

Alexandre KUM'A N'DOUMBE :
THE AFRICAN REVOLUTION AND THE SEARCH
FOR A NEW AFRICAN DRAMA

by
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Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe III (1944—), the Cameroon poet, playwright, historian and essayist, is little known to the English speaking world because the great majority of his works exist in either French or German. Yet, this youthful, exuberant, intellectual writer has an impressive body of works and he deserves every notice both for the powerful nature of his message and his capacity for manipulating whatever medium he chooses to work in. He possesses particular vitality and an acute perception of the intricate, almost labyrinthine nature of the forces which move his society; these, together give his writings a lot of sparkle.

Kum'a N'dumbe's experience is wide-ranging. After primary education in Cameroon, he moved to Germany to attend secondary school. He carried out University education in Lyon, France, where he arrived just in time to be caught up in the French students' uprising of 1968. Today, Kum'a N'dumbe holds a *doctorat de troisième cycle* in Germanic studies, having written a thesis on the German Second World War policy towards Africa¹. He has taught at the University of Lyon II and, presently, he is a lecturer in History, German, and Drama at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon.

This paper is limited to a study of his published plays that are written in French — other works are written in German. His works continue to show that almost obsessive preoccupation with the problems of becoming which face his society, and in this he proves himself to be a social visionary.

Kum'a N'dumbe's stay in Germany was to provide for him an avenue of self-expression, for it was there that he first came in contact with the works of Bertolt Brecht, which were to have a profound effect on him. He rather lucidly points this out himself when he writes:

*pendant mon séjour en Allemagne, le théâtre conventionnel que mes proches essayèrent de me faire découvrir me laissait complètement indifférent. Il m'ennuyait profondément. Puis un jour au Lycée, notre professeur d'allemand nous fit découvrir Brecht. Ce fut pour moi une véritable révélation. Enfin un dramaturge qui tente sur scène, de mettre en question les valeurs, les systèmes, le Monde Occidental, archi-orgueilleux ! Je ne pouvais plus rater la représentation d'une pièce de Brecht.*²

In his dramaturgy, Kum'a N'dumbe shows obvious evidence of Brechtian influences, but his theatre takes its roots from the rituals and festivals which he observed and participated in during his childhood in Cameroon. His is an absorbing and synthesizing process, one of experiential distillation, out of which he emerges with a style which is authentically his. The first thing one remarks about his plays is his continuous search and application of new dramatic techniques especially in his attempt to exploit a strong sense of rhythm characterized by a lyrical use of language, chant, music, mime, ritual, and dance.

Kum'a N'dumbe writes from an inner compulsion and expresses himself passionately. For him, the theatre does not exist unless it can effect a radical change in the audience. Thus, he expresses himself in a self-conscious manner without indulging in the techniques of his medium. He writes from an ideological standpoint which is socialist, without being Marxist, and is rather zealous in his commitment to social problems. However, Kum'a N'dumbe escapes the temptation, most often, of being doctrinaire, portraying action in a convincing manner. Whatever the debate might be about Kum'a N'dumbe, it hardly rests on the effectiveness of his plays as theatre, for his style is lively, if not buoyant.

His plays are intended to redeem man from the ravages and mauling influences of a materialistic world, extremely acquisitive and morbid, fraught with repression; exploitation, and egotism. The contrasts, conflicts, and antagonisms which sustain his drama emanate from the society and involve conflicting tendencies between individualism and communalism, between egotism and altruism. His hero is communal man — man striving for the common good of society against whom is selfish man. These are the broad tenets often symbolized by his one-dimensionally drawn characters who end up as spokesmen of either class or race. This one-dimensionality in characterization is re-inforced by an ambiguity of setting which gives his plays a wider appeal. The battle against racial or class hegemony is usually fought both on a linguistic and active level, with the one substantiating the other. His plays are vibrant with music and dance which reinforce the pulsating force of the drama, making it very compelling.

The ardour with which the playwright expresses himself is infectious as he examines the problems of human existence and demonstrates the communal anguish which exists in the society beyond the scope of his drama. In spite of the rampant anguish in these plays, there is a certain optimism expressed in the future, and this derives from the playwright's deep-seated belief that social change is possible if only there is the will to change.

The action which Kum'a N'dumbe develops throughout his plays, for all its irony and grotesqueries, illustrates this positivism, but the style is sometimes baffling. He develops the action of his plays in an episodic and staccato manner, often vacillating between the present and the past, sometimes taking recourse to the flashback technique. He freely mixes reality with fantasy and caricature so much that any uninformed audience may be left askance, but all this help to enrich the theatrical event. In his dramatic art, every technique that can hold the audience spell bound, is used; even the usual pyrotechnics which seem to belong to the Expressionist mode have a place here.

Evidently, Kum'a N'dumbe is a satirist of African political neophytes, the African intellectual bourgeoisie, and the *nouveau riches*. These are his anti-heroes of the social depredation which has overwhelmed his society, and he portrays them using a lot of sarcasm, humour, wit and irony. On occasion, he uses parody as we find in *Cannibalisme* (1976). However, Kum'a N'dumbe does not end with just simple satire. For him, it is a process of re-education and an attempt to inculcate socially acceptable values. To achieve this, history for instance, takes on a utilitarian sense for him, and he uses this as the means to reaffirm the dignity of man. He may be an optimist, but his style can be brash and aggressive, particularly when we watch the spec-

tacle of menaced freedom and thwarted hopes and aspirations. This strident feeling of acrimony is always justified by the kind of action which he portrays with an ironical intention. What is particularly fascinating in these plays is not just their social content, but their potential for invigorating an almost stifling and emasculated society. No incident is considered inconsequential in Kum'a N'dumbe's theatre. Each event has its place in the order of things, and even when he uses a curiously distorted logic, as he does in the case of *comedulisme*, he ends up achieving a symbol of the illogicality which pervades his own society.

However, Kum'a N'dumbe does not always succeed in distancing himself from these themes. For one, they are contemporary and involve him directly. At such moments, as is the case of *Le Soleil de l'aurore* (1976), he can be strangely doctrinaire, because his social vision overwhelms his creativity, and no matter how much his revolutionary fervour portrays a humanitarian vision, his writing becomes turgid.

These generalizations may easily give a misreading of his plays for although a basic concept underlines his writing, each of the plays shows a deviation in form and style. His plays to date include *Lumumba II* (1968), a tribute to the hero of the Kwantung revolution; *Ach Kamerun, unsere alte Deutsche Kolonie* (1969), a documentary piece based on the German occupation of Cameroon until the end of the First World War; *Das Fest der Liebe* (1969), a dramatic celebration of an unconsumed miscegenation owing to social, racial and political prejudices; and *Kafra-Biatungu* (1969) which is a satire of the insidious manipulations to which Super-powers subject the emergent nations of Africa resulting in civil strife in such areas as Biafra and Katanga. These first four plays were all published in German, and so far, only *Kafra-Biatungu* has been translated into French.¹

In French, he has written *Cannibalisme* (1976), a parody of North/South dialogue which takes for its leitmotif, the Négritude movement and all the polemics associated with it; *Le soleil de l'aurore* which is an evaluation of post-colonial Africa, using for its principal theme, opportunism; *Lisa, le putain de ...* (1976), another appraisal of independent Africa with all its socio-political malaise; *Amilcar Cabral* (1976), a tribute to the hero of the revolution in Guinea Bissau which routed Portuguese hegemony; and *Au nom d'une race*, (1979), a dramatized narration of the life of a South African black fugitive in search of freedom. This is an adaptation of one of his short stories, "La fuite du jeune Matlala" which appears in his collection *Nouvelles Interdites* (1978).²

By choosing the theatre as one of his means of communication, Kum'a N'dumbe is keenly aware of its public and communal nature; and he has developed a sturdy dramatic style which calls for a participatory audience. The lyrical, crispy and rapid nature of his language is particularly effective. The resultant drama is one of celebration of the joys of society, as well as a communal sharing of common burdens. The private and public are blended together as the playwright invites us to examine the plight of man in society.

Kum'a N'dumbe is a socially committed writer who displays an ardent desire in his writings to redress all social inequities. This is immediately evident in *Kafra-Biatungu* where he attempts to portray the surreptitious manner in which neo-colonialism has been implanted in Africa. The sub-title of the play

is ironically, the tragedy of Africa, although much of the action takes place in the cabinet and boardrooms of an anonymous Western country where the fate of an unspecified African nation is decided upon. This play, with its multiple plot and vacillating action defies critical oversimplification, but it needs to be pointed out that the action which the playwright incorporates into the plot is at once banal and serious. The naïveté of the Africans is treated with a malicious humour especially in the scene in which tribal loyalties escalate into war over the cost of a wristwatch. It is not the simple nature of the event which is important, but the gravity of the consequences, for here we find a stark statement of the fragility of the union that holds together many African countries. Yet, the playwright is equally able to portray the fact that tribal and regional loyalties have been mythified by the Super-powers, who then exploit these to their advantage.

This play evinces not just a strong anti-capitalist sentiment, but, equally, a certain abhorrence for stoogery and the betrayal of the ideals of independence. It is in the face of the new acquisitive tendencies that easily lead to betrayal that the playwright (through his actors) issues a battle cry which culminates in the frenzied singing and dancing which brings the play to an end:

1er comédien : Pourquoi ne pas danser ?
Devrons-nous aussi au crépuscule pleurer
Pleurer les fils morts
Pleurer ceux qui vont mourir
Les hommes et les femmes
Les femmes et les enfants
Pleurer l'Afrique
Tous : (dansent)
Non, nous ne pleurons pas.
Nous ne pleurons pas
Nous dansons le deuil
Nous dansons le combat
Nous dansons la bataille
Nous dansons l'avenir. (p. 77)

Kum'a N'dumbe's social vision is here clearly defined and the dance becomes one of defiance and assertion. The playwright sees his society as full of promise, but it is a promise which is still embryonic, the fruits of which can only be gratifying if the process of incubation is right. He expresses himself here in a credible manner and the way in which he resolves his plot is a clear challenge to his society. Conscious of his medium he recognizes the fact that the issues which he raises go beyond the scope of drama, so he lets one of his actors invite the audience to join in the debate that ensues:

1er Comédien : Parfaitement, c'est ce que nous avons appris, chers spectateurs. C'est ce que nous avons appris. Nous en sommes convaincus. Ce que vous en pensez ; je ne le sais pas. Vous allez dire : ils exagèrent. Ils veulent nous manipuler. Mais je vous le dis : nous ne voulons même pas vous manipuler, nous ne le voulons pas. Ce serait de l'impertinence. Car vous payez l'entrée justement pour ne pas être manipulés. Dites votre opinion. Vous voyez, nous venons vers vous pour que les choses soient claires. Vous aussi, vous devez dire votre opinion. Rester-là, ne partez pas. Ne sortez donc pas, la représentation ne fait que commencer. (p. 79).

Arrêtez la danse funèbre
N'entendez-vous pas les obus qui
Torpillent le quartier

N'entendez-vous pas les crépitements
Des mitrailleuses
Ne percevez-vous pas les fleuves
De sang qui coulent du
Haut montagne de
La libération

Les cris perçants des gosses
Eventrés
Les pleurs stridents des veuves
Agonisantes
Les rugissements des lions
En fureur
Désastre sur le pays
Pays aux lumières éteintes
Gouffre de la perdition (p. 52)

The stridency is not only that which is reported by the Old Woman, but can be equally felt in the flow of the language which the playwright uses. The sheer lyrical force conveys the anguish which is at once individual and communal. It is a certain acrimonious feeling against the powers that be. Here, it is not only the painfully destructive nature of war which is satirized, but the consequences of a power struggle in which people of a common progeny mutually destroy themselves:

Vous dansez à la cadence
Des mitrailleuses
D'un côté les combattants
Engagés
De l'autre les soldats
Enrôlés
Des deux côtés les fils du pays
Qui s'entre-tuent (p. 53)

The events which Kum'a N'dumbe portrays in this play are highly topical, yet he is sometimes able to achieve a certain aesthetic distance when he is not sloganizing. At such times, the reader has little to guess. This is very evident in what the altruistic brother has to say, and more especially in his dying words as he faces the firing squad:

Seule une conviction profonde de la Justesse de nos options doit
dicter nos actes. Et la seule option juste dans toute son entité est celle
qui considère les intérêts du peuple comme intérêts suprêmes. (p. 77)

Not even the fact that the playwright uses a classic technique of reportage to bring in this message reduces its directness and obviousness. The excessively doctrinaire nature of much of the play tends to make it, notwithstanding all its pyrotechniques and the sometimes caustic language, hard to accept as a successful piece of theatre. The stage has become too much of a classroom, and the

content of the course is too ideological. This is not, however, to say that the play does not have its moments when the action is fascinating. It is indeed replete with these. The opening is particularly effective as the neurotic leader screams at his brother's blood. Many of the flashbacks, dream sequences, and the verbal battles are well handled. One of the glaring examples of the playwright over-trying by a panel of judges, especially selected for their loyalty to the new regime. The travesty of justice is obvious, but it would have been more dramatic if the playwright had used situational irony rather than the direct statement to which he resorts. At such moments, one is left with the uneasy feeling that the playwright underestimates his audience and is striving too hard to drive his point home.

Kum'a N'dumbe seemed to have overstretched himself in this play in trying to handle not only topical but rather emotionally charged material within the context of an experimental dramatic style. But for all its weaknesses in structure, the play evinces a certain sublimity achieved principally through the altruistic statements made throughout. Kum'a N'dumbe writes from a peculiar experience — that of thwarted hopes and frustrated ambitions. His language is thus full of embittered invective against the perpetrators of the inequities situation which continues to go unassuaged. In the other plays that we have so far seen, the subject is very similar and his craft continues to be experimental. Here however, Kum'a N'dumbe abandons his call for dialogue as a possible means of redressing the inequities which exist in his society to concede to the use of violence:

Nous vaincrons le colonialisme
Nous abattons le néo-colonialisme
Nous anéantissons l'impérialisme
Le peuple vaincra
Le pays sera libéré
L'Afrique a pris les armes. (p. 87)

This call for revolutionary violence is the last means for the emancipation of the African people, and as recent events all over the continent show, it seems to be the only language understood by imperialist powers. However, Kum'a N'dumbe is not a masochist who enjoys violence for its own sake. He is a pragmatist and a visionary, who looks perceptively into the future of his people, and uses his art to raise an awareness and an alternative consciousness in them. His address is not only to the African people; it is equally to the people in the northern hemisphere.

In his fourth play, *Amilcar Cabral* (1976), the same message is clear — dialogue or face annihilation. Although Cabral was himself assassinated by Portuguese imperialist agents, the revolution which he had given birth to was so well founded that it eventually led to the independence of the territory. The play is Kum'a N'dumbe's tribute to the exceptional organizational acumen which Cabral demonstrated. But this was not the first thing Kum'a N'dumbe wrote about Cabral. Earlier on, the following eulogy had appeared in the weekly, *Afrique/Asie*:

Ils ont dû boire du champagne. Ils ont dû fêter la mort. Maintenant, toi, tu n'es plus. Tu as été ! Et eux, ils demeurent. Eux, les assassins, les sanguinaires, les monstres impérialiste. Et toi, tu n'es plus. Toi,

notre grand frère qui tenais le flambeau, toi qui courais devant pour
éclairer le chemin de ton peuple, c'est toi qui a disparu.

Ils ont tué Mondlane. Ils ont tué Lumumba. Ils ont tués Um Nydye.
Et ils n'ont rien appris. Ils l'ont tué. Ils en tuèrent d'autres. Et ils
n'auront toujours rien compris. Le vautour impérialiste aperçoit des
individus mais dans sa course folle d'un monstre assoiffé de sang il
ne voit pas le peuple. Le peuple dresse contre lui et décide à lui fermer
le chemin. Comme un taureau, il fonce et se cogne brutalement contre
le mur des masses populaires...

Le compromis n'est plus possible, le néo-colonialisme n'aura pas lieu.
Les peuples africains l'ont déclaré et défendent par les armes cet enga-
gement solennel. Il n'y aura pas de place pour les fantômes. C'est la
guerre, jusqu'à présent, a prouvé... Cabral ! Cabral !

Tu n'es pas mort. Parce que tu as compris assez tôt qu'il fallait savoir
ne pas mourir. Ton génie t'a ouvert les chemins de l'immortalité...

Kum'a N'dumbe sounds strangely prophetic in the above statement, for the
revolution in recent years, has met with exceptional success, not only in Guinea
Bissau, but also in Angola, Mozambique, and more recently, in Zimbabwe.
The play, *Amílcar Cabral*, is Kum'a N'dumbe's contribution, not only to the
immortalization of Cabral, but to the process of change.

The play becomes a classroom of concentrated reality in which the play-
wright attempts to portray the ingenious manner in which Cabral set about his
revolution. The playwright keeps very close to reality and avoids some of the
inventiveness which is present in some of the other plays. Using the technique
of the play-within-a-play, he provides the whole programme of mobilization
used by the PAIGC in the liberation struggle. He then goes further on to show
this being effected and debated on. The playwright introduces authentic material
but selects this carefully so that nothing in the play seems superfluous. One of
the many issues raised in the play is that of tribal and regional loyalties which
can easily dissipate any revolutionary effort. Kum'a N'dumbe then goes on to
show how dexterously Cabral handled this otherwise explosive situation, and
how he succeeded in unifying all tenets of national opinion into a consensus.

The success of this play rests on the fact that the playwright imposes
upon himself a certain discipline of style and exercises a lot of caution and
objectivity in the delineation of the character of Cabral. The hero is not romanti-
cized, but he is shown to be driven by a certain revolutionary fervour culmi-
nating in a humanist vision of his society. What is more fascinating about the
character of Cabral is his sense of propriety and his ability to adapt all text-book
ideology to the realities of his environment. This is particularly to be seen in the
play-within-a-play scenes in which Cabral instructs his militants on the party
ideology. He demands and shows this through action, that the 'isms' must not
be transferred whole sale into Guinea since the circumstances that gave birth to
Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao and the rest of them, were far different from the
situation prevalent on the Africa continent and in Guinea Bissau in particular.

The action of this play is further more sustained by the frenzied action
that goes on in those scenes set in Portugal, in which we find the Portuguese

leader, at his command post, screaming for help from his Western colleagues.
In such scenes, we find a lot of burlesque, parody, farce, and caricature, and
the freeness contrasts with the calm and caution that characterizes Cabral's
camp.

The supreme triumph of Cabral comes after his death, in a dirge sung
by a little girl — symbol of both youthful innocence and procreation. This is
the moment of apotheosis which demonstrates the transcendental nature of
Cabral's Charismatic leadership:

La Jeune Fille :
La tempête du combat
a soufflé sur la rive
la fureur de l'orage
a balayé l'occupant

Cabral, Cabral
Tends-moi donc ta main
pour recevoir la rose
cueillie à l'aube
de ta vie

La tempête du combat
a soufflé sur la rive
Tu ne réponds donc pas
Cabral

Réponds-moi Camarade
Tends-moi la rose
Cueillie à l'aube
de la vie

Viens prendre ta rose
Cueillie par ton peuple
À l'aube de la vie
Je ne connais pas la mort
Tu ne connaîtras pas la mort

Cabral ! (p.89).

The lyrical quality of the dirge is compelling and underlines the determination
that lurks in the African masses in the struggle for their liberation, which is
often underrated by imperialist powers. The choice of the young girl to sing
this is particularly apt and brings into the forefront the upsurge of sustained
awareness. It could be said of Kum'a N'dumbe here that the medium has been
made to match the message, and not even the sometimes doctrinaire teach-in
scenes seem to minimize the effect of the play.

His next play, *Lisa la putain de...* (1976), written just after he had watch-
ed a performance of *Robinson Crusoe* by Jerome Savary's *Le Grand Magic*
Circus,⁷ departs completely, in form and style, from the other plays in some
ways it is close to *Cannibalisme*. Not only has he abandoned the more overtly
political themes of his earlier plays, but also gone is the embittered invective.

Here, he deals with social problems of a less political nature in a jocund manner though the satire still maintains its robustness. The language is more soaring and the theatrical event is rid of the proselytizing of the other plays. He is out disrupting all known theatrical conventions, but he is at the same time careful to create a credible stage picture. Here, there is hardly any question of plot. The action develops in thirteen virtually independent sketches which are linked by a Master of Ceremonies. The occasion for the performance is the birthday of Lisa, the Madame of a famous area of queens, who offers herself and her compatriots for the sexual gratification of both old and young, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable. On the odd occasion, the action is moved to the mountainous hideout of Dragon Sauvage, the leader of a derailed band of revolutionaries turned bandits. The main conflict which underscores most of the action revolves around the battle of wits between the politicians who try to stamp out crime, and Dragon Sauvage and his band who persistently takes the law into his own hands. Lisa, who deals with both parties, becomes the central point of the play, but she is no mere catalyst, for she actively participates in the action herself.

The form of this play is extremely fluid, but cannot be said to be dictated upon by any particular tradition. As the playwright himself quibbles in response to a question from the present author, he is caught in a cross-cultural web:

... Je suis obligé de faire des compromis graves. Par exemple, j'écris en Français or le Français n'est pas une langue Camerounaise ! Je suis Camerounais, mais est-ce vraiment du théâtre Camerounais, ce que j'écris ? Je ne le crois pas. Je dirais plutôt — et c'est malheureux, mais c'est la réalité — que c'est du théâtre français (ou francophone) d'origine Camerounaise. Comment voulez-vous attribuer le qualificatif de Camerounais à une pièce que ma propre mère ne pourra pas comprendre ? ...

Kum'a N'dumbe's problem is virtually that of many other African literary figures who continue to complain about the inadequacy of foreign languages in the expression of their creativity. Kum'a N'dumbe exploits a very fluid dramatic form in which he uses dance and music which help to communicate at a different level, while keeping his language simple but lyrical. Even the rhythmic structure of his language is kept near the tonal structures of many African languages so that a non-speaker of French can still perceive the central meaning of his theatre. *Lisa la putain...* is important in this, for here, the playwright is more conscious than ever of the inadequacies, not only of the French language, in expressing his consciousness, but of all forms of verbalized language. Action, thus speaks louder than words.

The sketches which are incorporated into this play range from a satirical commentary of the course and consequences of prostitution through the rural/urban dichotomy with all the concomitant problems, political abuse, the banal life of the *nouveau riche*, freedom, to the prevalent acquisitiveness, opportunism, and venality which exists within his society. Through Dragon Sauvage and his band, the playwright examines the ridiculous nature of many of the laws promulgated to protect the rising ruling classes. The action in some of the sketches is reminiscent of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, especially when the playwright attributes the destitution of the poor to the growing capitalistic urge within the society:

Alors à quoi bon être un petit voleur
Alors à quoi bon risquer sa peau
Si on peut être voleur
Et être respecté
Et être tranquille
Et être admiré. (p.28)

The satire here is subtle, yet acerbic, for these seems to be a reversal of values in the society which he portrays, so much that even some of the laws passed become incongruous, especially those which institute progressive amputation and eventually the death penalty for petty crimes.

Kum'a N'dumbe, in an attempt at Brechtian alienation, tries to banish sentimentality from his theatre. He uses by the case of the announcement of a death and the response to this by Lisa, to state what ought to be the rational approach to life:

La Mama Bado est peut-être un personnage qui n'a jamais existé, mais que nous avons inventé pour les besoins de la cause. Mama Bado est morte, mais nous, nous continuons à vivre ... Lisa, ne disait-elle pas ton pathétique — la mort, je la hais, la mort ! Pour laisser à son cousin cette conclusion : l'essentiel, c'est de savoir vivre ! (p.41).

This kind of commentary after the unravelling of an event, permeate the play. The Master of Ceremonies may be philosophic in his attitude — in effect it all leads to an existentialist approach to life. For all the satire on the perversion of wealth, and power that this play contains, it remains a joyous moment of theatre, rollicking in its humour, pungent in its criticism, and ribald in its language.

Au nom d'une race (1979) again returns to the political themes, but the geographical location is more defined. Set in South Africa, the plot revolves around the life of a Black fugitive in search of freedom. Matlala, is the escapee of a despotic and dehumanized system. He therefore comes to the realization that come to no avail because he soon realizes that he is confronted everywhere by a despotic and dehumanized system. He therefore comes to the realization that he must fight for his freedom and for that of his progeny. He leaves South Africa to join the liberation forces working within the Mozambiquian territory. In the course of fighting he is hit by a bullet and on his dying bed, he narrates his life in the hope that this would be a guide for others.

This play, turns out to be a multi-media production, for the performance I watched at Lyon in May 1979 used slides, film, a television newscaster, an agent for a package tour firm, sound tracks of the creptations of machine guns etc, all of which added to the horror of the South African experience. The play opens with an announcement from the narrator, acting as the agent for the package tour company, who informs the audience that they are about to be taken on a tour of South Africa where they would be shown the panoramic country side, the sprawling mountains, and thriving economy. Immediately another actor comes in to object to this requesting rather that the political reality which is South Africa be shown to the audience. It is then that using the life of Matlala, the actors who nip in and out of various characters begin to unravel the desolate conditions under which the majority are made to live within the context of an apartheid regime. There is a constant feeling of eeriness

generated by this play because of the continuous catalogue of horrors which are reproduced, either on film or using the sound track. The playwright even resorts to a letter written by Winnie Mandela to the French government asking for the withdrawal of all French assistance to the apartheid regime. At some other moments, there is a direct appeal to the audience to take up arms against apartheid. In the end however, the playwright, ever conscious of his medium, brings the discussion into the audience. The response, as already mentioned, is often very mixed. This mixed response accompanies Kum'a N'dumbe's work, although the controversy often lies, not in the handling of the subject matter, but on the methods which the playwright suggests in setting about to redress the issues which he raises. A typical response is Jean Pierre N'diaye's which appeared in *Jeune Afrique*:

L'œuvre d'Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe doit être connue, publiée et diffusée, en particulier dans le monde africain car il sait exprimer et ramasser dans des situations denses et des images percutantes ce que les jeunes de sa génération ressentent de façons plus ou moins diffusées, pour les mobiliser vers une compréhension plus profonde et plus militante des réalités. Les œuvres de Kum'a N'dumbe sont d'une force et d'une fraîcheur qui montre une voie nouvelle aux nouvelles générations. Elles sont un exemple – en réactualisant – de la contribution que les écrivains africains peuvent apporter à la libération du continent...⁸

There is little doubt about the vitality and vivacity of Kum'a N'dumbe's plays and he writes from a multi-cultural background, absorbing from all, and critically establishing his own style. His art is not just aesthetic, but extremely functional, where content detail is never subjected to form or vice versa. His plays display a persistent search for a humanitarian approach to problems, and he hardly resorts to platitudes. He displays his ardour in an extremely compassionate manner for he is constantly aware of the fact that he is concerned with nature and humanity at its nadir, with communal man and not the individual as his hero. His writings may be unpretentiously propagandist, but his morality stems from a communal angst and is thus as sublime as any other which celebrates the dignity of humanity. It is from this inner compulsion that he writes and it is a compulsion that is infectious yet repugnant, depending upon which side of the fence we place ourselves.

NOTES

1. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, *Hitler, voulait l'Afrique* (Paris, 1980)
2. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, "Presentation of Plays" (mimeograph, Lyon, April 1976) p.2.
3. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, *Kafra Biatanga*, translated from German into French by Ivette Revelin (Honfleur, 1971)
4. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, *Nouvelle Interdites* (Lyon, 1978)
5. Jean Pierre Ghondé, *L'Ivrogne aux cieus* (MS, 1980), première, Yaounde University, 14 May 1980.
6. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, 'Cabral, mon frère' in *Afrique Asie*, 19 February 1973.
7. Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe, personal correspondence with present writer, Lyon, 9 April 1979.
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