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Africa on the British Stage, 1955-1966

By Steve Nicholson

Reviewing the play *Night Returns to Africa* (Craddock 1955), *The Times* said it was 'the first to bring us face to face with the real drama that is being played to-day in Africa' (9 February 1955). Over the next decade, as the British Empire in Africa fell apart, the images and narratives that found their way onto the stages of the declining colonial power - and their reception - offer insights into the attitudes and cultural politics of the period. It is on these images and narratives that this chapter focuses.

The Mau Mau and the Theatre of the Fifties

Night Returns to Africa was set in a farmhouse near Nairobi, and while described by its author, Reginald Craddock, as 'first and foremost a thriller', it was also intended 'as a tribute to those of all races who have fallen victim of the Mau Mau atrocities'. Craddock's aim was 'to show that the foul cult of Mau Mau is not just a struggle of subjugated natives against white dominion', but something 'aimed at Europeans, Asian and decent African alike'. The title clearly signifies a supposed regression to pre-European darkness, for recent events have demonstrated 'how the veneer of 50 years' civilisation can fall away, exposing the latent savagery of centuries'. Indeed, 'if the Mau Mau terrorists are made to appear beyond the pale of civilisation' wrote Craddock, it is because this is what they are', and he advised prospective directors that 'It is impossible within the propriety of a stage production to depict fully the loathsomeness of the Mau Mau mental outlook'. Thus, while we hear of a white family murdered off-stage, the only on-stage killings are of murderous black Africans, shot dead by two brave white women defending their farmhouse.

Running beneath the action of Craddock's play is the question of where the violence against Europeans has come from. 'To the African here we've brought civilisation', declares the local district officer, and no-one challenges his view. Europeans have introduced a system of justice to replace 'barbarous tribal laws', and in rescuing the downtrodden Kikuyu have 'stopped the Masai wiping them out'. If anything, the Europeans have been too kind: 'Because we never conquered the country... we've thought the Africans to be content with the life we've brought them'. According to the good and loyal Chief Wareru ('a pillar of strength in the resistance movement against the Mau Mau') the instigators of the rebellion are 'thugs and gangsters from the slums of Nairobi', who use violence and drugs to force the decent Kikuyu to turn against the whites. But there is also political blame: 'We all know it was Jomo Kenyatta who started it all' insists one of the Europeans, and Wareru confirms that Kenyatta's followers have been teaching 'sedition in schools', and 'a parallel religion of Christianity, in which Kenyatta was worshipped instead of Christ'. Reviews of *Night Returns...* praised the author for combining 'a serious examination of the racial problem' with 'intense theatre-stuff of a kind that leaves an audience gasping' (*Illustrated London News*, 26 February 1955), affirming the 'sheer authenticity' of his account, and insisting that Craddock had taken 'great pains to be fair' to all sides (*The Times*, 9 February 1955).

The following year, Cyril Davey's *Flame in the Forest* (Davey 1957) attempted a rather more nuanced perspective. First performed at a missionary exhibition in Liverpool in 1955, the play was also broadcast on BBC television in May 1956, two days before the annual Empire Day marking Queen Victoria's birthday. For the *Daily Express*, it was 'a tense piece of TV with a lesson that can apply equally to Kenya, Malay and to Cyprus - that the price of Empire is still being paid in devotion'. Indeed, 'EMPIRE DAY' would 'mean much more to the millions' who had watched the play -'especially those with menfolk overseas' (23 May 1956). Davey's play was set in 'an unspecified part of Africa at the present time' (*Daily*

Mail, 23 May 1956), but again based firmly on 'the Mau Mau trouble' (Davey, 1957). The central character is Janet, the wife of a missionary who never appears, and is murdered off-stage during the play. Janet and her husband had lived in Africa for fifteen years, but their neighbour - Christine- is a recent arrival, an engineer's wife who despises everything about it and distrusts the missionaries: 'I suppose you're on the side of those murdering black so-and-sos out there'.

Flame in the Forest contrasts two black characters: Kwama, the 'good' African, and Bunumbu - his half-brother - who has renounced his Christian education and rejects the Europeans and their influence. Before the play begins he has murdered Kwama's wife and abducted his children, and it is he who kills Janet's husband. However, the playwright was a Methodist Minister, and his message is intended to be generous and understanding. The play's action culminates with the death of Bunumbu - shot dead in self-defence by Christine's husband. But Janet sets a moral exemple by giving him water to ease his pain, even though he has just murdered her husband. We also learn that Bunumbu's hatred of Europeans is essentially a reaction to the racism he has himself encountered. As Janet tells Christine: It's what he saw in England. It's the way people like you treat the Africans out here'. Crucially, even the loyal Kwama is driven to question their attitudes; when Christine insists that the Europeans have been too soft and that Bunumbu 'should have been flogged', Kwama challenges her: 'For what, Mrs Gould? For saying aloud what half Africa says under its breath? For saying that Europeans cannot always keep Africans off their own land and out of their own Government? That Africans, too, have rights in their own country?' (Davey, 1957). For the *Daily Mail*, Davey's play was 'a strong sermon', and it noted with some surprise that 'The author gave Bunumbu, preaching revolt and revenge, most of the argument'. However, it deduced that the play's moral was 'not that the whites are wrong, but that there are not enough decent ones' (23 May 1956).

The late Fifties introduced two very different perspectives on the European occupation of Africa - Doris Lessing's *Mr Dollinger* (Lessing, 1958), staged at Oxford Playhouse in July 1958, and the Royal Court's response to the brutal murder of Mau Mau prisoners, *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp*. Lessing's play is set in a farmhouse 'in one of the Central African Colonies', where Europeans go about their highly profitable tobacco business, generating enormous profits for themselves at the expense of the workers, while away their time, and discuss 'the native problem'. It may lack the urgent action of the earlier plays, but the sense of a coming violence pervades the discussions and argument, for this is a world on the cusp of change - the end of easy exploitation and European dominance. As Kenneth Tynan put it in his review, the implication driving the play was that 'Africa is now too far gone for compromise' and that 'the holocaust impends' (*Observer*, 13 July 1958).

Lessing presents a range of views across the European community. At one extreme is the obnoxious Charles Baker, a politician and business man who sees no need for change: '[i]f the kaffirs aren't kept in their place, they'll sweep us all into the sea... They need a firm hand and no nonsense'. Henry sees things differently: 'this country's doomed unless the blacks get proper food, proper wages, proper houses', he warns; '(e)ither that, or we should all clear out before our throats are cut for us'. We see only one black character - a household servant called Sixpence who keeps his views to himself; but Lessing's character note gives the actor plenty to work with on a non-verbal level: 'He keeps his face immobile', she writes; (h)e gives the impression, however, of a controlled resentment, a locked anger'.

At the centre of Lessing's play is Jane, who despises Baker's arrogance and racism, but has no time either for the hypocrisy of her husband, who '[e]ases his conscience by writing newspaper articles urging equal rights for the very black population off whose cheap labour he lives'. Jane's treatment of Sixpence seems more overtly racist than anyone else's; yet the effect of this is to make visible the attitudes that underlie their daily interactions -

drawing attention to what might otherwise go unremarked and unquestioned. Sometimes she seems to deliberately provoke Sixpence into the confrontation which she sees as inevitable. ‘Do I exploit you?’, she asks him directly at one point, and informs her fellow-colonialists that ‘I expect him to push me out of my place when the time comes’. Indeed, when someone warns her that if she continues her provocative behaviour ‘they’ll cut your throats for you’, she observes that ‘I’d stretch out my neck and say: “Cut quickly”’.

If Lessing’s play attacked the attitudes of the colonisers, *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* set out to expose their savage brutality by focusing on a recent and particularly shocking example. In March 1959, eleven prisoners from a colonial camp in Kenya were brutally beaten to death, and many more injured, by British prison officers. The fall out at home included debates in parliament questioning ‘the use of unlawful violence’, and - in some circles - outrage at the ‘massacres’ which had ‘shocked and dismayed civilised opinion all over the world’ (House of Commons 1959). In July, the Royal Court Theatre presented an experimental Sunday night performance - ‘a documentary-dramatic improvisation’ (*Daily Mail*, 20 July 1959) with no written script. The performance was simple:

> The stage was bare, except for a few chairs. A narrator stands on one side, a commentator, who produced the necessary facts from Hansard, on the other. The two producers, William Gaskill and Keith Johnstone, wandered on and off. Ten coloured actors played the parts (...) The props were minimal: spades, batons, white masks. The actors had to create the situations (...) out of their impromptu feelings and such snatches of dialogue as occurred to them. Cram them into a square of light and they were in prison; put white masks on them and they were the prison officers; give them batons and they were warders, spades and they were work parties; set the drums beating and they began a Mau-Mau initiation rite (*New Statesman*, 1 August 1959).

Responses to the performance were mixed, and often focused on the innovatory form. *The Times* described it as 'another symptom of the contemporary drama's struggle towards responsibility' (20 July 1959); Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times* attacked it as 'the height of folly', since those involved had insufficient knowledge about what had happened (26 July 1959). Alan Brien in the *Spectator* was equally critical: 'almost never did their dramatisation of the squalid shame of Hola, and the pitiful pomposity of its apologists in Parliament, have an impact equal to a simple reading of Hansard' (31 July 1959), he wrote.

One of the performers in *Eleven Men Dead* was Wole Soyinka, then attached to the Royal Court as a writer and a play-reader. Nearly thirty years later, in his acceptance speech for the1986 Nobel Prize for Literature (Soyinka 1986), Soyinka recalled the performance, and his refusal to go on stage for the beating and killing of the prisoners, in which he was supposedly playing a warder: 'our task was to raise the cudgels slowly and, almost ritualistically, bring them down on the necks and shoulders of the prisoners, under orders of the white camp officers'. The effect, says Soyinka, was to create 'a surrealist tableau' and a 'near balletic scene', and this was followed by a realistic representation of actors 'writhing with pain' as they drank contaminated water (an event which probably never occurred). For Soyinka, these scenes - however powerful and disturbing they might have been for an audience - 'provoked a feeling of indecency', because he 'found the mode of presentation at war with the ugliness it tried to convey'. Moreover, Soyinka's 'intense disquiet' was exacerbated by the fact that the performance was taking place 'before an audience whom he considered collectively responsible' for the events. Crucially, the performance raised crucial ethical questions about the nature of acting and representation. 'When is playacting rebuked by reality?', asked Soyinka; '(w)hen is fictionalizing presumptuous?

Early Sixties: 'all-African' **King Kong** *and 'authentic' later works*

The performances so far discussed were widely reviewed in the press; however, with the exception of the television broadcast, the performances would not have been extensively witnessed or discussed. By contrast, the South African Township Jazz musical *King Kong* - which arrived at the Prince's Theatre in the West End of London London's West End in early 1961 - made front page news and was watched by far larger audiences during its nine month run. The show had originally opened in Johannesburg in 1959, with a cast of around 70 black South African performers, and was based on the true story of the success and tragic decline of a black South African boxer, Ezekiel Diamani, who named himself as *King Kong* to indicate his power and strength. Diamani had eventually committed suicide rather than go to prison for a murder he had been tricked into committing, but although he had never been able to prove his strength against a white boxer he was remembered by many black South Africans as a champion and a hero - 'an inspiration to Africans struggling for emancipation' and 'the symbol of the wasted powers of the African people' (Bloom 1961, Foreword). The director and instigator of *King Kong* was Leon Gluckman, a white South African with an established theatrical career in Britain. Both the writer of the book (Harry Bloom) and the lyricist (Pat Williams) were also white, but the composer of the music - Todd Matshikiza - was black. *King Kong* had been a huge success in South Africa - it was reportedly Nelson Mandela's favourite musical - playing to over 200,000 people across several cities, and to audiences of mixed race - though segregated within the auditorium. Apart from the fact that the central protagonist was black, the 'glorious, exciting ingredient that made it different from any previous kind of musical' (*ibid.*) was that *King Kong* was set within a township (Sophiatown) and claimed to bring the everyday life of that township onto the stage. 'The actors were not so much acting, as living out their normal lives on the stage', insisted Bloom; 'a whole town, with all its characters, noises, scenes, and problems came miraculously to life' (*ibid.*).

According to one member of the cast: ‘Mr Gluckman just told us to be ourselves, to be the Township people... he just said “Guys, do your thing... This is Township theatre” (BBC Radio 3, 2017).

Although there were a couple of cast changes, and a certain ‘watering down’ (Williams 2017, 204) of the music to render it more accessible, it was essentially the same show and company that came to London. Some people expressed surprise that the cast had been issued with passports, given that ‘it was exceptionally rare for any black person to be granted a passport’ (Williams 2017, 187). But Gluckman told the British press that ‘(t)he show has done a wonderful job for race relations in South Africa’, and praised ‘the Government’s sensible and open-handed attitude by making it possible for us to come to London’. He insisted that through theatre and the arts ‘ bridges could be built between opposing points of view in South Africa’ (*Daily Mail*, 6 February 1961).

Even before it opened, the British press gave the show huge (if excruciating) publicity: ‘MEET THE KING KONG CUTIES’ offered the *Daily Mail*, heralding as ‘sensational’ this ‘All-Black Show from the Land of Whites-Only’. But the same article also drew attention to the differences the cast would find on ‘the adventure of their lives’, and implicitly criticised South Africa’s racial policies: ‘For girls like the three in my picture, accustomed to apartheid and notices proclaiming “whites only”, I suspect that not the least of their pleasures will be the New Court Hotel in Bayswater... which they will share with white guests’ (8 February 1961). Sometimes the criticism was more explicit, as when Barry Norman reported on his meeting with the cast: ‘They have been told to say nothing that is “politically embarrassing” to their country’s Government’, he informed readers; ‘(t)he penalty? Withdrawal of their passports and immediate recall’ (*Daily Mail*, 9 February 1961). Certainly, the South African government had shown previously how thin-skinned it was when mocked on the British stage; in 1953, when the Prime Minister of South Africa’s first

apartheid government, D.F. Malan, came to England to attend the Queen's coronation, he was reported in *Jet: The Weekly Negro News Magazine* to be 'fuming' (11 June 1953) about a satirical song performed nightly by the black American performer, Marie Bryant, in a revue called *High Spirits*:

> Don't malign Malan!
>
> Because he dislikes our tan.
>
> We know that it's wrong to have skin that's all brown
>
> And wrong to be born on the wrong side of town.
>
> It's quite right that our filthy old homes be burned down.
>
> Malan is a wonderful man!... (Myers et al. 1953)

The South African Embassy in London declared itself 'incensed', while an outraged Johannesburg newspaper told its readers that this 'shocking song sung night after night by an American Negress ' was 'part of the provocation of South Africa on the eve of Britain's greatest festival' (*New York Times* 30 May 1953). *King Kong* contained no comparably overt criticism of the regime or its policies. Had it done so, it is unlikely that the '(s)ixty crisp new passports issued without protest by Dr Verwoerd's Government' (*Daily Mail*, 6 February 1961) would have seen the light of day.

Much of the music in *King Kong* was influenced by black American styles, so London audiences would not necessarily have found it completely foreign: 'Dancing was a mix of Township and Broadway as Gumboot dances followed jive. Zoot suits and stilettos shared a stage with penny whistlers and dungarees. This was Harlem, Joburg style' (BBC Radio 3, 2017). Certainly, it was enthusiastically received; the *Daily Telegraph* cited the 'constant

applause' which reflected 'a spontaneous token of genuine enjoyment' rather than 'a polite tribute to a company of exotic visitors' (24 February, 1961), and according to the *New York Times* '[i]t took the playing of "God Save the Queen" to quiet the audience after the final curtain' (24 February 1961). The show was also embraced by the Establishment. The first night audience included Princess Margaret (who met and shook hands with the cast backstage), Dorothy Macmillan (the wife of the Prime Minister), and Mr Iain Macleod, 'the Colonial Secretary, with race relations so much on his mind at the moment' (*Daily Mail* 23 February, 1961). Clearly, a deliberate statement was being made (not least to politicians watching from Southern Africa) about Britain's liberal and open attitudes to race. However, the *New York Times* also reported that 'the critics were more restrained than the audience' (24 February 1961). Indeed, while reviewers praised the singing, the dancing and the music, most were less impressed by the acting or the narrative. The *Daily Express* called it 'a raw, harsh, story from a raw harsh world, translated into a musical with a kick like shebeen liquor' (23 Feb, 1961), but for the *Daily Mirror* it was 'not the sensational knock-out that we have been led to expect' (24 February 1961). *The Times* was more upbeat: 'This all-African jazz musical makes an immediate impact as a piece of naive but vital indigenous art; and our final impressions are as favourable as our first' (24 February 1961). It even compared the tragedy of the central character to that of Othello.

Apart from the 'amateurish' (*New York Times*, 24 February 1961) qualities of the show, one key reservation for many concerned the show's political dimension - or perhaps the lack of it. The London opening occurred less than a year after the Sharpeville massacre, and the following year Mandela (and others) would be arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. How could a 'black musical' set in a Johannesburg township not talk about the injustices and brutality of the apartheid government? After all, its author, Harry Bloom, had previously been imprisoned for his novel - *Transvaal Episode* (Bloom, 1956) - 'a hard-

hitting study of apartheid' (Les Bons Caracteres 2008?) and had worked in court as a barrister alongside Mandela. Yet '(a)nyone expecting a tendentiously political slant will be disappointed', warned Philip Hope-Wallace, and he quoted the line '"more people around here goes to prison than goes to school' as being 'about as strong as it gets' (*Guardian*, 23 February 1961). Robert Muller was particularly damning: '[p]olitically, *King Kong* is about as dynamic as a bag of laundry' he complained; [e]verything, including the gangsterism and the social misery, has been agreeably prettified' and '[w]e are told nothing about Johannesburg life that is likely to arouse us to anger'. For Muller, *King Kong* was simply 'a slick, American-type song-and dance musical' which would upset no-one: 'South Africa House can keep calm' (*Daily Mail*, 24 February, 1961).

Bloom responded to such charges through an article for the *Sunday Times* in which he insisted that the show had 'rammed a hole through the wall of apartheid'. He even asserted that because of the show's success, 'every dark-skinned person in South Africa feels a little stronger, prouder and more hopeful' (5 March 1961). In his introduction to the published text, Bloom claimed that the show had 'brought about a strange and in some ways inexplicable truce in the grim war' in South Africa, being 'received with equal enthusiasm by all sections of the population'. The politics, he said, lay not in the content, but in the event: 'Nobody minded the colour of his neighbour in the endless queues for tickets at the booking office. Nobody cared about race mixing in the foyer of the theatres'. Crucially for Bloom, '*King Kong* showed that in spite of poverty and obstacles of every kind, Africans are capable of cultural achievements equal to any the whites can show'. Further, the collaboration of black and white South Africans demonstrated 'that any worthwhile effort in our country must depend on pooling the talents of all races'. Bloom also suggested that while London audiences might have 'expected a portrayal of Africans living under apartheid to be presented in a spirit of gloom, tragedy and despair', the zest and enjoyment presented in the township

scenes was a more accurate reflection of their mood: ‘Africans lead bitter, frustrated and tragic lives under apartheid’, acknowledged Bloom, ‘but hopelessness is not the spirit of the townships’. Much more typical, he maintained were feelings of ‘strength and courage... communal warmheartedness and laughter’; for ‘in spite of the ugly interim in which they live, Africans seem to feel instinctively that the future belongs to them’ (Bloom 1961, Foreword). Looking back more than fifty years later, Pat Williams agrees that the London critics ‘didn’t understand that *King Kong*’s very existence was a political statement in itself’ (Williams, 2017, 7). In fact, Williams still describes the show as ‘a watershed’, which initiated ‘a visible shift’ in terms of race relations: ‘How could people go on pretending - after *King Kong* had happened - that the black people in our country were totally different and utterly inferior to white people?’ (BBC Radio 3, 2017). Sadly for her claim, many of them did.

While a ‘township jazz musical’ was different from African performances seen previously in London, audiences were relatively familiar with other forms of dance and music. In fact, when the *King Kong* cast arrived, they caused a surprise: ‘When we got off the plane... people were saying “Oh, we thought you were going to be wearing skins”’ (BBC Radio 3, 2017). Such expectations were derived partly from exposure to ‘Les Ballets Africains’, a company formed in Paris in 1952, which had already visited Britain several times. Founded by Fodeba Keita, who had moved to France from French Guinea, this company aimed to bring traditional African culture to Western audiences. However, while the performances may often have been received as ‘authentic’ and unmediated, they also incorporated European performance traditions and conventions. As a recent analysis explains, ‘ the Ballets were a product of Fodeba Keita’s personal formation and artistic vision as shaped by conditions of 20th-century modernity’ (Cohen, 2012).

When Fodeba’s company paid its first visit to Britain in 1956, the *Daily Mail* reviewed it under the headline ‘BALLET, JUNGLE STYLE’ - and in fact, the show’s own

publicity had also claimed the dances were 'from the jungle'. The *Daily Mail* had no doubts about authenticity: 'For centuries the uncomplicated natives have been performing this sort of thing in their own villages', the paper declared; '[n]ow they have been "discovered" and are earning big money' (29 March 1956). The *Guardian* was a little more cautious, suggesting only that it was 'as genuine as a theatrical show intended for Paris and London and based on the song and dance of French West Africa and points South could be expected to be'. Their review praised the 'lissom, coppery company' and concluded that 'the lithe, ferocious agility of all the dancers is, even after all those films about Darkest Africa, a constant astonishment' (29 March 1956). For *The Time*s, it represented the chance to watch 'A People Who Naturally Sing and Dance', though the reviewer also noted that 'it cannot have been easy to confine the folk art of so extrovert a people within the square of a western stage and discipline it for western eyes'. The review also established what would be a recurring theme in terms of the reception of this - and other - companies: 'the limited resources of African dancing' (29 March 1956). Fodeba was frequently praised for contriving to hide these limitations through swift changes of settings and costumes, but reviewers repeatedly emphasised the supposed crudeness and simplicity of the physicality: 'African dancing is severely limited in its movements', *The Times* announced (3 August 1956); and again, '[t]he steps are extremely limited and repetitive' (7 August 1956) A few years later, it went so far as to claim that '[t]he continent of Africa has many dancers, but few dances' (28 November 1961). Fortunately, however, 'the danger of monotony' was 'nearly always averted by the unrelenting vigour' and the 'riot of movement and colour'. However, the key element which validated the performance was clear: 'its virtue still resides in its authenticity'. Indeed, the 'The impression is not so much of a devised theatrical entertainment as of some traditional dance celebration growing direct from the lives of the people' in which 'the artists seem totally unaware of the audience and dance with complete spontaneity and abandon as if only

for their own delight' (7 August 1956). The *Observer* took a similarly patronising stance: 'African dances are those of primitive people', the reviewer blithely claimed. But Fodeba knew 'that for western theatres he must adapt, select and then disguise the sameness of the steps by numerous changes in scene and costume' which 'help to keep our minds off the dancing'. In any case, 'African dancers are always a delight in the theatre' and 'It seems unfair and unnecessary to criticise the dance content of an entertainment that is so disarmingly pleasant to watch' (1 September 1957).

When Les Ballets returned in 1960, the popular press was keen to focus on matters other than the dance itself, concocting a controversy about whether the 'twenty dusky teenage beauties' should be allowed to expose their breasts: 'will the Lord Chamberlain make them cover up?'(*Daily Herald*, 12 August 1960). The issue was resolved when a senior member of his staff attended a specially arranged rehearsal and then approved the performance because it consisted of 'Genuine Ritual Folk Dances, in which it is customary for the girls to be so attired' (Lord Chamberlain's Office Files, 1960). The *Daily Mirror* duly enthused about 'the frenzied dancers' and 'bare-to-the-waist girls' who had brought 'a touch of authentic jungle life to the West End' (16 August 1960), but the show also had a new dimension. In 1958, Equatorial Guinea had achieved independence and Fodeba's company was now officially funded by its government. As *The Times* reported, 'three of the dances are openly and politically nationalistic, looking back with horror to the days of colonial rule' (1 August 1960).

In 1965, the Commonwealth Arts Festival brought a number of African dance and acrobatic companies to London, including stilt dancers from Tanzania, the Embu Drummers from Kenya and the Ikpegebegbe from Nigeria. The Sierra Leone Dance Troupe, featuring 'devils like spinning haystacks, and a delightful giant bird' performed as part of an international Dance Gala evening at the Royal Albert Hall. 'Compared with all this rhythm

and vitality the English folk dances looked sad and pale' reported the *Daily Mail*, sadly (17 September 1965). The troupe were also due to perform in Trafalgar Square, but ran into another row over dress, which this time took on a more overtly political dimension. When the company was officially informed that the exposure of female breasts was not permitted and that the dancers must be 'appropriately attired', its founder and director, John Akar, threatened to cancel the performance: 'Either our culture is accepted, or we forget about it', he declared; 'We are asked to participate in a strictly Commonwealth cultural festival, only to be told we must adopt a totally alien cultural tradition' and abandon 'an inseparable part of our cultural heritage' (*Daily Mail* 11 September 1965). Akar was forced to back down, provoking Vincent Mulchrone to write a column in the *Daily Mail* celebrating the ban on African dancers 'shaking their mammaries all over Landseer's lions'. For Mulchrone (who had presumably not noticed what had happened to most of Britain's former colonies) the 'essential question' was '[w]ill culture be served by brown bosoms bared at the heart of Empire?' He went even further, attacking not only the company's director for his supposedly specious claims, but also those who had been willing to listen to him: 'There is an alarming tendency these days', asserted Mulchrone, chillingly, 'to take every educated African seriously because he is black and speaks better English than we do' (15 September 1965).

Following the success of *King Kong*, Leon Gluckman returned twice to the West End with musical revues containing more overt - if sometimes questionable - political perspectives. *Wait a Minim* (Gluckman 1964) had previously been touring in South Africa and Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) when it arrived in London in 1964. It was performed by an all white cast - some of whom had only recently moved to South Africa - and depended largely on the versatile musical skills of the eight performers. The show offered more or less gentle send ups of different national groups (including English, Scottish, German, French, Italian, Indian and Japanese) living within South Africa. These were usually signified through the

wearing of different hats, including 'Huge floppy ones for the Boers', and 'pointed straws for the Black Africans'(*Punch*, 24 June 1964) . At other points, actors wore Ndebele costumes, played traditional African instruments, sang songs in (among many other languages) Xhosa, and performed a gumboot dance and music associated with townships. Doubtless the show's cultural appropriations are more evident now than they were at the time, and the intention was probably to demonstrate that South Africa was no monoculture but a mix of histories and peoples, each with its own idiosyncrasies and its own distinctive contributions to make. Under the headline 'South African Revue Hits at Apartheid', *The Times* praised the show's 'satiric fire' (10 April 1964), but others were less convinced by its weight or potency. The *Guardian* suggested that the material might have 'sounded a great deal more daring when uttered in South Africa and Rhodesia' but that 'We could take something even sharper than this mild protest' (10 April 1964). Bernard Levin was particularly dismissive: 'Foreigners, it appears, are wildly funny in South Africa' (*Daily Mail*, 10 April 1964).

In 1965, Gluckman was a key figure behind a follow up West End revue. *Nymphs and Satires* was 'entirely about racial segregation, with a black and white cast' (Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Files 1965), but it proved to be much less commercially successful, and much more contentious than its predecessor. Many scenes were set in South (or Southern) Africa, and the overall message was clearly intended to be both liberal and optimistic. The performance was framed by 'an opening chorus of race hatred and a closing chorus of racial harmony' (*The Times*, 26 May 1965) - a well-meaning if somewhat heavy-handed progression. In one of the wittier sketches, a rich white American big game hunter discovers that attitudes have reversed when he tries to book a room in a newly independent African country:

> I would like a large corner suite. Price no object… A room with a view of Kilimanjaro. (Pause) What? Could I possibly be what? A coloured hunter... Look: I'm

> white Anglo-Saxon European Caucasian... I'd be choosy about who slept in my beds, too, pal, but you don't need to worry about me. I mean, come to look at me a little more closer, maybe I'm not all that white, anyway. Kinda off-white, ya dig me? Sort of used ivory... (Pause) You might have to throw away the sheets and towels… or maybe fumigate (Gluckman and Kilty 1965).

Summarising this show recently, Kathleen Riley ((Riley 2004, 114) concludes that 'for all the good intentions and proven talent of those involved in attempting to carve a provocative morality tale on racial tolerance from what was essentially fluid but standardised West End entertainment, *Nymphs and Satires* failed dismally'. Yet, looked at now alongside *Wait a Minim* (and possibly even *King Kong*) it might also look like an advance - at least in terms of its political muscle. To begin with, the cast was multi-racial, and several sketches directly address political injustices or undermine stereotypes. But perhaps political awareness - and racial tensions - in Britain had increased, and both expectations and sensitivities had sharpened. The *Observer* thought the show needed 'a dash of spleen', and while acknowledging the 'pungency' of some sketches, found the songs 'cute and lulling' (30 May 1965). Even the *Daily Express* called it 'lightweight', and lacking in force: 'If it intended to attack black-haters, it should have employed sketch-writers with the ability to punch home the message' (26 May 1965). *The Times* questioned whether the subject matter was even 'fair game for "entertainment"', since the performance had 'no point of view to advance beyond vague good will' (26 May 1965).

The Times also worried that targets and messages in *Nymphs and Satires* were sometimes ambiguous and open to misinterpretation. This point was picked up and multiplied in a powerful article by Lewis Nkosi in *The New African* which described the show as a 'ghastly affair' and accused it of being 'monstrously vapid'. Sketches were 'humiliating' and 'distasteful', and at its core was the 'deliberate exploitation of African material', designed to

increase ‘commercial saleability’ by promoting ‘a unique African heritage whose novelty would act as a pull for European producers looking for exotica’. For all that the cast was mixed, Nkosi insisted that it was not - as claimed - integrated, since the black actors were ‘subservient’ and ‘act mainly as foils for the white members, whose show this is’. The article also cited specific examples of sections which expressed racist assumptions: ‘It must not be supposed that the show attacks or satirises these values in any way’, insisted Nkosi; ‘on the contrary it embodies them’ (Nkosi 1965). The article’s anger and contempt were matched by a letter sent to the Lord Chamberlain from ‘an association of non-white ex-servicemen’ which demanded that he withdraw the show’s licence for public performance:

WE EX-SERVICEMEN HAVE TO DRAW YOUR ATTENTION (...) TO A NEW REVUE (…) WHICH IS OBVIOUSLY INTENDED TO RIDICULE AND INSULT NON-WHITE PEOPLE. (…) THIS SHOW IS OBVIOUSLY MEANT TO BE PROPAGANDA FOR SOUTH AFRICA’S DETESTABLE RACIAL POLICY OF APARTHEID, AND AS SUCH IT IS NOT ENTERTAINMENT IN THE ACCEPTED SENSE AND MAY WELL HAVE REPERCUSSIONS AND DO CONSIDERABLE HARM AND INCITE RACIAL STRIFE.

The letter even warned: ‘IF YOU DO NOT HAVE THIS REVUE WITHDRAWN WE SHALL HAVE TO CONSIDER OUR LINE OF ACTION’ (Lord Chamberlain’s Correspondence Files, 1965).

African Writers: Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Duro Ladipo

In the autumn of 1965, the inaugural Commonwealth Arts Festival brought productions of three Nigerian plays to Britain - more than from any other individual nation. Two plays by John Pepper Clark - *Song of a Goat* and *The Masquerade* (Clark 1964) were presented at London’s Scala Theatre, as well as in Liverpool and Glasgow, and The Duro National Theatre from Oshogbo performed a Yoruba Folk Opera, *Oba-Koso* (Ladipo 1964),

which was staged in the same three British cities, and also Cardiff. Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (Soyinka 1965) was staged at Theatre Workshop's venue in Stratford East.

Referring primarily to the 1966 production of *The Lion and the Jewel* (Soyinka 1963), Martin Banham (Banham, nd)identifies a range of early critical responses to the work of Wole Soyinka 'that reflect, in equal measure, enthusiasm, uncertainty and – sometimes – naïve cultural responses to this African voice'. At times, they were also patronising, resistant, and even offensive. In November 1959, the Royal Court presented an evening of Soyinka's work, including *The Invention* (Soyinka 2005), his dramatic satire on apartheid set in a future where, as a result of a nuclear accident, South African scientists are struggling to distinguish who is white and who is black. Reviewing it for the *Spectator* under the headline 'Where Spades are Trumps', Alan Brien launched an extraordinary attack not so much on the play, as on what he perceived as a growing tendency to overrate and prioritise black voices: 'In what for the sake of sociological shorthand can be called the Royal-Court foyer', wrote Brien, 'the presence of a Negro in a play is becoming very near to being a guarantee of a masterpiece' (6 November 1959). He compared this to the political exaggerations of an earlier era: '[i]n the Thirties, Left-wing intellectuals consistently over- praised anything written by a worker. In the Fifties they overpraise anything written by a Negro'. And he added: 'Personally I believe in calling a spade a spade but never a bloody nigger'. Turning his attention to the performance itself, Brien was dismissive of the writer's skills: 'Mr. Soyinka is a fluent, funny and angry West African', wrote Brien, 'but he has not yet begun to understand how to work out a verse or to organise a play'. Not all reviews were so negative. *The Times* noted - and partially echoed - the positive audience responses to Soyinka's writing, which the reviewer insisted were prompted not by 'a patronizing attitude on the part of a white audience' but 'by respect for his gift for words' (2 November 1959).

In 1965, *The Road*, with five Nigerian actors in its cast of thirteen, opened the Commonwealth Festival, and in a *Guardian* preview Brian Lapping described Soyinka as 'a cross-cultural phenomenon', who 'writes plays which display a total mastery of European theatrical technique'. While 'his content is Nigerian', wrote Lapping, 'his form is thoroughly British' (13 September 1965). However, the same newspaper's review a couple of days later hit the patronising tone of old: 'There is a borderline between articulateness and mere verbosity which a certain sort of dramatist can teeter about on so skilfully that he gives a new dimension to language. Mr Soyinka (…) shows some sign of being on the way. He uses our language, his language, with love and some passion. When he (…) makes others know what he is trying to say, he will be going places' (15 September 1965).

Reviewing *The Road* in the *Sunday Times*, Harold Hobson found an occasional 'thrill of excitement' in the moments '[w]hen the drums beat, or the song bursts out, or the idol is beheaded', and responded positively to some of the less familiar stylistic features: 'There are masks: there is singing. There is something real here'. But he was critical of the 'actionless conversations', and suggested that the playwright had come too much under the influence of western theatrical traditions: 'When Mr Soyinka tries to apply a Royal Court technique... the interest flags'. Hobson was convinced that plays by African writers 'go wrong only when they speak under the evident influence of European civilisation'. On one level, he could be accused of advocating a cultural apartheid - a desire for separation and purity rather than cross-fertilisation. But Hobson did at least credit the non-European world he imagined with significance: 'There are in Africa things of value', he proclaimed with something like envy, 'passions, and excitements, beyond the cold climate of our restraint' - and it was to this, distinct culture that African writers must learn to confine their work: 'What they can tell us, and what we want to know about, is their own civilisation' (19 September 1965).

Where several reviews concentrated their praise on the music and the visual elements of *Road*, and were inclined to dismiss the spoken text, Penelope Gilliat in the *Observer* saw and heard it very differently. She lauded Soyinka for having invented new forms and styles of speech, re-energising and invigorating an English language in desperate need of shaking up. Soyinka had not only contrived to 'belt new energy into the English tongue' and 'booted it awake', but had also 'rifled its pockets and scattered the loot'. Gilliat had no doubt that *The Road* emerged from 'the jar of originality, distinct and audacious', and while acknowledging the importance of non-verbal elements to the work, it was the playfulness and the unexpected shocks of the verbal language - where 'compressed phrases often creep up from behind or buck like a hose of water' - which she emphasised above all (19 September 1965).

John Pepper Clark's double bill of plays (Clark 1964) tended to be compared unfavourably with Soyinka's. Gilliat found the form and style too trapped in the conventions and techniques of western drama, full of the 'bad apostrophising plays of decadent Europe' (*Observer*, 19 September 1965). *The Times* was equally negative in its overall judgement, but, in terms of the plays' relationship to western drama, saw things almost in reverse: 'Compared with Mr. Soyinka's urban drama, with its detectable western influence, Mr Clark's plays are wholly indigenous and defiantly unsophisticated' (17 September 1965). While Clark's plays did not draw on the non-verbal elements to which most reviewers had responded with relief in watching *The Road*, the narratives are powerful, and the language rich in expression. However, this poetic quality only alienated reviewers: 'Their prime fault is that they beat about the verbal bush and are frequently clogged with metaphor when directness and simplicity would be appropriate' (*The Times*, 17 September 1965). Hobson found it 'hard to believe that this is authentic African speech' (presumably in the way that Shakespeare's plays depend on authentic Elizabethan speech), and also proposed that the central subject of the play lacked sufficient resonance to compel a European audience: 'It

may be that the disgrace of a childless marriage is a profoundly African emotion, and that Mr Clark is therefore writing of something close to his race and people'. Even more crucially for Hobson, there was a conflict of tone. Like others, he identified in the plays' unwinding and inevitable narrative the mood and the flow of Greek tragedy with its 'endless cycle of sin and punishment'; but this clashed with 'the atmosphere of incongruous jollity', which he said sparked the 'amiable derision' of the audience - especially 'the sophisticated London Nigerians in the audience who laughed loudest of all' (*Sunday Times* 19 September 1965).[i]

If the plays of Soyinka and Clark were challenging to many, then a Yoruba Folk-Opera (sung in its original language) was probably likely to be more so. 'I find it difficult to write about this contribution to the Commonwealth Festival without seeming supercilious or insulting', wrote Oleg Kerensky of *Oba-Koso*, 'but then I found it difficult to watch the performance without being bored or irritated' (*Daily Mail*, 28 September 1965). With its 'singing more like chanting, and the dancing a kind of shake' Kerensky found the piece effectively inaccessible: '[t]he trouble is that there is virtually no point of contact between these native African forms of song and dance and a Western audience'. *The Tim*es agreed that 'the vocal lines are, to a western ear, inexorably repetitive, and the words unintelligible', but still found there was 'plenty to watch', and that the singing, the dancing and the design had all been compelling (2 September 1965). The *Sunday Times* went further, describing it as 'one of the most exciting events of the Commonwealth Arts Festival'. The reviewer, Orobiyi-Rhodes, was adamant that that 'even those who cannot understand the language (Yoruba) could not fail to be moved', for this was 'total theatre in which music, acting, dancing and visual arts are tightly interwoven into a whole', and which 'thunders over the stage with power and vitality' (3 October 1965). The *Observer* agreed that the opera possessed 'an authenticity of expression which many other Commonwealth offerings lacked' (3 October 1965).

Later Sixties

Audiences for the 1965 Commonwealth Festival may have been generally disappointing in terms of numbers, but it undoubtedly had a cultural impact. 'African drama is a force to be reckoned with' announced *The Times* the following year (29 June 1966), lauding Soyinka as 'an extremely sophisticated craftsman', whose writing could rescue 'the impoverished state of our own language' (29 June 1966). *The Times* even claimed that 'to find any parallel for his work in English drama you have to go back to the Elizabethans' (13 December 1966). In the *Observer,* Ronald Bryden described *The Lion and the Jewel* as 'the most sophisticated spectacle in town' (18 December 1966).

The later 1960s also brought new plays by European writers set in contemporary Africa and offering very different perspectives on colonialism and Empire from those of the mid-1950s. These included David Mercer's *The Governor's Lady* (Mercer 1968), staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1965 as part of an event called 'Home and Colonial'; Henry Livings's *The Little Mrs Foster Show* (Livings 1969), which opened at Liverpool Playhouse in 1968; and Peter Weiss's *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* (Weiss, 1970), performed at the Aldwych Theatre in 1969. Then in early 1972, London audiences could watch not one, but two African Macbeths. The first (at the Roundhouse) retained Shakespeare's text but set the play in a 'mixed up (…) emergent African nation (...) where elemental magic still has a potent meaning' (*Observer*, 27 February 1972). The costumes, the use of drums and the physicality of the choreography (including a war dance) contributed to what was for its time an innovative - or revolutionary - approach to Shakespeare, even if reviewers were not fully persuaded by it. The second - *Umabatha* (Msomi, 1996) - was presented by the Natal Theatre Workshop Company as part of the Aldwych's ninth World Theatre Season, in a text by Welcome Msomi (who also played the lead role) which fused

Shakespeare's play together with events in 19th-century Zulu history. Michael Billington described watching *Umabatha* as 'a breathtaking exciting theatrical experience (...) that offers a marvellous testament to the skill, discipline and precision of its African performers'. Perhaps inevitably, it was the atmosphere and the physicality of the performance - the rituals, the victory dances, and the battle scenes - on which he particularly focused: 'what will pound in the memory of non-African audiences is the explosive ensemble precision of the 55-strong company'. But Billington was also ready to point out that the production was 'not merely exciting spectacle', but also a reminder 'that Shakespeare's play is rooted in a ritualistic society of which modern naturalistic productions never give us a glimpse' (4 April 1972). Perhaps an observable African influence had begun to make itself felt in British theatre.

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[i] Margaret Laurence pointed out in 1968 that Clark had 'denied that his sources are primarily Greek' and that they 'may be traced equally well to West African sources' (Laurence 1968, 77).

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