

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE

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In a personal interview, the Chairman of the Commission (of enquiry into the Performing Arts, August 1977) was told by the Secretary for Bantu Administration and development that that Government Department assumed full responsibility for any matter in connection with the performing arts, so far as black people were affected. He had been asked about this in the interests of those Black inhabitants who are living in the country's White residential areas. Having been given the assurance that any needs which might exist or arise received or would receive the direct attention of that Department, the Commission devoted no further attention to this population group in its inquiry...

The Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Performing Arts : August 1977, Paragraph 425.

On 1st June, 1980, a symposium was convened at the Moravian Hall in Soweto. This was a meeting of people interested in the future of South African theatre. In this case the focus of interest was black theatre in South Africa, but the issues raised at the meeting served to elucidate areas of larger concern. The most pertinent question raised was : "Exactly what is black theatre?" The implication was (and Jean Genet might have said it) : "First of all, what is its colour?"

We are confronted, in this terrain, by the problem of delineation. What is South African theatre? It surely cannot be defined strictly in terms of language, for much of this theatre is multi-lingual. It cannot be defined as theatre created or performed in South Africa, for that denies the contribution of a host of exiled South Africans. It cannot be defined exclusively in terms of theatre about South Africa : Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot is not 'about' Ireland.

I could suggest many more delineating criteria⁽¹⁾, but I have already loaded the dice sufficiently for the purposes of this paper. The above are representative critical prescriptions regarding the nature of theatre in South Africa. The truth is that a concept of South Africanism cannot be defined exclusively in any of the above terms. Any work created in or by or about South Africans or with reference to any individual shaped by a South African sensibility must qualify for inclusion in our consideration. Furthermore, what of theatre itself? Is there, in audience parlance during the interval, a more evasive utterance than the statement : "Interesting, but it's not really theatre!" ? In short, prescriptive critical attitudes to South African theatre are the foes with which I choose to do battle in this paper. If I ignore Afrikaans theatre and commercial theatre, and barely refer to white theatre in English, it is because my concerns are not so much with actual works for the theatre, as with critical attitudes to those works. A focus on black theatre in English best exemplifies the points I have to make.

There are 3 major categories of prescriptive attitudes regarding contemporary South African theatre. These embrace the areas of

- A the subject matter of theatre
- B critical pre-conceptions
- C text and performance

Few can doubt that the present is an exciting period for South African theatre. This excitement is stimulated because the forms, styles, techniques and conventions of performance are being challenged. This challenge is of such a volatile nature that criticism has to react DESCRIPTIVELY rather than PRESCRIPTIVELY. With the emergence of multifarious innovations in theatre, our critical tools and our critical attitudes must be prepared to grow and be sharpened by the artefacts upon which we bring them to bear. In order to accomplish this, we must re-assess our prescribed critical assumptions.

PRESCRIPTIVE ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THEATRE

In South African theatre at the present time, social relevance becomes a clarion call. Anything of social relevance is important, of course, but if our task is critically to evaluate theatre, we must be as wary of praising social relevance which is defective theatre, as we are of praising effective theatre of dubious relevance. The whole notion of relevance is questionable, of course, and is inextricable from a consideration of ideological implications. Nevertheless, there are some who, ignorant of Brecht's redefinition of 'entertainment', react against the cancerous intrusion of serious thought into their entertainment. (2)

Literature and theatre of a polemical nature tend, in South Africa, to provoke suspicion. In many cases, 'polemical' has come to mean 'political'. (3) For many critics and patrons of South African theatre, serious subject matter 'reduces' theatre to statement or manifesto. It is unfortunate that such critics do not continually expose themselves to contemporary indigenous theatre. If they were to do this - and permits to visit theatre in Soweto are easily accessible - they would discover, to quantify a distinction, that most new contemporary South African theatre is black. They would then make another important discovery : that the fabric of black theatre is often, by the very nature of black experience in South Africa, political.

Lurking behind suspicions of political subject matter in theatre, lies the notion that "art is above politics". It is a notion that comforts those who wish to preserve the status quo. It is a notion that is rejected by those oppressed by the status quo, to those whose everyday lives are totally determined by politics. A glance at the attitudes of black writers in Africa today elucidates this. (4)

Within the area of subject matter, therefore, the major critical prescription seems to be : separate theatre from politics. This is an extraordinary attitude when one considers that politics, especially in South Africa, permeates every capillary of social life. It is also an attitude that fails to understand the very nature of theatre throughout history. Drama and theatre are fertilised in space and time, and a full understanding of the art must take cognisance of the context of that art. In South Africa, context is a determinant of subject matter in serious theatre.

This is not to denigrate that critical attitude which condemns petty proselytism and defective theatre : it is the rejection per se of political subject matter with which I do battle. Even the notion that theatre should avoid didacticism is one which should be re-examined. To a generation schooled in Brechtian theatre this should be obvious. (5)

The single most important factor to be learnt by those who wish to separate art and politics is that in Africa, political nationalism has congruency with cultural nationalism. The theatre should not be separated from the social and political soil in which it is fertilised. Black theatre especially, has a subject matter dictated by context. Plays written for black audiences in South Africa, creating the closest thing we have ever had to a popular theatre, must necessarily be about the conditions of black existence. Sartre has said :

"For a people's audience the first thing you have to do is to produce its own plays - plays written for it and speaking to it." (6)

Were it not for the occasional lights such as Fugard and a handful of serious craftsmen in white theatre, I should be tempted to suggest that in white South Africa there are theatres but no theatre, whereas in black South Africa there is theatre but no theatres. That theatre springs directly from subject matter.

CRITICAL PRE-CONCEPTIONS

I am concerned here with a difficult problem : that of an appropriate critical methodology when looking at South African theatre. That statement is itself prescriptive, but at least it will allow me, if not to define the correct critical procedure, at least to outline what should be avoided in a critical approach to contemporary South African theatre. I cannot, in this paper, solve the problem, but merely contribute towards an answer.

The first (and well-trodden) field is provided by the statement : do not impose western criteria upon Third World criticism. I am not sure what "western" really means in this context. For some, it may refer to white South Africans while excluding black South Africans. Frequently, it implies an aversion to things European. The latter assumption, unfortunately, implies that the critic of African theatre and literature is forbidden to use all the equipment which has been sharpened and practised upon the great works of the Hellenic-Renaissance-Modernist tradition : a tradition which permeates the lives and cultures of people not only in the west but globally.

Any sensible critic, schooled in this tradition, will in any case be aware of the need to take cognizance of time and place, of world-views, of the unique socio-cultural context of the work under consideration. Is it conceivable, for example, that we can offer instruction in Shakespearean drama without reference to the mediaeval heritage of English literature, the concept of the Great Chain of Being, the confrontation of mediaeval authoritarian conventionalism and Renaissance individualism, the Elizabethan political dispensation ? In short, what we are talking about here is a sense of history in our critical attitudes, a sense of time and place and import. Let us dispense with the notion that the Great Tradition has nothing to do with the Third World. Of course we need to change the lenses of our spectacles when we look at the new phenomenon. But for the sake of objectivity, for the sake of comparative literature, let us keep the spectacles. T.S. Eliot has said it for us : the new individual talents in the Third World often fertilise the tradition and at the same time receive nourishment from it. Granted, some of the new talents are totally unique, without external influence. All the same, comparisons are not odious, but lead towards the objectivity which is the product of all comparative literature. Surely no-one can suggest that criticism of indigenous theatre is the prerogative of 'indigenous' critics ? It is a short step from this to say that only Sowetans should criticize Sowetan theatre, or that only the Anthropophagi could verify Othello's anecdotes.

Criticism is at its weakest if it is meretricious, and if it fails to re-focus when discussing African literature and theatre. To expect from theatre a certain form, plot or technique based on alien traditions (however noble) is to deflower the art of criticism at the outset. For example, if there is one significant factor about serious contemporary black theatre in South Africa that strikes me, it is this: form nearly always follows subject matter rather than dictating it. Because of the nature of black experience in South Africa, serious theatre sets out to depict aspects of that experience. It is often a bitter depiction, sometimes sardonic - but the intention is always to illuminate the conditions of black social and political life. The form is secondary. The notion of "organic form" does not even come into consideration. For critics to expect elements of formal composition is fatuous. (7)

This is where the notion of a dichotomy formulated in western Third World terms is valid. A proper approach to the subject seems to me to lie in the Lukacsian category of Critical Realism, where serious black theatre directs its energies towards depicting the life of the black man within specific socio-economic contexts, using a realistic mode in order to speak to a broad-based working class audience.

What we are discussing here is clearly a matter of contextualism in criticism. Failure to place the artefact under consideration within its contextual determinants, leaves the critic open to attack. c Ayi Kwei Armah has made such an attack upon the American critic Charles Larson. In an article which must rank as one of the most savage demolitions ever perpetrated on a critic, Armah systematically destroys the credibility of Larson as a critic of African literature, pointing to what are some of the common prejudices of the western critic of African art. But what is more important for my purposes is revealed by Armah's own attitude: the fact of prejudice on both sides. In the article, entitled "Larsony - or fiction as criticism of fiction", Armah says

"the western critic of African literature does not operate from a plain and logical framework. He operates from a received framework of Western values and prejudices." (8)

Now, certainly the western critic, like any other critic, operates from a received framework of prejudices. But it is what is made of those prejudices that determines our evaluation of the critic. To imply, as Armah does, that the African experience has nothing to do with the western tradition, is provincial thinking. In Africa many factors fertilise the indigenous experience. In South African theatre, specifically, there are many traditions operative - tribal, European, English, Afrikaans, oral, literary - expressing cultural differences but nevertheless deriving from the same society. A theory of culture is insufficient - we must look at the unique circumstances which inform the culture, before we evaluate the individual work.

TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

In much of the new theatre we are confronted by a performance rather than a text. We are in an era of the playwright as chief maker rather than writer. The spelling of the word 'playwright' is sufficient to remind us that in theatre, materials are wrought for performance, not merely written. In black theatre particularly we are confronted by an image of reality rather than an imitation of it. To expect literariness in isolation is to misunderstand the phenomenon. (9)

Black theatre is working in new forms and conventions, where the image seems to be a central focus. Anyone responsive to the creative processes at work in black theatre will see the importance of the image. The image is a central idea sensuously manifested, and the juxtaposition of images is often the central dynamis in black theatre. In Egoli by Matsemela Manaka, a play recently invited to West Germany after Tukewarm response in South Africa (do we always need the international market to recognize our work before we design to ?) there occurs one of the most startling images. Two convicts are bound together by chains, each with a steel band around his neck. While the audience winces, each hammers at the other's steel band with a rock. They eventually free one another. The danger to the actors (hitting at the neck with a rock), the groans accompanying the action, the sound of rock on metal, and the suspense of the audience work theatrically to sustain the metaphor which resounds with implication. The response of a critic ? - "another unoriginal metaphor". (10)

The notion of performance is essential to a proper understanding of black theatre in South Africa. Indeed, where black theatre is weakest, in my opinion, is when it slips into an uncomfortable literariness and the audience becomes conscious of a dialogue which is written rather than spoken. The conscious attempt to create more sophisticated verbiage is no doubt the product of a desire to achieve publication and further recognition, but is often disconcerting to the ear in the theatre. This factor, slight as it may seem, merely exemplifies my belief that black theatre rests more firmly on images in performance than on words on a page.

These three factors, then, constitute the major categories of prescribed critical attitudes which we bring to the theatre in South Africa. In conclusion, it is necessary to outline a proposal for approaching the new phenomena in our theatres, by way of :-

DESCRIPTIVE ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE

The Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Performing Arts : August 1977 contains some illuminating facts which might serve as a springboard for re-assessing our attitudes to theatre. The terms of reference of the report seem, initially, sound enough :-

"To enquire into and make recommendations on the general policy to be pursued with a view to the sound development of the performing arts as an important means for the cultural enrichment of the population of South Africa..."

However, the true intentions of the Report are revealed in one of the terms of reference :-

"...the extent to which justice is done to the official languages and the cultural needs of the two language groups concerned"

(my emphasis).

The fact is that official policy and general attitudes seem to deny the role of black theatre in our society. This suspicion is confirmed in Paragraph 425 of the Report, with which this paper begins. In this simple, short paragraph, a commission of enquiry into the performing arts cuts out of its field of enquiry the major part of creative effort in the performing arts in this country.

Faced with such evidence of official policy towards contemporary theatre, how can we then propose an attitude which recognizes quality and evaluates with objectivity the new theatre emerging on our doorstep? I can merely contribute towards an answer in this paper. A DESCRIPTIVE attitude will start in the context of production. It will perceive how the environment conditions us, and will perceive the capacity of theatre to illuminate our understanding of that process. It will look at the present as history: perceiving cause and effect, perceiving the motive forces in our very unique society. Who can look at black theatre after 1976 in the same way as he looks at black theatre prior to that date? (11)

I do not wish to re-open the debate between the rival merits of explicatory criticism and contextual criticism, nor would I suggest that theatre is reducible to subject matter or ideology. Nevertheless, we must see theatre as informing and being informed by an ideological view. When we look at theatre in South Africa during the 1980's, we will also have to look at the phenomenon which has taken upon itself the umbrella term of Black Consciousness. Black Consciousness will be one of the determinants of theatre in the 1980's. Our critical attitudes will have to describe the role that such determinants will play in theatre, and then proceed to evaluate within that framework. As critics leading the consensus of popular appreciation nearer towards the consensus of qualified appreciation, we must exhibit all the uneasiness, trepidation and interest of objective South Africans in the 1980's. Otherwise we are inept scholars and critics, resting in armchairs, staring at our navels, turning psychically into foetal positions.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) It seems that anyone delving into the area is troubled by the problem of definition. See, for example: -
 - a) Greig, R.: "Three stages of South African drama: tourist, settler, inhabitant", The Star (Tonight) December 23, 1978.
 - b) Gordimer, N.: "The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing" Spro-Cas/Ravan, 1973, Page 5.
 - c) Sepamla, S.: "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas" New Classic 3, 1976, Page 18.
- 2) In The Star (Tonight) supplement of 28 th May, 1980, there is an interesting article in this regard:

"Henk Hugo has been awarded the Afrikaans Taal-en-Kultuurvereniging's cash prize for his television production Nommer Asseblief, the second series of which is currently being shown. It was judged the television programme that had contributed most to Afrikaans culture during the past year. Mr Victor Horne, executive director of the ATKV, announced the award in Johannesburg. He explained that because of its unpretentiousness, the comedy series had been met with great approval by Afrikaans-speaking viewers. 'Mr Hugo succeeded in offering light and healthy entertainment without creating pseudo-abstruse currents', Mr Horne said. 'As a contribution to the national culture, it was an excellent depiction of the everyday situation in an Afrikaner home and in pliant Afrikaans.'

The notion "pseudo-abstruse currents" defies definition, but exemplifies an attitude to entertainment which is quite prevalent.

See, for example, Raphaely, R. : "Polemical, yes, but this deserves to be seen" in The Star (Tonight) 27/12/79.

See, for example, Mzamane, M. 1978 : "Literature and politics among blacks in South Africa" New Classic 5, especially Page 56 :

"The bourgeois concept of culture as entertainment has been swept aside in South Africa. The concept of art for art's sake is dead. Black South African literature therefore addresses itself to the problems of that country. Its peculiarity actually reflects the peculiarity of the system in that country. If the poetry, for instance, would seem to be shrill and hysterical, it is the situation really that is perverse. At any rate, it is ridiculous to expect sweet Handelian music from the oppressed, unless the oppressed acquiesce to sing like the slaves of old, for their master's gratification."

and Sepamla, S. 1976 : "The black writer in South Africa today : problems and dilemmas" in New Classic 3.

5) Brecht, B. 1936 : "The German Drama : Pre-Hitler" published in Left Review, London.

"With the learning-play, then, the stage begins to be didactic. (A word of which I, as a man of many years of experience in the theatre, am not afraid). The theatre becomes a place for philosophers, and for such philosophers as not only wish to explain the world but wish to change it...For theatre remains theatre even while it is didactic, and as long as it is good theatre it is also entertaining."

6) Sartre, J-P. 1955 : Théâtre Populaire no. 15.

7) Raphaely, R. op. cit.

8) New Classic 4, 1977, Page 34

9) Sepamla, S. op. cit. Page 20 :

"What I mean is that if the situation requires broken or 'murdered' English, then for God's sake one must do just that. If other people come to the sad conclusion that writer so-and-so does not know English, then we should not even offer prayers for these misguided people."

10) Raphaely, R. op. cit.

11) See, for example, Mshengu, 1978 : 'After Soweto : People's theatre and the political struggle in South Africa' in Theatre Quarterly vol ix no. 33.