

‘Mwalimu’ John Sibi-Okumu



John Sibi-Okumu was born in Kenya and received his formal education in England, Kenya and France. For a great part of his professional life he taught French from junior to high school level. However, quite apart from his achievements as a teacher (or “*mwalimu*” in Kiswahili) he has gained a considerable reputation as a man of the arts. Whence his profile being one of 85 in the compilation: *Life Journeys, Scaling Heights – Conversations with High Achieving Men in Kenya* (footprints press. ISBN: 978-9966-022-01-1).

By way of summary, John Sibi-Okumu, (simply ‘JSO’ to many), has been a notable radio and television presenter. Between 1997 and 2002 he conducted incisive TV interviews with such newsmakers as Daniel arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta, Robert Mugabe, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Richard Leakey and Wangari Maathai on *The Summit*. Subsequent engagements have added such names as Kofi Annan, Paul Kagame, Benjamin Mkapa, Joachim Chissano, Raila Odinga, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Jane Goodall to his long list of interviewees. Between 2007 and 2010 he was quiz master for *The Zain Africa Challenge*, an inter-university, general knowledge competition seen by millions of people through national programming in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, as well as on a DSTV *Africa* channel. Thereafter, uniquely on Kenyan television, he was chief anchor for the one hour news’ digest *JSO@7*. Many one-on-one discussions from that latter programme can be seen under *The JSO Interviews* on *Youtube*.

He has narrated and voiced award-winning documentaries and commercials in English, French and Kiswahili. In July 2018, he recorded the audio-book for *Blossoms of the Savannah* by H.R. Ole Kulet; in 2017 he did the same for Peter Kimani’s acclaimed novel, *Dance of the Jakaranda*. He has acted in a number of local and international films, including *The Constant Gardener* (as Dr. Joshua Ngaba); *Shake Hands with the Devil* (as UN envoy Jacques-Roger Boh-Boh) and *The First Grader* (as Chairman of the Board of Education). He has appeared in leading roles on stage, including *Sophocles’ King Oedipus*; *Shakespeare’s Romeo, Oberon and Shylock*; *Beckett’s Krapp and Vladimir*; *Creon in Anouilh’s Antigone*, *Percy in Mtwā/Ngema/Simon’s Woza*, *Albert! Robert Mugabe* in *Fraser Grace’s Breakfast with Mugabe*, and *Serge* in the French version of *Yasmina Reza’s Art*. Under his direction, Kenyan musician *Eric Wainaina’s Mo Faya!* played to great acclaim in the USA as part of the New York Festival of Musical Theatre 2009, before enjoying a record breaking, homecoming reception at The Godown Arts’ Centre in Nairobi. He rekindled the collaboration with Wainaina in 2016 when he played *Lion* in *Tinga Tinga Tales-The Musical*.

He has authored nine plays, to date. Namely: 1)*Role Play – A Journey into the Kenyan Psyche*; 2)*Minister, karibu!* 3)*Meetings*; 4)*Dinner with Her Excellency* (for radio); 5)*Elements* (a monologue); 6)*Kaggia* and also the devised 7)*In Search of the Drum Major*; 8)*Like Ripples on a Pond* and 9)*Milestones – a Showcase for African Poetry*. For younger readers, he has written the short book *Tom Mboya: Master of Mass Management*.

As a print journalist he has provided articles (initially under the pseudonym *Mwenye Sikio*) for several newspapers. For more than 10 years, he has been a regular columnist and book reviewer for the journal *AWAAZ (Voices, of the South Asian Diaspora)*.and most recently, he has written for the magazines *Msafiri*, *Kenya Yetu* and *The Edition*.

He has welcomed opportunities to lend his talents benevolently towards charitable and social welfare causes.

He currently employs his wide range of communication skills as a freelance media consultant, taking on briefs as a trilingual facilitator, moderator, master of ceremonies, proof reader, editor, translator and tutor and also as an engaging public speaker.

He has been a member of the governing council of the Kenya Cultural Centre and National Theatre and is currently a board member of the Katiba Institute, dedicated to safeguarding the provisions of Kenya’s (2010) Constitution. He is a *Chevalier des Palmes Académiques*, for services to French culture through teaching.