

Not Lagos but Leeds

James
Gibbs

A FEW hours after the death sentence had been pronounced on Ken Saro-Wiwa and his co-defendants, the lights in the Courtyard Theatre at the Leeds Playhouse went up on the world premiere of a new play by Wole Soyinka. It began with an expose of the tyranny under which Nigerians live, and, some two hours later, the lights went down on an affirmation of the spirit of resistance to oppression.

The first ten days of the run were spent in the shadow of the Port Harcourt scaffold, and, after the execution of the Ogoni 9, widespread public coverage of events in Nigeria continued for a time. Media interest meant that the images of tyranny presented on the stage were complemented by news items, documentaries and journalistic comment. The production was disturbingly apposite.

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For reasons that are well-known to readers of this publication, it was not possible for *The Beatification of Area Boy* to open as planned in Nigeria. Thanks to the negotiation of an appropriate 'package', there was a subtle shift of vowels and consonants so that the play opened not in Lagos but in Leeds. The programme for the performance describes the presentation as a co-production between the Playhouse and various Swiss funding bodies. It also indicates that *Area Boy* was part of the Africa 95 programme, and that the University of Leeds, Soyinka's alma mater, was the sponsor.

Part of Soyinka's intention on *Area Boy* is to lay bare what has been happening in Nigeria. The play opens with 'red sky in the morning' - a phenomenon long regarded by Yorkshire shepherds and others as a bad omen. This theatrical 'russet mantle' is caused, it transpires, by the burning of shacks in Maroko, a 'squatter settlement' that is being removed at the behest of wealthy and powerful neighbours.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Although Africa 95 is over, the issues it brought to the fore are still with us. This is particularly true of the examination of Nigerian life presented by Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* that ran in Leeds during October and November. James Gibbs brings together comments from published reviews with his own observations to indicate some of the achievements of the production.

This exercise in 'class sanitation' - based on an actual event - establishes the political context of the play, and has repercussions which affect the day in the corner of Nigeria that Soyinka has chosen to show us. The playwright ensures audiences appreciate that the violence perpetrated against the 'squatters' of Maroko is just one of the brutal campaigns being waged by Nigerians on Nigerians. He links it with other, similar 'exercises'.

Associations are, for example, made with the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Ogoni, who happen, inconveniently for some, to live, farm and fish on top of the oil-reserves that make the Nigerian rich richer and the Nigerian powerful more powerful. The arrogance of the 'uniforms' in the play and the obvious alliance between power and wealth in the society presented on stage ensured that the play helped many to understand what they were seeing on their television screens at home.

In order to draw attention to the links between Nigerian power-mongers and multinational businesses, Soyinka even slipped in a line making the Swiss actor who toadies up to a Military Governor a representative of Nestle. Had the actor been Dutch or British, there might have been a temptation to link him with Shell!

There are many reverberations from the area in front of 'an opulent shopping plaza' on which Soyinka's drama, a play he subtitles as 'Lagosian Kaleidoscope', is played out. At the centre of the Drama in Sanda, employed to assist customers but in fact chief of the 'area boys.' In Ibadan, Soyinka describes area boys as 'plain cut-throats, extortionists and opportunists', but in this text he, somewhat indulgently, creates an area boy with attitude.

Sanda is an idealist - or he has been one. An intelligent young man, he had cut short his university studies with the intention of making a million and pushing forward the revolution. Soyinka's distance from 'Oga Security' becomes particularly difficult to determine when he credits Sanda with composing tracks from 'Unlimited Liability Company' - Soyinka's record that was released in 1983.

While this elision of identities was, in all probability, lost on the reviewers who covered the play for the British press, they showed that they were well aware of Sanda's importance and of the play's poignant topicality. For example, Charles Spencer (*Daily Telegraph*) began his review 'There are times when criticism seems almost impertinent' and, undoubtedly, there was

a sense in which we were intruding on private grief, eavesdropping on a Nigerian debate, viewing from a safe distance a nation in which many are threatened, many are suffering.

With help from the West Yorkshire Playhouse, I have been able to obtain reviews by Robert Butler (*Independent on Sunday*), Michael Coveney (*Observer*), Ian Daley (*Leeds Skytrack Express*), Jim Greenfield (*Yorkshire Evening Post*), Sarah Hemmings (*Financial Times*) Lynda Murdin (*Yorkshire Post*), Benedict Nightingale (*Times*), Paul Taylor (*Independent*), and Robin Thornber (*Guardian*). Martin Banham spoke about the production of BBC 4's 'Kaleidoscope,' and he has since written on it for the Leeds African Studies Bulletin; Alastair Niven discussed the play on Radio 3's 'Night Waves'. In the paragraphs that follow, I will draw attention to views expressed and judgments passed by some of these critics.

Several of the reviewers made the point that the play was written with a Nigerian audience in mind. This was very obviously true: there were references in the text that passed over the heads of many theatre-goers in Leeds. For example, some did not understand the significance of 'a little to the left and a little to the right.' And some did not appreciate why the revelation that a woman was an 'army wife' should have such an impact on bullying soldiers.

The reactions of Nigerians in the audience on the night I was present - one half rose to his feet when musicians struck up 'Arise Compatriots' - were often distinctive and hinted at some of what 'might have been' had a Lagos premiere been possible. But, while Leeds did not provide 'the ideal audience,' the barriers that existed were by no means insuperable: the production was followed and enjoyed; the audience was, within its terms, responsive and showed its appreciation warmly.

The presence in the cast of a significant contingent of experienced and knowledgeable Nigerian performers, including, Yomi Obileye, Wale Ogunyemi and Tunji Oyelana, ensured that those on stage understood both the text and the

background to the text. These were actors who had worked with Soyinka for decades, who had seen his theatre evolve and had frequently contributed to that evolution. And they were working with a distinguished director, Jude Kelly, who enjoyed the playwright's confidence

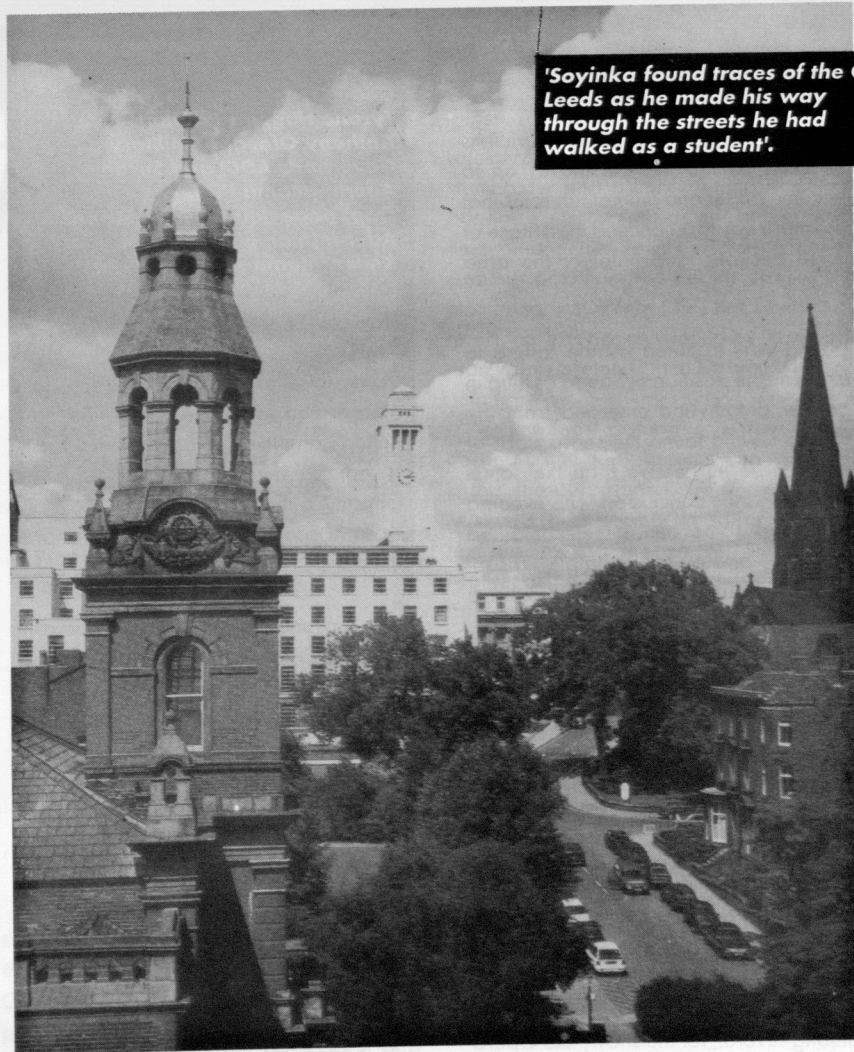
Looking at a Lagosian Kaleidoscope

Most reviewers helpfully suggested, in general terms, the kind of play Soyinka had written. Thornber described Area Boy as a 'slice of life... one day in the vibrant and violent, cruel and colourful life of a street-corner in post oil-boom Nigeria.' Hemming wrote that it was 'a juicy portrait of life on a Lagos street corner,' and continued with a powerful image: 'anger and exasperation wind through it like underground waterways,

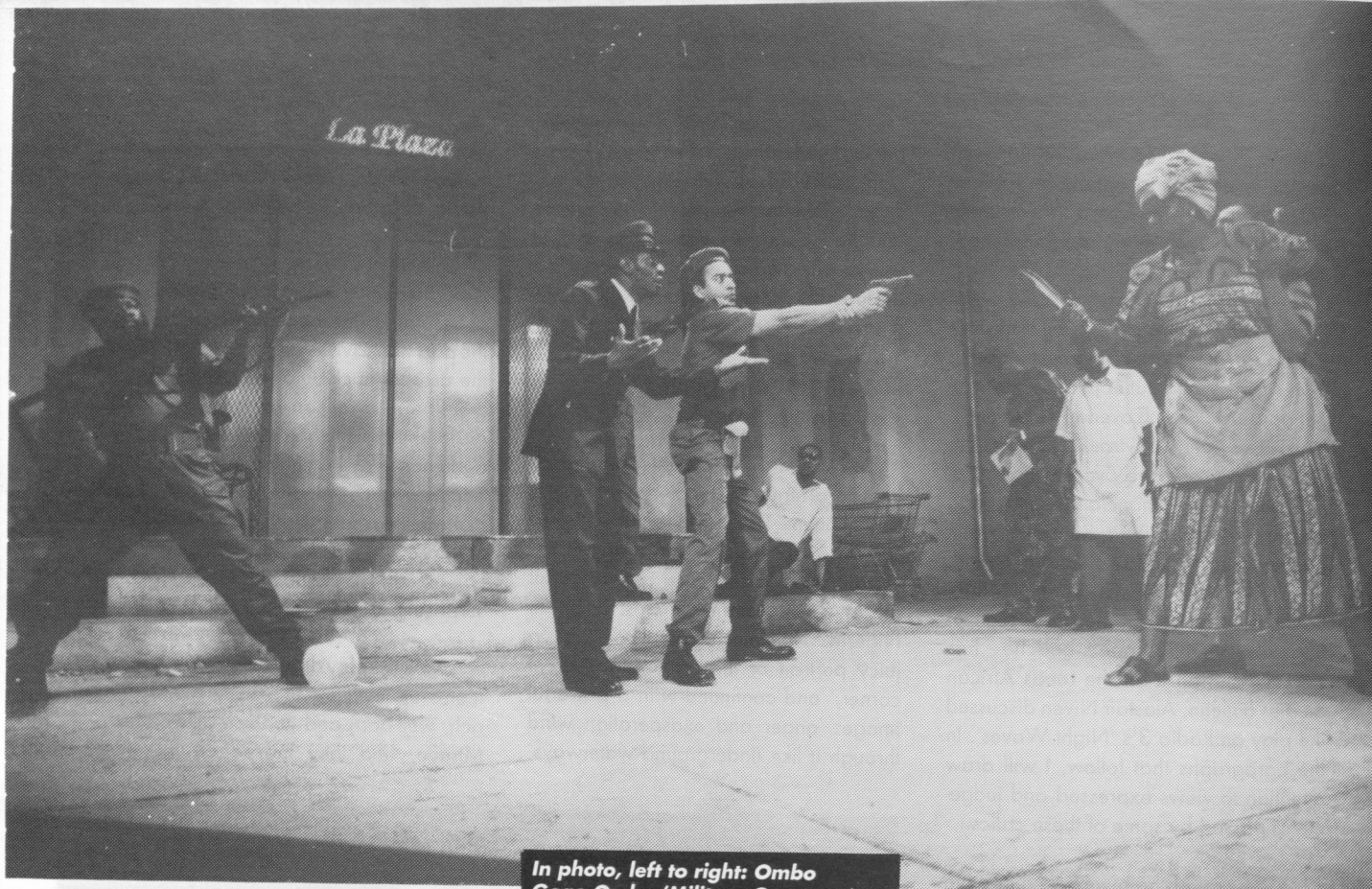
glinting fiercely when they come to the surface.' Butler, more restrained, wrote simply of 'a day in the life of Lagos.'

As is customary in Soyinka's plays, Area Boy has a good deal of exposition, of unfolding: the audience learns about the past (the Civil War, for example), and the present (including, as indicated, the creation of a million refugees following the torching of the homes at Maroko). The audience slowly comes to appreciate Sanda's 'game', learns of his past, and then watches preparations for a ritual. In this case, the ritual is a wedding celebration that, in typical Soyinka style, takes a surprising turn.

As the play draws to a close, Sanda teams up with his university friend, the rich, well-born and nearly well-wedded, Miseye, and they moved off into the



'Soyinka found traces of the Old Leeds as he made his way through the streets he had walked as a student'.



In photo, left to right: Ombo Gogo Ombo (Military Governor), Tyrone Huggins (Sanda), Anthony Ofoegbu (Military Governor's ADC) and Susan Aderin (Mama Put). Opp. page, left to right: Susan Aderin (Mama Put) and Miriam Keller (Mama Put's daughter). Photo by Simob Warner, The West Yorkshire Playhouse.

sunset to struggle alongside the victims of 'class sanitation'. He moves on to become singer and animateur: roles that are more easily reconciled than those of 'Oga Security' and chief of the area boys.

I was troubled by the failure to examine the position of Sanda as thug in greater detail, and emerged from the theatre having found the sharp stabs of satire more impressive than the somewhat romantic conclusion. The evening contained some almost self-contained sketches, about, for example, disappearing genitalia, that seem to have been prepared in theatre workshops. They were reminiscent of Soyinka's effective revue sketches and came across with greater energy.

'Don't touch my uniform'

Scanning the reviews, however, it is intriguing to see how little consensus exists about the effectiveness of the satire. In this respect it is revealing to assemble some of the comments about the song 'Don't Touch my Uniform'. This, it should be pointed out, is one song among several, for the show, like *Opera*

Wonyosi, relies heavily on music - both incorporated within the 'slice of life convention', and the kind of 'numbers' familiar from a musical. 'Don't Touch my Uniform,' a number, was sung by Wale Ojo and some reviewers found it hard-hitting.

Coveney described it as 'a wonderful song of vainglorious self-importance.' At the other end of the critical spectrum, Murdin, having disdainfully described the verses as 'cod Gilbert and Sullivan', asked, more with a shrug than with a genuine interest in the answer, 'Would they shoot an author for that?' She was perhaps, unaware of the way 'zombies' had taken exception to songs that had emanated from the Kalakuta Republic.

The musical support for these lyrics was inadequate and the only songs that

really succeeded were those familiar from the 1983 record, 'Unlimited Liability Company.' It was a privilege for Leeds theatre-goers to hear Tunji Oyelana 'as Minstrel deliver those lyrics, but, even with those, there were times when supporting musicians, *The Benders*, were sorely missed.

'Mountains of rubbish in built-up area'

Taylor identified a number of problems with the staging. These included the fact that the design, by Niki Turner, made no attempt to accommodate shop-windows that reflected the violence and suffering that was occurring 'across the street' - as required by the stage directions. While not put off by this, I thought that the set-designer missed opportunities to suggest the world out of which the play emerged. This could have included the violence 'on the other side of the street,' but need not have been limited to it.

Turner's neck of the Lagosian concrete jungle shown on stage was too well maintained, too neat, too clean. Significantly, the 'partially covered' drain specified in the stage directions had been reduced to an area of uneven concrete. A



minor hazard compared to those lurking in wait for Nigerian pedestrians!

The overhead power-cables on the set were in immaculate condition, and spoke of a basic utility provided for disciplined customers by an efficient organization. An opportunity was missed to show, for example, the capacity for improvisation often exhibited by stall-holders who flout regulations by illegally tapping into national systems - thereby adding to the difficulties experienced by those responsible for supplying electricity.

Despite references to the 'high mountains (of rubbish) in built-up area' there was hardly any litter on stage, and, had anyone had anything to throw away, there was a welcoming (empty) garbage can up right throughout the play. When a detail of convicts was marched to the shopping plaza to prepare the street for the society wedding scheduled for the evening, there was little for them to do. Turner seemed to assume that there were in Lagos, as in Leeds, frequent and regular opportunities to have garbage collected and removed. He hadn't listened to the song.

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'Lovely performances'

Of the individual performances, there were plaudits for Tyrone Huggins in the pivotal role of Sanda ('a triumph' - Greenfield; 'a finely judged, captivating performance' - Thornber.) And praise for Susan Aderin who, in the demanding

role of Mama Put, was both a determined stall-holder and a choric voice recalling Nigeria's internecine past (Hemming cited hers among the 'lovely performances'). Another actor singled out for praises by Hemming was Wale Ojo, but Taylor differed: he was not convinced by 'a young man vainly pretending to be an old man.'

The most disturbing feature of the casting came near the end. The situation is that the plaza has been prepared for Miseye's 'high society wedding' and the text requires that first an MC and then a Mother of the Day talk the guests - and the audience - through the functions. In this spectacular climactic scene, Yomi Obileye, surprisingly, took both parts. A quick change after playing the MC enabled him to emerge in the female role, hirsute and with trousers carefully visible beneath his wrapper. His appearance reminded all in attendance that this was The Theatre, but it was a pity that 'a good female role' in a male dominated play should have gone to a man.

The cross-dressing looked for all the world like an economy measure: perhaps the company simply didn't have enough actresses. Or, more precisely, enough

black actresses - for in other areas the company had a superabundance of performers. There were under-used whites. Apparently in response to the requirements of the Swiss funding bodies, the cast-list had been enlarged to include three Swiss nationals, one of them a woman.

Judgements

In summing up their reactions, several critics embraced the play. Thornber concluded 'I think it's a masterpiece.' Butler found it 'generous, entertaining and observant ... a joyous, unsentimental celebration of the people who live in the city.' Spencer, after his comment on the impertinence of criticism, weighed the production up, with the positive in one hand and the negative in the other, but he clearly didn't rate it highly. He wrote: 'You admire Soyinka's refusal to give in to despair as you lament the clumsiness of his stagecraft.' And continued, 'Jude Kelly's production... creates a vivid sense of Nigerian street life,' before indicating that 'there are occasional longueurs and too many moments when the narrative would gain from clearer definition.'

He concluded: 'In the final analysis, I don't think *Beatification of Area Boy* is a great play. There is, however, no mistaking the great heart of the man who wrote it.'

Wedded to his muse

In an article he wrote for *The Observer* just before the opening night of the production, Soyinka described finding traces of 'the Old Leeds' as he made his way through streets he had walked along as a student. But he remarked that there was 'an unaccustomed air of cosmopolitanism' about the city and he wrote

enthusiastically about the 'splendid space' represented by the West Yorkshire Playhouse where his play was put on.

In the same article, he described his irritation at the oft-repeated question 'Do you still find time to write?' pointing out that 'The writer is wedded to his muse and we don't go around asking strangers (or friends) if they still make love to their spouses.' *Area Boy* indicates that Soyinka, while travelling and organising, has been writing - indeed, it seems, he was putting in lines right up to the last minute.

The *Observer* article was more or less 'by the way'; the text put on at the Playhouse was the important statement. Thanks to accomplished performers, a sensitive director, imaginative financing, and the spirit of the new Leeds, the production made a significant impact. Because of what was happening in Port Harcourt, audiences emerged from the theatre and returned home to catch the latest news about the tribunal and the executions, the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth and the campaign for sanctions. A terrible relevance had been born. **GR**

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