



Writing for the Kenyan Stage from the Year 2000: A Practitioner's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is an encouragement to the greater documentation and study in Kenyan academic circles of, in very broad terms, Western style, 'proscenium arch' stage performance in what could be called the 'Theatre of the New Century.'. It also argues that, with greater freedom to create historically, the playwright of the present day has a greater responsibility in helping to bring about an anti-ethnic and pro-minority society within a devolved system of government. The paper is offered by a practising playwright.

Key words: Language, Ethnicity, Stereotyping, Performance, Identity, Censorship.

INTRODUCTION

Who is Kenyan and who is not? Are some more Kenyan than others? What characteristics distinguish Kenyan society? What can Kenyans



do to make it a better one? What appreciation do Kenyans have of their history? These are the questions, all to do with the notions of Identity, Belonging and Citizenship, in the Kenyan context, which have largely informed me as a playwright

THE PLAYS

So far, I have written five, original, as opposed to devised, plays which have all had something to do with what I would broadly describe as ‘the Kenyan condition since independence.’

The first, *Role Play, a journey into the Kenyan psyche* (2004) was conceived, as its name suggests, so as to have actors playing against racial type, the better to conjure up a panoramic view of the interactions between ‘Blacks,’ (*Wafrika* in Kiswahili), ‘Whites,’ (*Wazungu*) and ‘South Asians,’ (*Wahindi*).

Thereafter, the satirical comedy *Minister, karibu!* (2007) employed mistaken identity to expose how the ‘Big Man Syndrome’ has helped to foster a ‘top-down’ culture of corruption. Peripheral themes were a patronising, ‘Western’ view of Kenya as part of some homogenous entity called ‘Africa’ and also religious hypocrisy.

The play *Dinner at Her Excellency’s* (2010) was written for radio and it explores the expectations of a sampling of ethnic and racial stakeholders from Kenya’s 2010 constitution.



Meetings (2013), my third play written expressly for the stage, was an artistic plea for reconciliation, cautioning against a repetition in 2013, specifically, of the ethnic violence that had followed the general elections of 2007. In *Meetings*, a political activist who had gone into exile after the failed coup in 1982, returns to Kenya towards the end of 2012 together with a young son from an inter-ethnic union, which he entered into during his 30 year stay in the United States. He is obliged to reunite with several ghosts from his past, including the college-mate informer who had first exposed him to scrutiny by the state, and he must come to terms with the imperatives of the moment.

Elements (2013), a monologue, originally written in French, features a female protagonist with Kenyan antecedents, her Indian grandfather having come to Kenya as an indentured labourer to help build a railway inland, from Mombasa. She is a celebrated writer who muses on her creative process and the influences upon it of her own life experience, which was blighted by the trauma of incest in her childhood.

Finally, *Kaggia* (2014), inspired by the life of the leftist-leaning, Kenyan politician Bildad Kaggia, invites the audience to query the consequences of the political choices which Kenya has made after independence and whether more could be done to lessen the huge divide between the Haves and Have Nots.



BACKGROUND AND INSPIRATION

Playwriting was the inevitable progression for me after I had taken on more than 40 roles on stage, since my teenage years. The roles and, indeed, the years in which they were performed, represent milestones in the history of post-independence, western style, proscenium arch theatre performance in Kenya. And where I was not involved as performer, I was a historical witness.

I knew, for example, that James Ngugi, before he became Ngugi wa Thiong'o, had written *The Black Hermit*, the first play in the English language by a Kenyan whilst he was a student at Makerere College in Uganda, in 1963. I did not see but I did register the production of Ngugi's 'politically incorrect' *Ngaahika Ndenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* in 1977. The production of *Ngaahika Ndenda* was to be part of a series of events which eventually led to Ngugi's exile.

I made my acting debut at the National Theatre in 1973, playing 'Romeo' opposite an English 'Juliet.' This was evidence of a persistent attachment to British theatre. In 1975, I was the First Son, playing opposite the late Francis Imbuga, in the inaugural production of *Muntu*, by the Ghanaian Joe de Graft, a play which was later to be degraded,



ignominiously, from school text to banned publication. Imbuga was, of course, to write, among several others, the epoch-making play *Betrayal in the City*.

In those days our playwrights set their plays in “a fictitious African country’ for fear of being more specific. And we actors, in our attempts at social commentary, had to take part in plays which took place “Somewhere Else,” in the hope that comparison would be at best, veiled. Examples, from my own experience include Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*, about state torture in a Latin American country and Mtwa/ Ngema/Simon’s *Woza, Albert!*, which posits Jesus Christ’s second coming to a racially segregated South Africa.

In the not so distant past, the censor held powerful sway in Kenya and, as already suggested, there were dire consequences for those who dared to displease the powers that were. Those who survived those years were challenged to find ways of, in the formulation of Ugandan playwright John Ruganda: “telling the truth laughingly.” The climate of apprehension and fear was to last until 1997, when certain prohibitive clauses of the Film and Stage Plays Act were repealed, allowing for a welcome expansion of artistic licence.



MILESTONES AND TAKING THE PROCESS FORWARD

Therefore, when I wrote *Role Play*, first produced in 2004, the giants upon whose shoulders I now walked, had made it possible for me to abandon self-censorship and to set my action squarely in Kenya; to query in the course of it, who had killed Pio Gama Pinto? Tom Mboya? JM Kariuki? Robert Ouko? To evoke the rape of many South Asian women during the attempted coup of 1982. To point to the existence of unflatteringly called *wazungu* ‘Kenya cowboys’ and ‘Kenya cowgirls’ and, in so doing, to remind audiences that the definition of Kenyan should not always and only be preceded by ‘black’ as an adjective of colour.

I have evoked four periods in this personal timeline: 1) a period predominated by theatre from the European and especially British tradition; 2) the theatre of the Kenyatta presidency, noteworthy for a flowering of nationalistic plays, largely centred on the theme of tradition versus modernity; 3) the theatre of the Moi presidency, marked, particularly in its latter stages by an acute muzzling of the creative voice and 4) the theatre of the period from the Kibaki presidency to date, with a general resurgence of relatively uncensored artistic activity.



It would stand to reason, consequently, that speaking on behalf of other playwrights, I should be saluting the advent of a creative nirvana. Sadly, not so, on several counts.

CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTITIONER

Most disturbingly, the dark clouds of state censorship seem to be looming over Kenya once again. The language debate has not gone away, either. I find that the recent switch to talking of ‘communities’ and ‘nations’ within Kenya represents a great leap backward, because, to my mind, it is as inimical to national cohesion as was talking of ‘tribes’ in the past. In order that devolution might not become a code word for division, I would argue strongly against plays being written in ethnic languages for ethnic audiences. The use of Kiswahili and English as our self-declared national and official languages, supported strategically over, say, 25 years, would, in my opinion, reap manifest gains for our definition of being Kenyan, as it would make for a form of linguistic unity within cultural and religious diversity.

As a playwright, I have found that simply giving my characters names that pointed to their ethnicity has led to stereotypical and often



nefarious assumptions. This is a problem which, I must confess, I am yet to solve to my satisfaction. For example, if my thieving protagonist has a name which sets him out as an El Molo, am I saying to my audience that all El Molos are thieves?

Still on the subject of language, it is also worth noting that great literature displays a mastery of any given language and it is unlikely that national governments will be able to fund the mastery of 40 plus major languages throughout the country, not to mention the mastery of many, distinct dialects. To my mind, it should *not* be part of the national agenda to invest in the preservation of all the languages spoken in Kenya, a project which, understandably, has a strong appeal to those who come from majority groupings. I do believe that our mother tongues *will* survive, simply by continuing to be spoken and written by those many who will continue to rely on them for self-expression, by force of circumstance.

CHALLENGES FOR ACADEMIA

My final ‘red lights,’ as it were, are more direct provocations to the academics among us. It may be true that publishers are loathe to publish plays and poetry because they find little material profit in doing so.



Only my first play has been published. But would our universities not consider printing esoteric genres, such as plays and poetry, in limited editions from their own presses? The theatre space has moved forward creatively in different ways but it seems that our intellectuals are keen to sustain the familiar and, perhaps, comforting ‘Kenya is a literary desert’ debate interminably. I would wager that the social and political concerns of the youth in our lecture halls today are far removed from the concerns which I had as an undergraduate in the early 1970s, when all of them were not yet born. This is a reality which, I would contend, is not sufficiently reflected in our current literary scholarship.

To put it summarily on such a summary occasion and with a nod to William Shakespeare, 400 years after his death: why hold a mirror up to society if there is no desire to look into it?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would urge our academics to engage more wholeheartedly in taking stock of, analysing and nurturing the creative output for the stage which is now coming from a country which, young as it is in absolute terms, is now more than 50 years old.

Thank you, Chairperson, for having given me the opportunity to speak.

Note:



John Sibi-Okumu, has played close to 40 lead roles on stage and appeared in local and international films, including *The Constant Gardener*, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, *The First Grader* and *The Rugged Priest*. He has written and devised nine plays to date, and directed amongst other productions the record-breaking *Mo Faya!* by Kenyan musician Eric Wainaina. He has also been a notable broadcaster, a children's author and, as a print journalist, he has been a regular columnist for a number of publications, among them AWAAZ.

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