

Mineke Schipper, *Theatre and Society in Africa*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1982, 170 pp.

Mineke Schipper's study is divided, broadly, into two parts, each presenting African theatre as a total expression of society.

The first part discusses the significant elements which make African theatre vibrant. For example, under the heading 'Oral Literature and Total Theatre', she discusses the important role played by the traditional narrator, the man who knows how to use words effectively, and who 'by his rendering of mythical stories ... touches on the deepest truths'. (p.13). Myths, legends and fairy tales are seen as important elements of oral literature, explaining the significance of human existence (p.17). Similarly important, in oral tradition, is the role of the ancestors. The author gives Okot p'Bitek's *Horn of My Love* (1964), Tom Omara's *The Exodus* (1972) and J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1964) and *Ozidi* (1966) as examples of plays dominated by the presence of the ancestors who have to be appeased, as they influence human destiny.

African theatre has often been inspired by the past. The author discusses this element by examining the way it is expressed, especially in the epic. Examples of plays employing this mode include *Soundjata* in which the deeds of the hero are magnified. She points out that the epic is often part of history, as in the case, for instance, of Shaka. The latter has been presented in theatre in many roles, ranging from nation builder to militant black fighter. The important point which she emphasises about the epic is that it is an important, integral part of oral tradition, with the hero as a source of inspiration.

The discussion in the first part is, unfortunately, too brief to be effective. The author, while expressing interesting ideas, does not develop them fully. One would have welcomed a more detailed discussion of at least some of the plays referred to. This would have given the argument the depth that it so woefully lacks.

In the second part the author discusses important aspects of the African experience in their socio-political context. For example, she examines dramatic response to the confrontation with Europeans. She mentions plays dealing with this issue, for example, A.S. Masiye's *The Lands of Kazembe* (1973) and Bernard Zadi's *Les Sofas suivi de l'oeil* (1975). She also discusses, briefly, the colonial system itself as presented in African theatre, and refers to relevant plays, such as Bernard Dadié's *Béatrice du Congo* (1970), Philippe Elebe's *Simon Kimbangu ou le messie noir* (1972), Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja* (1967), Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* (1975) and Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970). While the list above is impressive, suggesting wide reading and research, the argument presented is, unfortunately, quite inadequate for this kind of study. The author makes sweeping observations; she often gives long quotations from the plays, but does not discuss them fully. Similarly inadequate is her treatment of such colonial issues as assimilation and African protest. Had she discussed the plays to which she refers in some measure of detail, her argument would have been more effective.

Mineke Schipper suggests that African theatre has tried to direct its energies towards important social issues. Plays such as Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* (1968), Sarif Easmon's *Dear Parent and Ogre* (1964) and *The New Patriots* (1965) are examples of the concern of theatre with tribalism, while Oyono-Mbia's *Trois prétendants un mari* (1969) is a defence of a woman's right to marry whomsoever she chooses and Rebecca Njau's *The Scar* (1960) and *In the Round Chain* (1964) are a call for the emancipation of oppressed groups, especially women. Here again, the author shows wide reading and exhibits an acute appreciation of the issues involved in African

theatre. However, long quotations accompanied by short discussion do not enhance the argument. This chapter, like the others before it, ends up as a wide survey when, had it been treated more seriously, it might have been interesting and informative. The material exists; it needs to be handled carefully and developed fully.

In the second part of her study, the author singles Wole Soyinka, the 'leading writer in Nigeria, as well as in the rest of Africa, Europe and America' (p.136) for discussion in a chapter of his own. She deals with the various influences that have shaped Soyinka's plays, among which are traditional elements such as songs, dances and festivals. She tries to show that such plays as A Dance of the Forests (1963), Death and the King's Horseman and Madmen and Specialists (1971) have been influenced by traditional elements. She also discusses Soyinka's attitude to such issues as African heritage and Negritude. Her conclusion is that while he is concerned with these issues, Soyinka refuses to idealise Africa; rather he uses his plays to point out the success of the continent as well as its failures. A good example is A Dance of the Forests where even the Gods do not escape his censure. The author sees in Soyinka a man with single-minded determination to make society face reality, however disturbing this may be.

A few concluding remarks might help us understand Theatre and Society in Africa. The book is well-researched into, as can be seen in the wide array of plays mentioned. The argument is well-organised; the style is lucid. The tone of the book is sympathetic to the subject under discussion; real effort is made not only to understand, but also to appreciate the place and role of theatre in African society. Nevertheless, the book does have some weaknesses. For example, the topic seems rather broad, as do the geographical and linguistic areas covered. It would, perhaps, have been better if the author had selected fewer aspects of African theatre for a more thorough examination. As it is, the argument tends to be thin, shallow and sketchy, thus unsatisfactory. This is a pity because a great deal of worthwhile research has been carried out.

All in all, however, Theatre and Society in Africa is a welcome introduction to a very important African literary and cultural topic. Scholars and researchers will find the detailed bibliography most useful.

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