

Contemporary English Language Theatre in Nigeria

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FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

Indeed, if we are thinking of the whole population in a society, it does not seem possible to talk about the development of theatre and drama in that society without analysing the nature of its economic and political development.

- Michael Etherton

N actor playing something of a dance director stands back, leaving the stage free for his performers of the dance -within-the-play, but only after he has voiced a poignant lament: 'The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden - to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness - knowing full well, it is all futility. Yet I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long-rumoured ineffectuality complete.'

That role of the Forest Head in *A Dance of the Forests* was acted by Wole Soyinka who wrote and directed the premiere performance of the play ostensibly for Nigeria's independence celebrations in October 1960. The play is often mentioned with regards to this independence-motivated production. But in reality, it was far from being the favoured text for such occasions. According to an account given by the playwright himself in the memoir *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years (1946-1965)*, *A Dance of the Forests* was thought to strike 'a discordant note in Independence suite - subversive, cynical, iconoclastic, that it mocked the glories of the past and was pessimistic about the future.' Its author, it was believed, 'lacked the patriotic spirit of hope and confidence that was needed for a nation that was taking the first step into a rose-tinted future.'

There was no official venue for the play in Lagos, where most of the celebrations were taking place. Although the script had won a competition, also sponsored for the independence, it was not featured on the official programme of events. Yet, it went on stage at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, performed by the cast of '1960 Masks.'

The feast in *A Dance* is called 'A Gathering of the Tribes', a phrase which may have unwittingly captured the true character

of the country the British left behind in 1960, and which remains till today. Apart from a departmental production at the University of Calabar in early 1980s, the full play has not been seen on stage anywhere. In a country where fictions, properly funded, easily become news, then history, one is tempted to doubt the story of any performance of *A Dance* but for Soyinka's own narration and the evidence of some photographs this writer once encountered either on the pages of *Nigeria Magazine* or among the files in the attic of the Arts Theatre, Ibadan.

And did those files escape the conflagration at the department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan on January 25, 1995? Long before the fire incident, a set of crises had befallen the department. There were eleven students in the diploma class in 1963, out of 27 admitted the previous year, when the School of Drama formally took off. According to one of the students, the then director Geoffrey Axworthy had remarked that facilities in the theatre were not adequate for the students. Currently, there are about 50 students in the diploma class alone, and there are also the three degree courses and the postgraduate diploma programme. The student population must be up to a hundred at the least. The department has eleven lecturers on its staff list, out of which one is on leave at the National Film Institute, Jos, Plateau State. The situation represents a staff-student ratio of one to 40. For efficient tutoring and a well-realised practical scheme similar to what is available to medical students, the department requires a ratio of one to six, but the university can approve only one to 25. Not even the fire incident has convinced the authorities that the department needs special consideration.

Two months after the fire outbreak in which according to one of the lecturers Femi Fatoba, the department 'lost a world', a former graduate student there, the theatre director Chuck Mike took the cast and crew of the Performance Studio Workshop to Epeme a small community sited 12 kilometres off the Badagry expressway near Badagry. The group's aim, under its Theatre Outreach programme in 1991, was to 'collaborate with the people of Epeme towards the initiation of action that would lead to development within their village.' After a formal meeting with the Oba of Iworo, superior to the Baale of Epeme, an entry in the group's report notes: 'The truth of our mission was far from being understood. If it were, its authenticity was in doubt.' The PSW group lived in Epeme from March 20 to 26, 1995. With the people, they worked on six skits in the tradition of agitation and propaganda theatre. At the end of the stay, Bunmi Lana, PSW's assistant co-ordinator reflects: 'I think we should let them develop but don't change them. I have learnt to tolerate people. I went to develop people but came back more developed. It is a new experience.'

It was a totally different experience for Israel Eboh, artistic



Collective Artistes staff. From left: Adetokunbo George-Coker, Ademola Asiru, John Iweh, Muyiwa Odukale, Anthony Abbey, Muiyiwa Hanson. Front row: Ibiye Romeo, Chuck Mike (centre) and Ajua Dickson.

director of Fezi Productions, a Lagos-based amateur theatre group on March 1, 1996. His team had planned a staging of Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* at the National Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos. The text was on the syllabus of the West African School Certificate Examinations, and the company had thought to attract the student population. But Eboh, national scribe of the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Art Practitioners, NANTAP, got wind that men of the State Security Services would stop the play. Their reason, which they did not have to state, was that the writer of the play, then (as now) on self-exile, was an opponent of the military regime of General Sani Abacha. He quickly printed new posters and shifted the performance to the hall of Jubril Martins Memorial Grammar School, Surulere, Lagos. But the security agents trailed him there, ordered all arrangements at a performance stopped and invited him for 'a chat' at their state office in Shangisha, on the outskirts of Lagos.

Now, how do these episodes tie together? Why bring politics in an article concerned primarily about the continued search for relevance - and so popularity - in the Nigerian theatre of English expression that has apparently been vibrant for close to four decades? Isn't theatre all about professionalism, that is, making a theatre and making it sell? And why write about it, why all this ink on the page about a tradition whose vitality lies in inducing sweat on the stage, at a time like this when records have either been wiped out, stolen or burnt and archives become centres of ash and dust?

Maybe for those precise reasons.

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* has suffered as a repertory play in comparison with *The Trials of Brother Jero*, perhaps the most performed of his plays. *The Trials* was written inside three days in 1961, and for its comedy and accessibility has either stayed in various repertories, or on the reading lists. Soyinka was soon to become the first Nigerian to head the school of drama in 1967, a position he had barely assumed when the regime of General Yakubu Gowon clamped him into detention for his anti-war stance at the start of the Nigerian civil war. Although this ordeal arose from the political and economic contradictions characteristic of most African countries, rather than from a purely cultural engagement reminiscent of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's experience in Kenya a decade later, it must be remembered that the person involved was Soyinka, whose protagonist in *A Dance*, Demoke an embodiment of the Ogunnian contradiction fulfils himself by transcending the limitations of socio-political consciousness. In 1996, Soyinka's continuation of this self-exploration has afforded General Abacha's censorious regime, bastion of the legacy of an indivisible yet divided Nigeria the luxury of stopping a production of *The Trials of Brother Jero*, just as it has ensured that the playwright's definition of the 1990s, *Beatification of an Area Boy* is not performed on Nigerian soil for as long as that regime remains in power. Censorship has now taken over the job begun by the diffidence which consigned *A Dance* (and several other major works of the playwright) to the irretrievable repertory of Mata Kharibu's court. There is no knowing for certain what impact Soyinka's headship of the School of Drama would have had on the theatre in Nigeria since, according to Dapo Adelugba the current head of depart-

ment at Ibadan who was a lecturer at the school at the time, 'he (Soyinka) was really not fully in a position to carry out his duty as director with the kind of energy that he could have devoted to it if the country had not been plunged into the kind of political and social difficulties that it was plunged into in 1967.' But his agit-prop approach of the mid-1960s pointed in a direction, the direction that Mike's PSW has now broadened.

Even as late as 1977, Adelugba said the department of theatre arts at Ibadan had not yet decided whether it wanted to run separate programmes for professional theatre artists and the liberal arts students. He was interviewing fellow lecturer Jide Malomo for a number in the LACE (Language, Arts, Culture and Education) occasional publications. Then he said: 'You know, in 1967, a conference was organised at which we discussed the role of the arts and then we discussed the School of Drama. It was my view, based on careful analysis of the theatre arts, that in those five years we had not produced a director of note, we had not produced a playwright of note, we had not produced an actor of note, apart from Betty Okotie whom, I argued, got her training mostly from Wole Soyinka's Orisun Theatre right from her school days. Also, in my view, we had not produced a technician of any quality or a designer. That was ten years ago. Can we, ten years after, now boast that we have produced people of note in the various areas? Granted that we claim to be a liberal arts department, have we produced any theoretician who will be able to relate theatre arts, to the society? Given our leadership role as pioneers, have we produced graduates who have formulated policies in the arts, who have been able, in their various environments, to espouse the development of vital attitudes, among the community, to the arts?' Malomo's response was much longer but all it amounted to was that there was no basis for the department to evolve its own objective in the absence of a cultural policy on the arts. The generation of Nigerian professional theatre artists depended on the school, which in turn looked up to the government to formulate policies. And 1977 was the year of official cultural regeneration: the Festival for Arts and Culture, FESTAC, which launched the Nigerian National Theatre, itself a monument of neo-colonial delusion.

But we speak specifically of now; theatre as it is done in thrusts and prosceniums in Lagos and everywhere across Nigeria, in the Eighties and Nineties, oblivious to the shadowy influence of the cultural policy - or taken it for granted - able to generate its own philosophy despite the inadequacies of the schools which Adelugba captured with so much painstaking questioning. That such a subject was possible at all might seem to lay the queries to rest. It would seem to support an argument that runs in this fashion: Whether or not resulting from its interrogation of the forces - political, cultural, economic - shaping or misshaping contemporary Nigeria, a generation of playwrights, directors, actors, designers, technicians, notable in each case, is at work from sunrise to dawn putting plays and other kinds of production on stage with a good deal of success. The trend is that unlike the early years of the Sixties and Seventies when the university was the benign seat of power, English language theatre now exists also 'in the streets' among the population whose very realities and preferences it grapples with.

It might even ransack in the chests of recent memories for statistics of sold out tickets, plays worn from frequent mountings and tourings, directors booked for years and theatre halls for months. New answers to old questions.

Yet some new questions are waiting in the wings, eager to take cue: What is the current state of practice in the theatre of English expression in Nigeria? Who and who are involved? How much of it is imaginative within the context of a community that has not evolved from the doldrums of an imposed political economy? What is the economic basis of this theatre?

What is at the moment the dominant trend in contemporary theatre practice was on view in Lagos during April and May 1996. The 1996 edition of the Nigeria International Bank's (NIB) sponsorship of a Nigerian classic featured Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, directed by Olu Akomolafe and shown for four nights in mid-April at the main Auditorium of the University of Lagos. It was the seventh in a series of major productions commenced in February 1990 and which has also showcased the plays of Soyinka, John Bekerderemo-Clark and Wale Ogunyemi.

In May, Goethe-Institut, the German cultural agency, in Lagos, noted for its interest in live theatre mostly through Felix Okolo's adaptations of German scripts, co-sponsored an exchange project between German and Nigerian theatre artists. Other sponsors were German concerns like Lufthansa, the airline, Strabag and Julius Berger, both construction companies. Tagged African Theatre Project '96, the exchange featured playwright Ben Tomolaju of Kakaaki Production with Jide Ogungbade (whose last effort was directing Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* for the playwright's birthday festival in 1994) and Matthias Gerht, a freelancing director with Shawbuinez Theatre in Germany. Tomolaju's new play 'Amona' was produced alongside Sophocles' *Oedipus* and were shown in Abuja and Lagos in late May and early June.

Chuck Mike who had received in January 1995 a grant from the MacArthur Foundation Fund for Leadership Development equally had month-long performances of his two workshop-developed plays 'Ikpiko' and 'The Nigerian Factory' staged at the J.K. Randle Hall, Onikan, Lagos. The first play was actualised through the Sister Help (acronym for Synergising Information Systems Towards Enhancing Reproductive Health and Eradicating Ligate Practices) project. In the past, Mike had consulted for private, governmental and international organisations which included Shell Petroleum, UNICEF, USAID, the British Council and the Federal Road Safety Commission. From time to time, productions are mounted by private and government troupes in theatre halls in Lagos and in the states. For example, in July, the National Troupe of Nigeria staged Ahmed Yerima's 'The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen', a play that explores a different perspective from Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. The main feature of the practice is the dissolution of activities; even in the campuses, student and departmental productions proceed apace. Yet in none of these was there a fully professional, independent troupe originating a repertoire of self-financed plays.



Scene from Felix Okolo's play, *Aruku Shanka*

The contemporary English language theatre is a product of both the reaction to the perceived elitism of university-based theatres influenced at once by the linguistic and structural deficiencies in Western-style theatres, and the need to adopt a more professional attitude to the theatre. These two broad levels of disenchantment with a tradition that has profoundly characterised a socially responsive enterprise like theatre are so much of that - disenchantment. But there is a lot more else to them. As facts will show, the reasoning that informed the conclusion are far from being free of the confusions and complexes becoming of disenchantment.

The development of this theatre, like a good number of other cultural products of modern Nigeria, has been closely linked to the colonial educational system. The alleged political independence from Britain in 1960 rather intensified this education. Michael Etherton, a drama teacher who has written an insightful book titled *'The Development of African Drama'* believes that the curricular basis of drama in the university is flawed. Governments at independence felt universities, like the School of Drama ought to be able to teach a creative course like theatre. The School of Drama took off in 1963, following the visitation Report of 1961 which observed that 'drama should not be left to the fortuitous presence of enthusiastic volunteers, but should be properly organised by the University.' What resulted was 'a combination of theory and practice, often taught separately, a mixture of literary criticism, history of the theatre and some practical skills.' This close association to the educational system situated drama in contexts, that the uneducated masses were

unable to have access to.

Some of the plays of Soyinka and Clark operate within this ideational framework. This also is the intellectual profile of most teachers and students of theatre in all the universities. Although the radical aesthetics of playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Yemi Ajibade, Bode Sowande and many of those emerging in the early Eighties compelled a departure from the 'old order' the facts of a limited, apparently homogenous university audience and occasional poorly publicised tours to handpicked theatre halls by semi-professional theatres meant that the plays had limited impact. It was this gap that informed the clamour in the early Eighties for theatre to 'move out of the university.' The suggestion was that a university-based dramatist's livelihood did not depend entirely on earnings from a theatrical production.

Soyinka could go on teaching trips to France and Britain. Clark could teach English at the University of Lagos. Osofisan could attend a writing programme at Iowa for three months, writing a new play, while Kakaun Sela lay inactive. And so on. It was this desire for professionalism that has led to the presence in Lagos of professional theatre companies from the early 1980s.

The focal point was Ajofest '86, a theatre extravaganza that 'involved a total cast and crew of 100, staging a different English-speaking play on every weekend for four weeks and performing to a capacity crowd right in the mainbowl of the National Theatre, in every case,' as Toyin Akinosho, cultural journalist, recorded in *The Guardian* of September 21, 1996.

The impetus also came from elsewhere. Clark had in 1982 resigned from the University of Lagos and established the first repertory theatre in Lagos, PEC (Pepper Clark) Repertory theatre in the old J.K. Randle Memorial Hall. Here, The plan was to feature a season of plays, concerts, recitals, for a period of nine months. The National Theatre was itself poised to sponsor plays and in June 1983, it introduced the Open-Air Theatre. So when Fred Agbeyegbe's Ajo productions happened in 1983, the stage seemed set for a revolution that would definitively chart the path for the contemporary English language theatre in Nigeria.

Agbeyegbe, lawyer and playwright struck up a friendship with Jide Ogungbade, then a broadcaster and producer with the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Lagos. As a student of English at the University of Ibadan, Ogungbade had been deeply interested and involved in theatre. His soulmate, Ben Tomolaju a playwright with bias for traditional forms of theatre had before then begun working on a professional company idea. 'Kakaaki started as a workshop in 1980', he says in an interview with this writer. 'We were self-financed even up to the point when we thought of establishing an arts village at Ota (a town between Abeokuta and Lagos). Soon an opportunity offered itself on television... To convey goods and personnel we used eight vehicles. A few minutes into recording, one member of the television production crew, the soundman said he had a party to attend and abandoned the recording. And that was the end of the project.' The end? Why didn't you do something about it? 'We protested but there was no redress. At the end, we quit', he says.

But Ajo Productions came to redress it. Tomolaju, who had written the play 'Jankariwo' (unpublished) became the associate director. Ogungbade, the director, is good at transforming texts with a great deal of improvisational facility. His plays, whatever the pace of the scripts, attain a certain mobility and vitality that is rare among Nigerian directors. Agbeyegbe bankrolled the production of the first script, *The King Must Dance Naked* staged at the National Theatre on June 17, 1983.

Prospects that the fun would last led to the invasion of Lagos by actors and actresses from the Universities, especially Ibadan and Ife. As a matter of fact, under such directors as Adelugba, Oduneye, Rotimi, Euba and Osofisan a generation of actors and directors determined to make a living as professional theatre practitioners was already in place. Certainly Joel Adedeji's five-year plan which in 1975 envisaged a five-unit structure including Music, Arts, Design Arts, Dance Arts, Communication Arts and Visual Arts at the University of Ibadan was yielding some result at last. Likewise, the Ori Olokun experiment masterminded by Rotimi and his colleagues in the old Institute of African Studies in Ife had convinced enough students that a career in theatre was not a waste. And truly, Ajo Productions returned in 1984 with *Woe Unto Death*; *The Last Omen* (1985) and *Budiso* (1986) all written by Agbeyegbe and staged during Ajofest '86. *Woe Unto Death* in 1984 ran three times on the same day, by popular demand.

Suddenly, not only had the crowd of promising actors,

directors, technicians and designers found its feet in Lagos by 1985, a number of professional Companies like Bassey Effiong's Anansa Playhouse, Kapo Productions under Kunle Adeyemo and Akpo Otebele (both of whom were instrumental to the formation of the Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Students Association NUTASA, in 1981), Ayo Oluwasanmi's Gangan Productions, had also been established. In that year, Abdul-Yekeen Olusegun Taiwo (deceased) resigned his appointment with the Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture, and began what he called AYOTA (an acronym from his name) Centre at Ajegunle, Lagos. He started, like the rest, on a shoestring budget, but managed to put up a play every month until his death in March 1994. He had his own company of actors, dancers, musicians and a large hall on 33 Oyedeji Street, Ajegunle, and devoted another hall to the exhibition of films. He was a beneficiary like the actor Richard Mofe-Damijo and the director Segun Ojewuyi, of the United States Information Service-sponsored international visitor's programme for theatre workers and in 1992, his 'Upside Down' was produced for the Goethe-Institut. The National Association of Nigeria Theatre Arts Practitioners, NANTAP, was born in the euphoria of the time.

In 1986, Funso Alabi, a University of Ife theatre graduate established Komitat a corruption of 'committed art', signifying a theatre committed to showcasing social problems. This rash of new companies had very visible results. There were 20 plays shown at the National Theatre between January and April 1986. Effiong, then an employee of the National Council for Arts and Culture NCAC, produced eight plays through both the voluntary effort of members of Anansa and support of the National Theatre. The group hoped to be consistent enough to build a clientele among the youth. According to a member of Anansa, Archibald Etikerentse, the playhouse realised early that the secondary and primary schools were where the foundation for theatre must be laid. Malomo once expressed a similar view. Kapo Production also produced Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* in February 1987, by which time Gangan took Osofisan's *Oriki of a Grasshopper* to Ibadan and Ife. It was directed by Ojewuyi, an Ibadan graduate whose final year directing project of *Death and the King's Horseman* received favourable reviews.

The Lagos theatre scene, boisterous as it was, could only absorb some of these products. At the end of *Woe Unto Death* in 1985, Tomolaju said: 'Some of us could have loved to leave the universities and go straight into full professional theatre practice but the avenue is not there. What we are doing is to create that avenue so that we can have a vibrant theatre culture. This is the making of history in the development of Nigerian theatre. It would be unfortunate if we as young technocrats allowed history to pass us by.'

He repeats the same statement in his interview for this article, but adds: 'There has to be something to advance the perspective. That is to say, at this stage, I stop complaining and make the best of the situations. Ogungbade also says that Ajofest provided the first opportunity for products of different schools to work together on one production. Before then, 'it had been each man to his own theatre tradition and the National theatre for

nobody.' And he does not forget to add the clincher: 'It was a very vibrant and promising era for the theatre in Nigeria in the sense that we were taking literary theatre out of the precincts of the university to the streets.'

At the party to close Ajofest '86 in August that year, Agbeyegbe promised that the company would record all the plays on celluloid, produce a film, 'Don't stop the Bullets,' stage more plays and build a theatre camp in Lagos. Of all these projects, only the first, a film of the four plays, has been achieved. He has also written a new play, 'Nana Ebroime.' Akinosho's argument for the inability of the companies to keep up the spirit is that the system of funding was quite flawed. Agbeyegbe put down almost every kobo and while Ajo Productions paid actors fairly handsomely, others, like Anansa used mainly volunteers. Those volunteers began to drift to Ajo which ironically could neither sustain the initial volume of payment nor attract sponsors to generate permanent funding.

Without doubt the point has been made that theatre could thrive beyond the university. The point that remains is, for how long will it thrive and on whose account? How this question is resolved will determine the survival or otherwise of the English language theatre. As for the theatre in Yoruba or Igbo, this question has been answered in the current forays into the home videos, purveyor of the new oral culture and in reality another leg in a process that began on the stage. They had found avenue on the radio, then the Yoruba photoplay serial publications - *Atoka*, *Alawada* and *Kayeefi* - then dabbled in the television, film and now the home video. Where is the next stop?

Before the euphoria of the Eighties subsided, Mike left Ile-Ife for Lagos to begin a season of plays every year. He raised funds by writing proposals to multinational companies, foreign cultural agencies and foundations. Between 1988 and 1992 when he held the Collective Artistes Festival of Theatre Arts in Nigeria, CAFTAN, he produced scores of plays for Lagos stages, a practice he was finding difficult to sustain following the political and economic problems that attended the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential elections won by MKO Abiola. The Nigerian and International Theatre Extravaganza, NITE in 1991 was held in such a way that it involved the French and the Germans as much as it involved the companies. 'That Scoundrel Suberu', an adaptation of Moliere's play by Adelugba and members of the old University College Dramatic Society was one of the repertory plays. On a banner with the logo of Seven-Up Bottling Company were listed names of individual sponsors like Christopher Kolade and Rasheed Gbadamosi. During 1991/92, the Performance Studio Workshop received a Ford foundation grant. Certainly, he got others before the \$24,000 grant from the McArthur Foundation. This might explain why the focus of his production had shifted from main stage productions with all its accountment to agit-prop sketches that address social problems. In this regard he is confessedly beholden to Soyinka who in the Sixties started the satirical revues aimed at the political excesses of the First Republic. These were the topical sketches of *The New Republic* and *Before the Blackout* era, all produced by the Orisun Theatre. The practice of this phase when political and



Clark-Bekederemo (left) and Soyinka

economic reality hindered the putting up of a major play is very crucial to this essay's argument, and has been described by Adelugba as 'the greatest moment in the English language theatre in this country.'

This, in Jerzy Grotowski's later coinage, is 'the poor theatre.' It requires a small cast of actors to play several roles; the use of costumes, props, and stage furniture is reduced or transformed by the preponderance of mime and other bodily gestures. Production costs are likewise reduced and a traditional stage is encouraged in so far as it provides a place for people to gather. These plays and sketches are geared toward agitation and propaganda (hence the name agit-prop) which for the imaginative professional throws up limitless possibilities. If Soyinka used the sketches to attack the excesses of the Ladoke Akintola-led government in the old Western-region and the Obasanjo/Shagari phase was the target under the Unife Guerrilla Theatre Unit in the late 70s and early 80s, the Performance Studio Workshop and Felix Okolo's Tempo Productions have taken it a bit farther.

Mike's political posture, at least deducible from the sketches, is not in the antagonistic 'I-Go-Revo-Dem-Headi-O' mould of Soyinka. Except in the sketch 'Footprints,' there may be types, not

caricatures. He is no less socially committed for all that and in fact socio-cultural issues like drug abuse, road accidents, AIDS, female genital mutilation, family planning have featured as drama sketches. These, it is becoming clearer, are the ideologies of the 21st century, and the sketches have been presented as art theatre productions, only with little of the inconvenience of large-scale costing that goes into such extravaganzas. This theatre has a very sound theoretical basis. Richard Schechner's *Experimental Theatre*; Grotowski's *Towards the Poor Theatre*; Augusts Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* are among the possible references.

But Mike defends the emphasis on developmental theatre: 'When we went to the communities it required much less, we were using physical bodies, you don't need the theatre space, you don't have to print tickets, no publicity, no promotions. They are enormous costs which are necessary for the main stage productions. And unfortunately the June 12 problem set business down the drain in the country at that time. So those who had been generous to the arts had to withdraw... and when there's a problem we in the arts are the first item to go. So we had to make that decision, given the financial recession and for me, it's quite an appropriate decision. I believe the theatre has to be responsible to the community in which it originates and that perhaps was what moved us.'

Not long after he relocated in Lagos, a workshop coordinated by the German theatre director, Lucas Hemleb and organised by the Goethe-Institut featured Felix Okolo with whom Mike had worked in the past. An adaptation of Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, 'Iku Dee Ti' resulted from the workshop. Okolo, a gifted actor and director whose strength is in improvisation followed up with another adaptation, this time of Gunter Grass's *Tin Drum* which he called 'Ira Alagbe'. It was also sponsored by the Goethe-Institut. Several plays were similarly adapted by Okolo, usually a German script suggested by the institute. Okolo siezes on an idea, builds it into the script and gives it a title. The poster reads 'written and directed by Felix Okolo.' There have been such experiments as 'Mekunnu Melody', 'Walking Stick', 'Edikang Ikong' (based on Ben Okri's Booker winning novel *The Famished Road*) an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* with the title retained (the two sponsored by the French Cultural Centre), 'Sahara' and 'Aruku Shanka' based on Cyprian Ekwensi's novelette, *The Drummer Boy*.

Okolo's adaptations generally bear very little resemblance to the original scripts and have been criticised, justifiably, for being airy, loosely scripted improvisations stuffed with spectacles and any other idea that happens to thrive through Lagos lingo. But he says he even has to force his own ideas into the scripts because the Germans, his sponsors, do not grant him the luxury of writing his own independent plays. He blames the corporate sponsors for ignoring the theatre and says 'as long as they refuse to step out to offer sponsorship, adaptations is what they will continue to get from me.' The German cultural centre hosted those plays at the Institut's courtyard and collected no gate fees. But the audience had to pay to see 'Medea' at the Maison de France.

The most consistent of the sponsorships by far has been that of the Nigeria International Bank, NIB. In 1990, the bank, in a bid to patronise the performing arts bankrolled a production of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. It was followed in 1991 by a stage adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* directed by Oduneye; Rotimi's *Ovonramwen - Nogbaisi* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1993) both directed by the playwright himself; Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* (directed by him in 1994); Clark's *Ozidi* (directed by Adelugba in 1995) and Rotimi's *Kurunmi* in 1996. The full cost in production, publicity, hall rental, artistes' fees - is borne by the bank, which collects and donates gate-takings to charity. The bank has been accused of running such an important project as a passing fancy. 'NIB rarely produces catalogue or thoroughly thought out documentation to serve as intellectual anchor for what they have achieved,' Akinosho writes.

This does not invalidate the idea, for talks are certainly on now about the next classic worthy of sponsorship. And the well-meant criticism is about the major omission on the project, apart from its concentration on Nigerian classical plays. If nothing else, it has shown what interest financial institutions could have in the performing arts as well as exploded virtually all myths about the unpopularity, the much-vaunted elitism of literary dramas and their location within an academic environment. Of all the seven productions to date, only the first two have been produced by city-based troupes. Each play lasted half a week, (in some cases even more) and on every night the main auditorium of the University of Lagos was filled to the rafters. It was only during the production of *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Things Fall Apart* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* that the plays were hosted at the National Theatre, and only the NIB can explain the preference for the university auditorium.

With no harm done to anyone, theatre has 'moved out of the university.'

Yet this by no means excludes the input of the university-based theatres of Osofisan, Rotimi and Sowande whose group not only produce plays within and without the campus but whose plays, with the possible exception of Tomololu, Okolo and Mike still dominate most stages. Almost every year, Osofisan writes and produces a new play either sponsored by his group or by the department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan; Odu Themes Meridian does much the same. In 1991, the troupe presented *Mammy Water's Wedding* in Lagos and Ibadan in a manner that appropriated the economics of play production now preferred by the NIB. A ticket sold for N100, and it worked. The same troupe took Sowande's adaptation of Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* to England in 1995. Members of the Awovasiy Theatre like Kola Oyewo, Laide Adewale, Jake Muiyiwa, Peter Fatomilola constituted the core of the cast of *Kurunmi* as directed by Olu Akomolafe in April 1996. This perhaps is why the question must be asked: If Ori Olokun (the old theatre group at the former University of Ife) took *Kurunmi* to the National Theatre, was it exactly to be understood as moving out of the University? Does an English language play really lose audience by being shown at the university? It is possible that a



Ola Rotimi (left) starring in his play, *Holding Talks*

resident of Abadina, the junior staff quarters at the University of Ibadan will fail to be moved by the fact of a performance by Isiaka Egunbunmi (a producer-director based in Osogbo in the Eighties) at the Arts Theatre whereas a journalist living at Ifako-Agege, Lagos, will go down to the University of Lagos to see a performance of *The Lion and the Jewel* by Chuck Mike? 'Moving out of the university' is no doubt a confused expression, taking just a part of a problem for the whole. The same goes for the expression 'filing a theatre', that magical feat which only Ogunde and Moses Olaiya Adejumo (the comedian Baba Sala) were once thought as only capable of pulling off. Hasn't effective publicity done it, time and again, for the NIB, as for the National Troupe's recent production of Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*? The contention that a literary drama cannot fill a theatre the way the Yoruba theatres do is patently false, for it can and it has. And a 'popular' drama in Yoruba, if it is not well advertised may not even fill a cubicle. What that expression does is to equate a full hall with appealing to vast audiences; and the two are not necessarily the same thing: a hall can be filled, as is often the case, by people of the same class, as at a classical concert at the Agip Recital Hall inside the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) Centre at Onikan, Lagos. In this city, people go to see plays at the University of Lagos just as they go to see them anywhere else. Anybody who wants to test this contention should fix a well publicised performance of Adebayo Faleti's *Basorun Gaa* for MUSON Centre and see whether the place will not collapse with crowd. Only that for that fear, MUSON's management may not tolerate any crowds from Mushin and Bariga. Maybe the expression was true of earlier times. It is quite valid to argue that in this kind of environment where the level of cultural consciousness is very low, refined taste in art is exclusionary. Even this essay, by virtue of its being written in this kind of

journal is orientated toward the crowd more likely to be sympathetic to the trend it is criticising. Jimoh Aliu, a dramatist and film-producer and president of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners would more readily buy and read a copy of *Starfilms* magazine carrying his photograph and opinion, than he would care to read a journal that would stylise, rather than sensationalise the crisis within the ANTP. Perhaps it is about time those who want the theatre out of the 'university' began creating their own critical standards. For if it is argued that literary dramas have an instinctive predilection for relating to the fears and preferences of less than mass audiences, it is to be expected that the standards for evaluating the dramas will often tend to adopt the same canonical attitude. Yet the town, with its newspapers, radio and television stations, its advertising and public relations companies is better placed to evolve ways of directly engaging the teeming audiences.

THE GARBAGE OF ARISTOTLE

The simple fact, easily overlooked in the frenzy of doing a theatre that will appeal to everyone, remains: there is no Nigerian theatre as yet. Or there is, in so far as there is a Nigerian nation. But there are a number of other things. There are personal oeuvres, the valid visions of individual writers in the manner of 'great texts.' (Soyinka and Clark represent a tendency that Osofisan begs to differ from. And so far no dramatist has presented a distinctly different aesthetic. There is of course the case of a writer like Olu Obafemi (author of *Naira Has No Gender*, among other plays) who is Osofisan's ideological brother and therefore enters into a problematic relationship with him. Rather than challenge the inadequacies of the 'second generation' writers and seek to transcend them as Osofisan has

done in his re-readings of the older writers, writing his own versions of *The Raft* and *The Strong Breed* those brothers merely come to legalise and gloss over the grey areas in the radical dramaturgy. For if culture is dynamic, it is proper to expect texts to contest texts, for young writers to rewrite the classics of their formative years in the light of new experience. And a genuine work of art is not necessarily diminished by such contest. There is also the case of Yerima who believes - and writes to prove the belief - that 'the ideas of a writer 'must be compatible or be attuned with the dominant interest in society.' These individual visions, from Soyinka to Tomolaju are valid and, if nothing else have constituted a body of works. But theatre is a lot more than texts).

There is a National Theatre building and there is a National Troupe of Nigeria first conceived as a dance troupe under Hubert Ogunde. Even as a drama troupe, it has survived on government patronage and its presentations confirm this. As argued earlier, this thread runs through the entire fabric of much of contemporary Nigerian theatre of English expression, the only theatre practice that there is. And it explains why the questions of language and lack of professionalism determine how the theatre relates to its audience.

Adelugba has argued that 'the language barrier is more on the level of ideas than reality.' Elsewhere, in respect of the National Troupe, he says: 'Theatre language is not Yoruba, it is not Hausa, it is not Igbo. It is theatre and that is why the countries that have chosen the dance model have got round their problem. Once we choose the language of movement, sound, expression, then you get round the problem.' All this is true if the medium is not verbal. The moment one begins to deal with the cold texts that constitute a large part of the Nigerian theatre, the question of language becomes all too urgent.

Ogunba, almost 20 years ago, expressed the 'hope that as it (modern African drama) matures in years, it will become even more distinguished and finally achieving a form uniquely African... To do (this) however, the language question will have to be resolved in many parts of the continent.' He was aware then of the problem, underlined by the involvement of those who had chosen an idea which frustrates rather than facilitates communication. Etherton who usually takes the pain to examine every problem critically finally confesses that 'the language used in African drama is a problem for which there is no ready solution.'

Yet Nigerian dramatists have made conscious efforts to relate their works to their perceived audiences. Clark, who had earlier written 'The Legacy of Caliban' believes the writer has to search within his culture. 'The task for an Ijaw', he remarks in 'Aspects of Nigerian Drama', a later essay, 'and I dare say, any Nigerian or African artist writing in a European language like English is one of finding the verbal equivalent for his characters created in their original context.' Rotimi has also stated his own approach to the issue thus: 'English, as you know, is the official medium of communication in Nigeria. Inevitably, I write for audiences who are knowledgeable in this language. However, in handling the English language in my plays, I strive to temper

its phraseology to the ears of both the dominant semi-literate as well as the literate groups with ease in assimilation and clarity and identification.'

Any of the plays of Soyinka termed as 'difficult', shedding the language could have evolved from the imagination of a traditional artist. The use of traditional and accessible motifs like myth, ritual, dance and dirge situates them within a context to which Akinwumi Isola reaches in translating *Death as Iku Olokun Esin* which Ojewuyi directed in 1994. But Soyinka claims he writes 'in the firm belief that there must be at least a hall full of people who are sort of on the same wave length as mine from every stratum of society and there must be at least a thousand people who are able to feel the same way as I do about something. So... I write in the absolute confidence that it must have an audience.' Osofisan, who arguably has written more popular plays than any other Nigerian literary dramatist, once translated *Who's Afraid of Solarin* into Yoruba as *Yeepal Solaarin Nbo* with the collaboration of Dotun Ogundeji, a teacher of Yoruba. There is a coinage, 'Yorubanglish' by Adelugba. 'This is not just Yoruba or English or Yoruba mixed with English but the many-sided attempts to catch the flavour, tones, rhythms, emotional and intellectual content of Yoruba language and thought.' Even Jeyifo, taking this experiment and others (with Pidgin for instance) as ways through the problem, remarks that 'the question of English language as a possible medium for an authentic Nigerian literary drama, a drama which can reach vast audiences is now no longer a serious problem.'

Plays have had very wide appeal in spite of the language. But there can be no question that a great number of the people that such plays intend to address have been excluded. Even at the very bare level where Mike now operates in the developmental theatre, vestiges of the language problem remain, and will remain for as long as English is used by only a few influential people in these parts.

The origin of this problem, which constitutes for the contemporary theatre a crisis of relevance is, as hinted earlier on, to be found in the nature of education that the pioneers of the Nigerian theatre received.

The production of Soyinka's and Clark's plays in the late Fifties and early Sixties permanently established the English language drama tradition in Nigeria. Even with the dynamism and exceeding vitality and popularity of the Yoruba travelling theatres and their possible replications in other part of the country, it has proved be a dominant tradition. This writer's statistics record at least 300 plays (about three-quarters of which are published) belonging to Clark's definition of 'drama that is usually first seen in print before it is seen on stage'. Playwriting becomes an art on its own, leading such writers as Aminu Fari, Tar Ahura, Sam Ukala, Rasheed Gbadamosi, Akomaye Oko and several others to write and publish first, bothering less about the kind of staging that will be suitable. The writers are so many it is futile to recall them

All but a few of the plays (like Segun Oyekunle's *Katakata*



Banjo Solaru (second right) as Oba Sarumi in the detention camp scene of the film, *Kongi's Harvest*. Fourth from right is Wale Ogunyemi as Deinde.

for *Sufferhead* and Tunde Fatunde's plays) are written in the English language.

In the hands of masters like Soyinka and Clark, there is a level of literariness that is daunting for anyone unfamiliar with the language. Since they are in most cases finally seen on stage, the plays however communicate as theatre, but mostly with those who have been 'accessed'. These turn out to be members of the society who share the writer's educational and cultural values.

Thus explained, language appears to be one major problem. In fact, it is a living problem deeply rooted in politics, and indeed in the very idea of Nigeria. The evaluation of drama in the African context has been based largely on the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, or reaction to it. Aristotle's descriptive analysis of the major texts of the Greek tragedian of the Periclean age was specific to the age, and formed only an aspect of quite extensive commentaries on a highly developed civilisation. Because dramatic criticism starting from the neoclassical era has come down to Africa as part of a whole garbage that permeates all levels of the education, Nigerians who have found Greek models handy easily overlook these aspects. They appropriate the

spirit of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a literary theory as a basis for dramatic criticism and use Greek plays as models.

And because most of the plays that emerge do so not from a thorough study of a dynamic society on its own terms, they have tended to remain grossly misunderstood as theatre. An example is the immensely popular play by Rotimi, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, which is neither an adaptation of Sophocles nor for that matter a commentary on the Biafran war. If, as the playwright tries to suggest through king Odewale's final speech, the trouble with Nigeria is tribalism, who is Odewale to carry the blame? Thanks to Rotimi's stage iconography, very few audiences have seen the play from his point of view. (Yet, there is a direct translation of *Oedipus* into Yoruba by Olanipekun Esan. With its title, *Teledase* - meaning something like 'The Creator's Will Be Done,' its poetry and its willingness to just translate the English words, this play is much closer to Sophocles' original).

Attempts by foremost dramatists, Soyinka and Clark to define their dramaturgy within a theoretical structure have helped to transform orality into a literary culture. In the essays 'The Example of Shakespeare' and 'The Fourth Stage', the writers' ultimate concerns are theories of drama. Whether the ends are attained is one thing, it is another thing whether similar exercises in theatre history have been as devoid of a locus in the socio-

political reality as the essays have been. In one case the reference is to William Shakespeare's classicism, which Clark finds ideal, in the other it is to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Soyinka's, an elaboration on the tragic impulse with the Yoruba cosmology draws heavily on metaphysics. The language of the essay is poetic and hermetic, perhaps recalling the temper of the essay it is reacting to. One of the salient arguments in the essay as it relates to theatre - that the dramatic conflict is resolved through the communal will epitomised by the audience in the theatre as part of the performance - yields a social dimension only at a different level of interpreting an entire superstructure of myth, ritual and cultic symbolism. Yet Soyinka and Clark are, like most educated Nigerians, products of a colonial education that has profoundly altered their consciousness and, linguistically at least, alienated certain audiences from their theatres.

Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Miller were like Soyinka and Clark faced with the problem of relating to societies completely different from Aristotle's. Weimar Republic showed the classical definition of poetry (and poetic drama) by Goethe and Schiller as grossly inadequate, and 'Short Organum' was written by Brecht, disrupting the unities of time, action and space and substituting Alienation Effect for Aristotle's catharsis. Miller's 'Tragedy and the Common Man' grappling with post-Depression American nightmare questions the suggestion that only nobles were capable of a tragic experience. Unlike Soyinka and Clark, Brecht and Miller wrote in languages spoken by majority of their countrymen.

Demas Nwoko, like many others who have berated the colonial legacy of the Nigerian theatre points his finger at two types of dramatists that came to prominence at independence. Two of the opening paragraphs of his 'Search for a New African Theatre' bear quoting as some length, if only to demonstrate that the problem lacks no real and timely perspective. He writes: 'An aspiring dramatist enters university either in his country or in Europe or America. If he chooses to study English or French in his own country, he continues the grammar school pattern. He studies more European classics and watches them performed by the local European community whose taste for art hardly ever goes beyond European classics. So when he writes his first play, he models it after Sophocles and Euripides and other Greek dramatists or after Moliere or Shakespeare. For this show of promise he is sent to Europe or America for advanced studies in Drama. He gets the first shock of his life when he discovers that the people there have been doing things for two thousand years (or at least four hundred years) ahead of what he knew to be theatre. Before he settles down to the task of catching up on lost time, he is told by everybody that he should become African. This is not only a shock, but it is confusing. He is allowed to stay the year, studying his craft between persistent demands to show his Africanness. At the end of the year he is sent home to research into his own culture, he occupies a post in the local university and forms his own generation of artists.'

'The second type of student goes overseas straight from grammar school to study Drama and receives the same formation as the artists of his host country. At first, not much notice is taken

of the fact that he has a different cultural background, as he is required to fulfil similar examination requirements as every other student. At a later stage of his studies, he is encouraged to apply his new knowledge to his own culture but he is not shocked because the preservation of cultural identities is one of the principles inculcated in these overseas institutions, and he has absorbed this in the course of his first play which turns out to be a scientific application of modern western theatrical techniques. He too comes back to join the home university where he meets the first type still digging deep into the past. He joins the search with his interest for compiling native customs which he quickly reduces to scientific terms to fit into the idioms of the Western culture he has acquired.'

Nwoko published his essay in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1970, at the beginning of the decade purportedly signalling the indigenisation of the theatre in Nigeria. The war ended in January 1970, followed by the Gowon regime's policy of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. National unity through culture, sports and education became a priority project. There was the National Youth Service Corps scheme, the international airport and the National stadium, all made possible by the oil boom. Universities and states proliferated under this and subsequent regimes. Some of the plays of Rotimi and Ogunyemi have been categorised as identifying with the spirit of unity and tribal harmony that this period preached. But indigenisation was only in name. Soyinka's 'Towards a True Theatre' in which he says the Arts Theatre in Ibadan 'cannot boast practicalities such as ventilation or sound proofing' was written eight years before Nwoko's. But when the Nigerian National Theatre was to be built as one of the may construction works of the decade it was not up to the likes of Nwoko, who in 1969 began constructing an ambitious theatre at Mokola, Ibadan, to design the theatre. Wholesale like a piece of furniture the theatre plan was lifted from Sophia, Bulgaria. Its parts were fixed together at the cost of N24 million. It was completed in December 1976, in time to host the Second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC, in February 1977. One of the ways in which Nigeria has matched Britain history for history is that both opened their National Theatres in 1976, Britain only five months earlier!

In most states of the country, the elephantine project has been duplicated as cultural centres, only this time built by Nigerian artisans. It will be a great day when Nwoko's New Culture Studio dedicated (but far from completed) in December 1995 begins to steal shows from the National Theatre and the Cultural Centre just on the other side of Mokola.

Theatre directors, playwrights, actors and designers have therefore created a body of literature on the misbegotten nature of the proscenium stage of the National Theatre. They argue that it is beholden to a colonial mindset that erects a wall between the audience and the performer. 'There is no National Theatre in the full implication of the idea', writes Femi Euba, a playwright and director now based in the United States. He contends that the structure of the National Theatre borrows rather heavily from that of the proscenium stage which does not reflect the realities of a

Nigerian theatre. Euba's is actually a critique of theatre practice in Nigeria, which he believes is intolerant of the ideas of a genuine professional, and hence his deploring of the stage structure which is but one of several criticisms of an incongruous idea.

Adelugba, giving a talk on 'Basic Premises of African Theatre' at the Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S., in 1974 said of the soon to be completed National Theatre: 'It seems to me that the idea has been slavishly taken over. There has been no attempt to relate the ideas to the needs in Nigeria.' A year later, he was told by an interviewee, Bayo Oduneye that there was the need for 'a collection of theatre artists from all over Africa (to gather for a conference) so that we can come down and talk about what we mean by black theatre or Nigerian theatre because we don't know it yet.' These criticisms would have been a great deal clearer with a closer look at the character of the Nigerian state itself. For the character of the Nigerian theatre is closely related to the character of its elite which is in turn shaped by the political character of Nigeria as a country. For a long time, Nigeria was thought to be one indivisible country. The civil war was fought to keep it so. Now it's no more so, in fact it had never been and one needs no further proof than the general, loudly ignorant argument about the non-negotiability of the unity of Nigeria. This is a fashionable slogan born as a reaction to the call for a sovereign national conference to examine the national question and, if need be, reexamine the basis of the Nigerian federation. The call itself predates the annulment of June 12 1993 elections and the unwillingness to listen to it is at once responsible for the hanging of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight co-activists in November 1995 and for the current political problem that has seen a horde of politicians, journalists, lawyers and soldiers either in jail or in exile.

It is not true that Nigeria is non-negotiable. If an idea has survived for 36 years the impression is easily created that such an idea must be strong or valid to have stayed as one piece for that long. But everyone knows that Nigeria has never been stable. Long before independence it was clear that the arrangement was merely one of political expediency on the part of the British. Only the zeal to wrest power from them led the politicians to pretend about this structure in which they had no part in bringing about. It was a basic fact. In less than seven years that opportunistic silence became very costly, and ever since the war was won and lost, Nigeria has been kept together by a balance of terror. Soyinka in his book *The Open Sore of a Continent* writes: 'The inviolability of national boundaries is therefore a fictitious concept, borne-out of nothing more substantial than faith, and therefore, every bit as questionable for those of the rational world.'

THEATRE AS BUSINESS

At the beginning of the second week of September 1996, a one-day symposium was held in Lagos on the theme 'The Theatre Artist as a Businessman'. It was organised free by an arts marketing company, Tall and Wide collaborating with the NANTAP. The consensus at the symposium attended by more journalists and businessmen than theatre artists was that for too

long, the business aspect of the theatre arts practice had been neglected in the curriculum. 'Our teachers have not taught us much', said Toye Arulogun, chief executive of Tall and Wide and until recently head of Client Services in an advertising agency. 'They taught us only practicalisation of the discipline. We are now teaching ourselves.'

Four facilitators spoke on public and personal relations, marketing, management and financing in the theatre. Although the attendance was low, the forum was significant in pragmatically relating to the cultural atmosphere of the Nineties. It is the era of free trade, of subordinating all else to the dictates of the market. The Nigerian electronic media had been deregulated and in 1996 alone, at least two private television stations began test transmission and another is expected before the end of the year. The most vibrant cultural department now is the home video which thrives, on the one hand at the expense of the film industry rendered moribund by lack of finance, and on the other as a result of inability of live theatre to secure its own economic base. One of the facilitators at the symposium, Charles Igwe, husband of the soap opera director Amaka Igwe, manages Crystal Gold, the marketing company that in two weeks allegedly sold over 40,000 copies of the second part of *Violated*, a video play which people paid N500 to see when premiered at MUSON Centre in early August. Musical concerts are held almost every other day in Lagos and in each case are jam-packed. Every Sunday at the National Theatre at least four Yoruba home videos

B The most vibrant cultural department now is the home video which thrives, on the one hand at the expense of the film industry rendered moribund by lack of finance, and on the other as a result of inability of live theatre to secure its own economic base.

are being screened, occasionally the shows are moved out into bigger halls because of the large crowds.

Yet the argument at the symposium was for the live theatre, not the video market. In fact, Arulogun, a theatre arts graduate insists that the main idea is to contain the threat of the videos. 'The questions that will matter are: what is the play you're doing, where and in what time of the year are you doing it? These are the things that will contend with the threat of the videos. After all, people are going to the theatre to see the home videos.'

Mike, ever keen on the marketability of a theatrical product also spoke recently about the need for theatre artists to 'go into the universities and to do workshops on producing, fund-raising for the theatre because that's what we're not taught in the department. We are taught business management, not producing for the theatre, which is a problem on its own.' He has a structure comprising two organisations, the Collective Artists and the Performance Studio Workshop. While the CA does public relations and promotions that raise money through the main stage productions, the PSW sustains the promotions by

developing individual talent through workshops, training programmes and in the area of developmental theatre. 'You put up an activity, you design a proposal and you now go to look for funds,' he says, adding, 'there's money in (the theatre), it is how to get that money that constitutes problem for the average theatre artist without training in devising a proposal, mapping out how the proposal will work.' In 1994 before the long oil-workers strike that complicated the political crisis and saw people like Soyinka leaving the country, Chartered Bank sponsored his production of *The Lion and the Jewel*.

This is the approach favoured by Arulogun and his friends in the business community. They think that the corporate sponsor not only wants concrete proposals to justify funding, he also wants to see in the person shopping for funds the image of himself the clean-shaven, suit-wearing briefcase-clutching individual, tucking his theatre 'personality somewhere inside his designer socks.' And they get responses. Apart from Tall and Wide, George Coker and Associates has in the past worked with Collective Artists to raise funds. There is, in this approach an attempt to look beyond the ready funds of donor agencies whose ends are often incompatible with those of a theatre professional hoping to do popular plays as independently as possible.

But there must be no mention of Wole Soyinka to a sponsor in 1996, for obvious political reasons. 'I will not make the kind of mistake Israel Eboh made,' says Adewale Adeduro, marketing manager of MUSON Centre and a facilitator at the symposium. 'Doing a Soyinka play might make commercial sense because of the syllabus but it doesn't make business sense, it's unrealistic.'

Here is the crunch: There is usually a very wide gulf between the expectations of people like Jeyifo and Etherton about the theatre as a vehicle of political consciousness and the agenda of Effiong's Anansa Playhouse of creating audience by cultivating the youth. (Effiong is the director of Cross River State Council for Arts and Culture). Although the argument can be made that it is important to engender interest before tackling the question of what kind of theatre, the two positions are informed by certain mutually exclusive conclusions: Jeyifo believes that a play must be consciously created for an urban mass audience and that it must deal with their sociopolitical problems in order to be valid and acceptable, but Effiong's position suggests that over politicisation of themes is a repellent.

And there lies the real problem: To tuck a Soyinka play away on the basis of the author's politics, which may be different from the politics of the given day is very *Nigerian*; to address a problem by keeping silent about it. The problem is not even the one we would ordinarily think is at the heart of Nigerian theatre's crisis of relevance: that is, the ethical problem of striking a balance between the consciousness of a writer and that of his audience, to stylise the original nuances that went into the making of Kongi's *Harvest* in such a way that the Ogunde/Jide Kosoko crowd can relate to what is, simply, its experience. No, that is not the problem, but how to abandon everyday politics altogether, sever all links, real and surreal, with Soyinka and Radio Kudirat, just to get a living space, to make money to do theatre or vice

- versa. Desirable and inevitable as the input of businessmen is for the survival of contemporary theatre, that is the price the theatre artist has to pay for working with them.

Now *The Trials* is not a political play, by any standard. And Arulogun would not touch it with a 100-metre pole. Yet business must continue and under an atmosphere of silence about the least fundraising name. Not only will Arulogun as producer not touch a play the government does not like, he will readily do any that the government does like, which is not likely to be Kongi's *Harvest*, a play about a maniacal dictator who sacks a natural ruler or *Morountodun* the story of a peasant revolt or for that matter *Hopes of the Living Dead* in which lepers assert their rights in spite of enormous weaknesses. Maybe Yerima's 'The Silent Gods.'

'Amona' the story of a military man, a drug baron who seizes power to cover his misdemeanours but finds he is unpopular, was successfully staged in Abuja in May. But the kind of opportunity Tomoloju and Kakaaki Productions have had with the project does not come often, and it does not equate with a self-financed theatre. Its source of funding has its own kind of politics as Okolo's experience has shown. In times like this, when the theatre desperately needs to stay alive, Jeyifo's preference for 'a drama (emerging) from a conscious class analysis of our society,' is part of the inconvenience to be quietly set aside. There will be exceptions, when a truly subversive play, using a lot of music, dance and spectacle will lead distinguished guests by the nose and spit at them, and slip handbilled messages through seemingly harmless phrases and gestures. And runs away. But an exception does not prove a case, except it is the kind of exception that disrupts the pattern of history, which no amount of 'conscious class analysis' or historical stocktaking or hardnose bargaining ever manages to anticipate, much less preempt, but which in this particular case must surrender its immutability to precisely those forces.

And while the audience waits in the illusionary dark of the theatre for one such, the show must go on. **GR**

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