The State of the Theatre in Rhodesia

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Rhodesia has no full-time professional company of actors. There is one semi-professional group, Ken Marshall Productions, and the Salisbury Repertory Players have the services of a professional Director of Productions, Mr. Adrian Stanley. For the rest, stage drama is kept alive by amateur societies.

Almost all the societies which produce plays for the public are members of the Association of Rhodesian Theatrical Societies. The Association (hereafter referred to as ARTS) is, in effect, the governing body for theatre in Rhodesia and as such offers a number of services for the benefit of member societies. Every year it organises a Rhodesian Drama Festival and engages an adjudicator, usually from Britain or South Africa, to select the best entries for presentation in repertory fashion in one of the larger centres. Thereafter placings are given and prizes awarded for the most notable achievements in various theatrical skills. ARTS also makes representations to the Government on behalf of its members: at present ARTS is negotiating for dispensation from censorship. Through ARTS scripts are obtained and royalties paid; ARTS is the accredited agent of the most useful groups of publishers in Britain and America. For the use of its members there is a library containg scripts of approximately two thousand plays. Besides the commendable services which ARTS offers to its members, it assists the National Arts Council whenever the latter sponsors dramatic productions.

At the time of writing ARTS has thirty-eight member societies. Of these, six are in Salisbury, and three in Bulawayo. The majority of the societies are distributed about the western sector of the country; only five are in centres east of Salisbury, a fact which population distribution does not entirely account for.[1]

The topics to be pursued in this article concern the kinds of societies which have ARTS membership. Predominantly these societies are independent entities, i.e. they do not exist as subsections within sports clubs or clubs sponsored by large commercial organisations, and have to finance their productions out of members' subscriptions and profits from past productions. Membership of dramatic societies is for the most part confined to Europeans (although their rules do not often exclude non-Europeans) and audiences also tend to be almost entirely European. Non-Europeans do not participate to any great extent, for a variety of reasons, political, social and economic.

Africans do participate in productions at educational institutions, principally mission secondary schools and teacher training colleges but these productions are very few in number in relation to the overall African population. To my knowledge there is only one society run by Africans which is really similar in character to the European societies; this is the Wankie African Dramatic and Choral Society. Whatever the reasons for non-participation by Africans—the larger African townships are sorely lacking in dramatic endeavour —it seems most unfortunate that the theatre should be fostered and patronised by a small section of the total population.

In order to find out more about the state of the

theatre in Rhodesia I recently wrote to seven prominent and experienced producers of drama in Rhodesia. Their answers to my specific questions, which I have collated and compared, together with their unsolicited comments, form the substance of what follows. The questions concerned the degree of interest prevailing in the theatre here, the kinds of plays which appeal to popular taste, the future for serious drama and the acceptability of modern techniques of stagecraft. Wherever possible, answers have been checked against available statistics, a few of which are given where they are illuminating and sufficiently accurate.

Of those whose opinions were canvassed, only two feel that the Rhodesian's interest in the theatre is waning, but the other five are guarded in their optimism. Mr. John Cobb, well-known in Bulawayo as a producer, says, "I do not think that interest in theatre has ever waned in this country. But I most certainly think that its condition is decidedly weak."[2] His view reflects the consensus of opinion. Although no question was asked about the possibilities for professional drama here, four replies dwell on the need for professional theatre to add a stimulus. It is recognised that a permanent professional group would have to rely upon Government subsidy for survival, as do the provincial Performing Arts Boards in South Africa, but two alternatives are suggested: tours of Rhodesia by professional companies would help; so would the establishment of courses in Speech and Drama in school and university. On the latter point Mr. Anthony Weare, Chairman of the Fort Victoria Drama Circle and producer of the winning play in the 1967 Rhodesian Drama Festival, says, "Rhodesia has a unique opportunity to create a national theatre interest in this tiny land, but this can only be done by carrying Speech and Drama and threatre training into the lives of young people through the schools and University."[3]

As to the good influence of professionalism, one has only to look at the career of Mr. Adrian Stanley in the Salisbury Repertory Players for proof. Mr. Stanley was invited to join the staff of the Repertory Players in 1964, after the Committee and members of the society had become desperately worried for the future of their theatre. In 1960 a profit of £1,088 had been recorded, but in 1961 the profit had dwindled to half and to £232 in 1962. In 1963 the downward trend continued, resulting in a profit of only £6. Then Mr. Stanley was appointed. 1964 showed a profit of £1,208 and by the end of the following year Mr. Stanley's good offices had brought in a profit of over £2,812 for the year. In 1966 the profits rose sharply to £4,790 and last year (1967) a profit of more than £4,000 was again achieved. On the subject of Mr. Stanley's success, Mr. Neil Jardine of Fort Victoria, whose play *Colour The Rabbits Blue* won the Caltex "Play of the Year" award in 1965, comments, "Adrian Stanley has built up a tremendous reputation—and it's not true to argue that this rests purely on box-office flim-flam. One of his big successes in 1966 was *Hamlet*."[4]

There can be no doubt that the advent of television, in November 1960 in Salisbury and June 1961 in Bulawayo, did have an adverse effect on the size of theatre audiences at first, but whether television has continued to have such an effect is a moot point. Mr. Stanley contends that television can help the theatre and that it has in fact done so: well-known local television personalities appearing on the stage invariably attract larger audiences; also, television can be used to publicise stage plays in the performance of excerpts. However, in Rhodesia the cost of televising excerpts is too high in relation to financial resources and there is insufficient technical equipment available to televise exerpts properly.[5]

It is difficult to tell what the future influence of television is likely to be in Rhodesia as there are unknown factors. Mr. Brian Durden, Vice-Chairman of ARTS, says that television is no longer a positive threat to the theatre because the public has become "disenchanted with television",[6] as a satisfactory alternative to live theatrical productions. At this point it might be interesting to compare theatre attendances in Salisbury with those of Umtali, where television has not as yet arrived. In Salisbury an average of approximately five per cent of the European population see each production of the Repertory Players. In Umtali the proportion of playgoers is at least ten per cent. The comparison is a reasonably fair one in that the Umtali Players, whose attendance figures I take, dominate theatrical activity in that town to the same extent that the Repertory Players do in Salisbury. Perhaps television does account for the disparity to some extent, but a number of other possibilities have to be taken into consideration as well. To conjecture as to what the other factors might be is beyond the scope of the present study.

One rather curious fact emerges from a further comparison of average rates of theatre attendance: rate of attendance varies in inverse proportion to population! Fort Victoria, which has a European population only a quarter as large as Umtali's, boasts an average attendance at each production of between 40 and 50 per cent of its European inhabitants.[7] Perhaps all the circumstances which combine to account for this inverse proportion—one can only guess at what they may be in the absence of a thorough sociological survey—also explain the remarkable vitality of dramatic societies in so many centres even smaller than Fort Victoria.

It is all very well to talk of theatre attendance rates, but what kinds of plays appeal to the public? This question must always be an important one to those who see in the theatre the expression of an art form as well as sheer entertainment. Four of my correspondents are decidedly gloomy about the future for anything other than frothy comedy and farce. Nevertheless, as Mr. Stanley points out —with the authority of one who has trained in Britain and had wide experience there—the situation is not peculiar to Rhodesia. He emphasises that the few London theatres which maintain a repertory of more serious drama (in which term I include high comedy) can only do so because they have an immense population from which to draw a coterie of enthusiasts and are subsidized by grants from the National Arts Council.

Other factors contribute to the lack of interest in serious drama in Rhodesia in particular. One is the lack of education in the drama. It is true enough that almost all European schoolchildren are presented with a few serious dramatic works in the course of their school careers and that almost every European secondary school, whether government-controlled or privately owned, puts on at least one play per year, but it is quite plain that very little enduring interest is engendered. Dramatic societies throughout the country complain that very few young people are prepared to take an active part in drama once they have left school. It seems that children are often taught drama without being educated to it.

Because of the lack of real education in the drama, or at least partly because of it, the public scarcely tolerates the playwrights of earlier centuries and is simply not used to—and does not understand—the work of the modern serious dramatists, who require intellectual rather than emotional involvement. Even though the playwrights of our times have undoubtedly injected new life into the drama overseas, very few of their works are performed here. And it is not true to say that all such plays are only for the coterie. Brecht, for example, is really popular among German audiences, especially in the eastern sector, almost as a playwright of the proletariat, but "Bulawayo Theatre Club's production of *Mother Courage* showed that people were not ready to sit objectively as Brecht intended."[8] The same may well be true of Salisbury: *Mother Courage* was produced by the Salisbury Repertory Players in 1960 and proved to be the least successful production of the year in terms of attendance. The felicitously phrased comments of Mr. Jardine sum up the situation:

> I don't think that Pinter, Beckett, Brecht, et al. are going to get a much wider hearing than say Jackson Pollock and Salvador Dali or Alban Berg and Nielsen have had—yet. The average theatre-goer is little different from the gallery visitor who "knows what he likes"—or who acknowledges Pollock and Picasso and Klee, but hangs Degas and Renoir. These things take time . . . Brecht's plays and their authentic production require cold-blooded appraisal and some measure of intellectual involvement . . . at least. The majority of theatre-goers still want to escape, and sit in the dark and eat popcorn and identify.[9]

Whatever the reasons for lack of interest in serious drama in present-day Rhodesia, the current political situation adds to them. Mr. Durden and Mr. Stanley speak of the similarity between Rhodesian audiences today and those of Britain during World War II. Mr. Durden says, "In some ways the present success of light presentations in the country had a parallel in England during the War. By and large the theatre-going public want to be taken out of themselves with a good laugh; they are not interested in thinking."[10] Mr. Marshall sees the desire to escape as a more-widespread problem, applying to all who perceive that they live "in the shadow of the bomb".[11] It would be ridiculous to suggest that the mood of audiences in Rhodesia is unique, but there are special pressures which do, no doubt, have a special effect.

Plays like Giraudoux's *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and Anouilh's *Poor Bitos* have played to

very disappointing audiences at the Reps. Theatre in the past few years. One could have predicted this, but Shakespeare has, by contrast, proved popular. Shakespeare's popularity may be somewhat artificial in that there are those who will go to one of his plays as a cultural obligation to which they feel reluctantly committed. Furthermore, the Salisbury Repertory Players usually choose for production a Shakespeare play which is a set text for "O", "M", or "A" Level examinations. Nevertheless, Mr. Stanley's 1966 production of *Hamlet* in modern dress was sincerely acclaimed. His *Othello,* in 1964, played to houses that were consistently better than average: in 1964 the average number of seats sold per performance for the whole year was approximately 41 per cent, whereas *Othello* averaged a 55 per cent attendance per performance.

One may well ask whether it is not the responsibility of well-established amateur groups with first-rate facilities, the Salisbury Repertory Players and the Umtali Players immediately come to mind, to educate or re-educate audiences into an appreciation for drama of literary merit, but Mr. French Smith, Chairman of the Umtali Players, defends against this criticism:

> As long as we are bound to make an amateur theatre pay its way (in the case of the Courtauld to meet its considerable overheads) we suffer in that those who would like to see and do serious or thought-making drama can only exist in small theatre-club groups accommodated in free . . . or inexpensive halls.[12]

Mr. Weare is more optimistic:

> The public will generally . . . support any entertainment which has quality and is not sufficiently esoteric to be outside its capacity for understanding.
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> In drama, a play which may be a valuable intellectual exercise may not have a wide appeal . . . until a director comes along and makes it explicit by visual or other means. As a theatre enthusiast I find myself at variance with the purists on this point but take the view that theatre is, or should be, primarily an emotional experience, and if a director succeeds in achieving this he has served his playwright well.[13]

That Mr. Weare has successfully put his theory into practice is indicated by the popular support attained by his production of *Rashomon,* the play which won the 1967 Rhodesian Drama Festival. By contrast, the Salisbury production of the same play was the least successful of its year (1964).

The difficulty with modern drama is quite largely one of technique in staging plays. If there is any characteristic of twentieth century drama which is common to a high proportion of serious drama it is one of form rather than content; the characteristic I have in mind is what has been called "expressionism".[14] Expressionism is a term which may be used broadly to include all non-realistic modes of presentation from impressionism to surrealism. The nineteenth century drama was, for the most part, bent upon realism; the aim was to create so convincing an illusion of reality on the stage that the audience would forget that they were watching a play and would instead gain the impression that they were watching something happening in real life. The nineteenth century also saw the final phase in the evolution of the stage with the proscenium arch: the apron had been progressively foreshortened until it had almost vanished, with the result that all the action took place behind the proscenium. This development naturally gave rise to what is commonly termed "the fourth-wall convention", which simply means that the stage is viewed—for indoor scenes—as a room from which one of the four walls has been removed so that we can see into it. Four outdoor scenes the convention similarly applied: one saw the rustic scene as though through a picture frame—and what was inside the picture had no right to come out of it. The players had no business to intrude physically upon their audience.

Things have changed. As I have said, the serious drama of this century tends to be non-realistic in its form and manner of presentation. Because theatres built over the last seventy-five years or so lend themselves to realism the use of non-realistic devices in them has to be very skilfully handled and one of the reasons why the serious drama of today does not readily succeed is that the theatres and halls in which it is performed are often architecturally unfriendly to it. In recent years theatre design in Britain, Europe, and America has made allowance for expressionism, but in Rhodesia, where most of the established theatres are built on the nineteenth century principle and where there has been little money available in recent years for experiments in the new, there is little evidence of the arrival of a new form of theatrical expression. Besides, many performances here

have to be given in multi-purpose halls belonging to schools or sports clubs. Such halls are naturally built with proscenium-arch stages to allow for the most economic use of space. In some few cases, however, the proscenium arch has been made less obtrusive (e.g. the Beit Hall at the University College, Salisbury) or has been almost refined out of existence (e.g. the Reps. Theatre, Salisbury).

Modern techniques of stagecraft have, then, to be very carefully employed to succeed, but what are the attitudes of Rhodesian producers to expressionism as such? All my correspondents agree that expressionism has its uses, but only two laud it without reservations. Their reservations seem to be centred upon their feeling for what a Rhodesian audience will accept rather than upon any conservatism in themselves. A sample opinion:

> If Rhodesian audiences are to be singled out, I think they might reject a form of expressionism which allowed them to be continuously conscious of the fact that they . . . were real life, watching something that wasn't. The director *must* persuade his audience to transport itself imaginatively.[15]

Mr. Cobb, whose support for expressionism is whole-hearted, places the responsibility for the lack of modern expressionist drama on the Rhodesian stage squarely upon the producers. He says:

> The introduction of expressionistic theatre has been this century's greatest contribution to the Muse. Unhappily, we are afraid of it, or are insufficiently experienced to present it correctly to an audience and only succeed in embarrassing them. The actor becomes obviously conscious of his audience and the director is still blinded by the "fourth wall" (the reason why so many productions just do not penetrate beyond the first row).[16]

Of all the sub-species of the *avant-garde* the "theatre of the absurd" is the most famous and has the closest associations with expressionism. In fact the theatre of the absurd depends on expressionism for its existence. Perhaps one of the reasons why Rhodesian producers treat expressionism with suspicion is that they realise that the theatre of the absurd was a passing phase, one which produced some interesting work, but a phase nevertheless. Reviewing the drama of the last twenty years, Mr. Stanley puts the matter in context:

> The absurd was a necessary phase, but it was experimental and is now finished. Its influence shows in the best of the most recent writers. The way in which Robert Bolt uses the figure of The Common Man in the stage version of *A Man for All Seasons* shows the influence of experimental expressionism, though it would probably be more true to say that Bolt was more immediately influenced by Brecht than by the absurd.[17]

Expressionist devices have led to experiments in new ways of staging plays, and some old ways have been revived too. Perhaps the most significant of the innovations of our time are theatre in the round, open stage productions, and intimate theatre. What the first two—and sometimes the third—have in common is that they do not try to preserve any illusion of reality. Theatre in the round goes quite the other way, indeed: the stage is in the middle and the spectators all around it can see across it to the watching faces opposite them.

Open stage productions do away with the proscenium arch, though without necessarily bringing actors and audience physically closer. What the open stage does do is to break down the barrier between them. As Professor Richard Southern has said, "The cardinal problem about the proscenium arch is that it creates a line."[18] The open stage removes the line.

The intimate theatre also strives to bring actors and audience into closer mental contact, but does so by more physical means. The auditorium is much smaller than in most conventional theatres, and often holds no more than fifty people. An atmosphere of intimacy is created, although the proscenium is not always abolished. In effect the proscenium often disappears because the stage may well be as wide as the little auditorium and as high.

I asked my correspondents to give their views on the three unconventional techniques of staging just mentioned. The consensus was in favour of all three. Mr. Stanley says that his London production in the round of *Burning Bright* was well received and that the more plays he saw in the round the more surprised he was at the different types of theatre which work in this medium.[19] Mr. Jardine says, "There's been too little of it done to pass a valuable opinion, but I did see The *Trial of Mary Dugan* in the round a few years ago

with considerable box-office success in Salisbury."[20]

Very recently I saw the Salisbury Repertory Players' production of *Death of a Salesman*. The play demands an expressionistic set and I was pleased to see how much use Mr. Stanley made of the wide apron in the Reps. Theatre; he gave the play the freedom which only the open stage allows and thus avoided embarrassing the audience. The set would have seemed absurd had the audience been given any reminder of the presence of the proscenium and the realistic box set which conventionally goes with it.

After seeing so fine a production as Mr. Stanley's *Death of a Salesman* one feels that one need scarcely ask oneself whether there is a bright future for the theatre in Rhodesia. Furthermore, the quite astonishing number of dramatic societies in existence indicates that interest in the theatre is very much alive, but from all sectors of the country comes the same warning: there is a dearth of young actors and actresses.[21] It is my own experience that all too often our audiences are embarrassed out of all enjoyment at the sight of a middle-aged woman playing a coy maiden or of a man in his forties trying to recreate the part of a young swain from dimming memories of departed youth. Behind this rather obvious need for youth lies a more worrying danger, the danger that dramatic societies will become forever petrified in the mental attitudes of a passing generation. Mr. French Smith's *cri de coeur* expresses the situation succinctly: "We are hidebound with age and convention."[22]

What overall impression does one gain of the state of the theatre in Rhodesia? The theatre is undoubtedly holding its own here as a means of entertainment for the European population, but it is equally obvious that much of the entertainment offered is of a rather superficial kind. That serious drama is sometimes successful here (if we judge success by attendance rates) is at least a hopeful sign for the future. Resistance to the expressionism which is characteristic of so much modern serious drama is not formidable and should fade in time if recent work is more regularly performed. Tours by professional companies could, until we have sufficient resources to establish our own Performing Arts Council, fulfil the important double function of "educating" the adult public and encouraging the young.

Nevertheless, the greatest single handicap to the advancement of serious drama remains: the European population is too small to sustain drama of quality. As it is we are rather cut off from the cultural main stream of Western Europe and America and so we cannot reasonably expect a higher proportion of what European population we have to take an interest than does in Britain. In other words, while the theatre in Britain appeals to a minority, here that like-minded minority is contained within another minority. If widespread African support could be enlisted the problem of numbers might well be solved. The African peoples of Rhodesia have their own drama in embryo in the antiphonal chihwerure or threshing-song and with sensible encouragement this oral tradition could be subsumed into the world's dramatic literature[23]. The threshing-songs are rich in subject-matter and theme and could benefit from the structural qualities which are the heritage of western traditions. After all, it was the combination of a lively native tradition with classical forms which moulded the great drama of the Renaissance.

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