

Open-air Theatre

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African drama is the sphere of modern art which reveals, more distinctly than any other, the process of different epochs and different traditions coming into contact with one another, which is so characteristic of present-day culture of Africa. Like in any other country, dramatists in Africa keep debating the question. What is modern theatre to be like? True, none of them are so far known to have come out in favour of the "theatre of absurdities"; whereas, on the other hand, there is quite a marked tendency towards making the play more complicated, towards extending the scope of symbolics to convey the numerous meanings and situations. The position existing today is curious. Somewhere, at one end, there exists national, folk "performance" which is still closely linked with cult, rituals, religious symbolism, which can be understood only by those who knew what they were supposed to represent. At the other end, there is modern African play strongly influenced by the Western drama, which at times tends to be so complicated that it can be understood only by those who can "interpret" what is implied. The latter are plays permitting of different interpretation, and, consequently, giving rise to heated debates, as, for instance, in the case of "Dance of the Forest" by W. Soyinka.

These contrasting tendencies in the African drama reflect the condition of modern African society in its present-day stage of rapid development. After all, a contrast between a mystery-play, performed somewhere in the depth of the country with its old mode of life and ancient customs, and the modern theatre with the latest achievements of world drama—is it not a contrast just as striking as that between the mud-house and the fine asphalt roads with motor-cars swishing along? Both the elements are parts of one big great whole—Africa.

In their works researchers of African religions and beliefs have quite fully described the numerous existing rituals and rites, the significance of mask, the meanings of religious symbolisms, and the like. All those elements are prototypes of the folk drama. In some cases the deviation from the original symbolisms and rites is so great that there has been created a king of drama of quite a different quality, that is, a primitive folk mystery-play or a dramatic performance staged by way of the older generation sharing the experience with the younger one. In both those cases the edifying meaning of the play is conveyed through mythological images and scenes from everyday life. The range of themes embraced by such plays includes disapproval of disrespect for the elders, ignorance of customs, human faults and vices, such as conceit, greed

Wherever ancient forms of many centuries' standing come into contact with modern ways of life and new problems, the range of themes tackled by the folk dramatics considerably extends. They draw in more characters, and this or that theme begins to acquire a more or less definite and lasting interpretation. Just like there is the African "book fair", which is quite popular with the readers, for instance, in Onitsha, Nigeria, one of the largest ones of this kind, there is also "dramatics fair", whose repertoire, though quite simple, is far from being devoid of ideological contents and reflects some burning topics of the day. The main characters of the dramatic performances of this kind include the official, the market-woman, and in the period of colonialism those used to be also the white man, the policeman, and others. Some of those primitive performances are downright obscene, and all of them are brimful of rough humour—that is the distinguishing characteristic of the folk theatre of the «dramatics fair». Incidentally, this kind of theatre is to be found not only in Africa. In London I saw a company of strolling players showing their performances right in the street amidst the cars—some of them riding, others parked, as the case might; some of the scenes they performed were, perhaps no less primitive and crude.

In between the pantomime fair and modern drama there is the performance of numerous amateur actors who, as a rule, stage simple, one-act plays treating of folklore themes, burning topics of the day. Sometimes those plays are referred to as "folk opera".

for they devote a great deal of attention to singing, especially, in chorus, dancing and pantomime. Quite popular is the so-called "Drama Studio" set up in Ghana in 1961 by E. Sutherland, a talented poetess and dramatist, and Joe de Graft, producer. The theatre's repertoire includes classics like Shakespeare, plays by modern dramatists, but chiefly, plays written by E. Sutherland and Joe de Graft in collaboration with members of the company. The range of themes dealt with by those plays includes everyday life of simple people, short sketches on moral subjects, folklore element in various adaptations. The Studio performed in many cities of the country and outside it, too.

There is another semi-professional company of Kola Ogunmola, quite well-known in Nigeria. His company stages plays on everyday subjects, extensively using the traditions of the folk theatre. Last December his theatre staged a play based on a novel "The Palm-Wine Drunkard" by A. Tutuola, which is quite popular in Nigeria. Another dramatic company, the so-called "dance drama", based its last show on another novel by the same author entitled "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts."

In the course of the past few years dramatic art has been gaining popularity all over Africa. Stable dramatic companies have appeared in Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and other countries. There have appeared quite a number of dramatists, who write original plays or translate plays by classic dramatists into various languages of African peoples. For instance, in Ghana K. Asare writes plays in the Akan language, J. Hagan—in the Fante language; the latter is the author of a number of moral plays. Another dramatist J. Dadson has translated into Fante plays "Julius Caesar", "Merchant of Venice" by Shakespeare, and others. Some plays are adapted to be easier understood by wide audiences, as, for instance, was the case with "Hamlet" staged by Joe de Graft.

In Sierra Leone Sarif Easmon is quite popular as the author and producer of many plays. His play "Dear Parent", treating of caste prejudice, intrigues and love, is a gay and witty comedy which was a great success. J. Akar has also written several plays, of which especially popular was "Valley without Echo".

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"Black Hermit" was staged during the former's plays entitled "Black Hermit" was staged during the festivities held on the occasion of the proclamation of independence.

This year a talented actor and dramatist of Uganda R. Serumaga staged a play entitled "A Play" which was performed by his company at the "National Theatre" of Uganda.

In the past few years, under the influence of modern plays, especially those in the West, there has appeared in African drama a tendency towards complicated plays with many underlying developments. This is especially true of Nigerian drama. Frequently the complexity, expressed in an extended scope of symbolism, results from the author's inexperience and a consequent tendency to complicate every element which psychologically is not motivated. But, as a rule, the introduction of symbolics into the fabric of the play and the action taking place in different times was dictated by the author's conception. That applies to plays "Song of a Goat" by J. Clark, "The Raf" by W. Soyinka, «The Strong Breed», «Dance of the Forest», and «The Road». These plays reflect the Africa of today, its past intertwined with the present, African mythology, its complex socio-political processes. These plays arouse the spectator's great interest and heated discussions. Their enthusiasm for and interest in their national art will be a source of further development of African drama.

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