

<< zied sexual attack that has been caught on video and that is used to blackmail him (162-3). But there is also the encounter between Mfonda and Woods referred to below. It is disconcerting that Abaidoo passes with some decorum ('Then all hell broke lose', 'The rest was a blur' etc.) over mutually enjoyable sex but goes into considerable detail in those scenes which combine sex with violence. Without being prudish, there is a disturbing sense that Abaidoo is writing to meet certain expectations: readers, it is assumed, want a certain number of sex scenes, and they relish sadism.

As might be expected from what I have said, characterization is weak. This is noticeable in the handling of motivation, particularly where characters shift their allegiance. For example, at one point 30 year old Mablane Mbusa, the African mistress of a racist general, Frisch, is recruited to kill her lover. There is reference to the plan to enlist here, but silence about how the approach is made or how she reacts to overtures. On the other hand, and, in view of the emphasis on violence already mentioned, not surprisingly there is a lengthy description of the manner in which she disposes of the general - and a clumsily staining for immediacy as she does it. Briefly, she injects potassium cyanide into a cake 'now' and he eats it 'now' (68).

The writing is, in fact, released by violence and death - and in this once again it follows the convention of the thriller. In addition to the last minutes of General Frisch (70), there are particularly elaborate accounts of deaths, in Germany (6), and in Paris (173). When people die on a massive scale

in Philadelphia following the detonation of a canister of poison gas, Abaidoo waxes lyrical. He also becomes confused, and the account includes the following:

*The vehicular commotion in the area boggled the imagination. ... Crushed vehicles littered the streets.*

*... A stunning blonde lay astride the pavement, her legs over her poodle.' 228-231.*

(Incidentally the African liberation group responsible for this wholesale slaughter does not take account of the significant number of African-Americans likely to be killed by an attack on down-town Philadelphia).

When Hamburg later receives similar treatment, the novelist writes:

*... No one moved in the tram now. No one could. They had been gripped by the cold death that was sweeping across the Plaza. (238)*

Since the novel's contribution to the international thriller genre is in putting the triumph of an African democratic movement at the centre, it might be anticipated that African characters would have major roles to play and that they would provide a sympathetic presence at the centre of the novel. This does not happen and, indeed, several of the African characters are particularly poorly drawn - they don't attract much of the novelist's attention. They may be planners and paymasters, but they

inhabit the margins of the plot and are not brought to life on the page. I suspect this is because Abaidoo has more models for second-hand Cosa Nostra hit-men and corrupt CIA agents than for African freedom fighters and nationalist campaigners.

The process of generating interest in a story-line, taking it to a sort of conclusion, and then dropping it is repeated several times in *Black Fury* - and is a particularly irritating feature of the work. The novel contains enough plots for four thrillers and enough characters for five or six. Abaidoo would have been well advised to economise, to concentrate, to follow sequences through to conclusions. For example, one asks in vain what happens when Kalule is under surveillance? And one wonders: what does Stevenson Crump of *The Washington Post* do with the information he collects in Africa? The first question draws attention to poor plotting, and the second question points to a larger silence: What about public opinion and the media? Abaidoo writes of a world in which journalists have little impact. He writes of politicians who seem to act without taking heed of what the media is saying.

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## Producing Africa

Fiona Ledger

**I**N 1967 when the BBC World Service broadcast *The Union Men*, a play by John Storm-Roberts, an Englishman who lived in Nairobi, a tradition was born on the BBC: radio drama for Africa.

The theme of this first play is a mystery - the tape onto which it was recorded is now blank - but it was to be followed by four or five plays for Africa, all written by Europeans (including, oddly, the Swiss playwright, Friedrich Dürrenmatt),

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<< until a play by Femi Euba from Nigeria; *Down by the Lagoon*, was broadcast in February 1968. This was to set African Theatre on its course as a show-case for African writing talent.

The BBC's African Theatre was, in the words of one of its early producers, John Gordon, 'a means of encouraging African writers and actors'. And they needed little encouraging.

Nigeria then, as now, supplied the bulk of scripts. As well as Wole Soyinka (*The Swamp-Dwellers* was broadcast in 1967, *Before the Black-Out* two years later and *Die Still Reverend Doctor Godspoke* in 1982), there was Bode Sowande and Biyi Bandele-Thomas. From Ghana there was drama by Ama Ata Aidoo and Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, while from South Africa contributors included Maisha Maponya and Zakes Mda, Kenya's Francis Imbuga and David Katuta Mulwa have also featured as have Zimbabwe's Chenjerai Hove and Simon Shumba. These are just a few of the talented fish in a huge sea of creativity.

Of course it should not be forgotten that many brilliant dramatists in Africa were not - and are still not - in a position to contribute to African Theatre. Their work is often not performed in English or the written script is an alien form. In Africa, drama often depends on a process of improvisation and such dramatists depend on physical movement and a lively dialogue with the audience. All of this is cruelly taken away by radio. And with writers restricted to thirty minutes to tell the story and establish the characters, the BBC makes the test even harder. In this sense, African Theatre could never claim to be broadcasting the best drama from the continent, but rather just



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some of the best.

The BBC's African drama season has provided a launchpad not just for writers but also for African actors in London. In the Sixties, professional actors from Africa were scarce and many who took part were, to begin with, gifted amateurs - students or those working in other forms of broadcasting.

Among that generation was Alex Tetteh-Lartey, an actor who, until his death in 1996, acted in more roles in the BBC's African drama than any other, appearing in one of last year's prize-winning plays, *The Broadcasting Station*. His zest for comedy and finely judged character-acting was one of many talents; he was also a barrister and in his youth, a top cricketer.

Jeillo Edwards from Sierra Leone, another regular contributor, was one of the few actors back in the Sixties who had had professional training. But the parts available in the burgeoning TV drama scene were extremely mean, offering only marginal roles; silent ladies carrying shopping or on stage, silent spear carriers. African Theatre did at least guarantee some meaty roles for the gifted actor, but there is little doubt that the diet of mindless and racist roles, offered throughout the Sixties and Seventies, contributed gradually to the grinding down of some extremely talented actors.

In 1971, African Theatre held its first competition - now

an annual feature. The winner was South African writer Richard Rive, for his first radio play, *Sweet Scum of Freedom*. One of the runners-up was Ken Saro Wiwa, then a businessman and occasional writer. This proved to be the springboard for his writing career and the play he wrote, *The Transistor Radio*, was made into the very successful radio and television series: Basi&Co.

In 1994 the idea of recording plays on location in Africa was born. It was decided that recording should no longer be restricted to the BBC's London studios and that there was a real need to meet up with actors and writers on their own territory. This has been accompanied by a move to embrace not just drama, but also song, drama-documentaries and poetry. It was at this point that it seemed right to change the name of the season from the European-inspired and rather stuffy-sounding 'African Theatre' to the broader title of 'African Performance'.

But if the contributions of the actors and the writers are heroic, then so, too, are the listeners. Listening to drama on short-wave can be tough, with crucial words in a dialogue disappearing - but now, with the increase in FM broadcasting of BBC programmes, drama could get a new lease of life. Certainly, a record number of scripts was received this year for the playwriting competition: one-and-a-half thousand, with the largest number of women writers ever.

Many recognise news as the cornerstone of the BBC; reporting politics, crises and death. And drama is the vital counterpoint, conveying patience, humour and dignity, as well as other less admirable qualities - cruelty, greed and lust; in other words, drama gives the full picture.

Fiona Ledger for many years produced African Theatre at the BBC.