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0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

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Theatre Matters

Performance and Culture on the World Stage

Theatre, in a variety of forms and contexts, can make, and indeed has made, positive political and social interventions in a range of developing cultures across the world. In this book a distinguished team of theatre historians, practitioners and dramatists explores how theatre has a dynamic and often difficult relationship with societies and states, arguing positively that theatrical activity can make a difference.

The collection begins with a foreword by Wole Soyinka and, through the volume, specially chosen plays, projects and movements are examined, embracing a variety of theatrical forms from conventional text to on-site developmental work. The communities addressed range from the national to the local, from middle-class elites to the economically dispossessed in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, Nigeria, Eritrea and South Africa, and India and the Caribbean countries.

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RICHARD BOON is the Deputy Director of the Workshop Theatre at the University of Leeds, UK, and the Course Director of the MA in Theatre Studies founded by Martin Banham in 1969. His teaching and research interests lie primarily in political theatre of all kinds, in directing for the stage and in multi-cultural theatre. He is author of *Brenton the Playwright* and of a number of articles, mainly in the area of political theatre in Britain.

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FEMI OSOFISAN is Professor of Drama at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and a prolific playwright whose fame is second only to that of Wole Soyinka in their home country. He writes pungently political theatre from a broadly Marxist point of view.

JANE PLASTOW is Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds, UK, where she teaches primarily in the areas of African theatre and gender in the theatre. She has worked on a variety of theatre projects in Africa since the 1980s, primarily in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and at present is closely

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involved in developing Eritrean theatre in the post-liberation period. She has written widely on emergent Eritrean theatre and is the author of *African Theatre and Politics*.

WOLE SOYINKA is a graduate of the University of Leeds, UK, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Playwright, poet, novelist, essayist and critic, he is generally recognised as Africa's greatest living playwright and one of the foremost writers of his generation. His most recent play is *The Beatification of Area Boy*.

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Foreword: A letter from Kingston

WOLE SOYINKA

Dear Martin

This comes to you from Kingston, Jamaica, which has been aptly described as a clone of Lagos, Nigeria, a city that you may remember! It would not surprise you therefore to learn that *The Beatification of Area Boy* is being reincarnated in these parts, but the ramifications will surely stretch your imagination. Since you were very much involved in bringing that play to Leeds, I thought you might like some news of its latest adventures, which are the result of an exchange programme between Emory University and the University of West Indies. Wedged in between the two, as initiator and facilitator for the specific undertaking, is a production company known simply as The Company Ltd. It is not a theatre company but a group of 'enthusiastic volunteers' who periodically organise theatre practitioners – mostly amateur and semi-professional – into a production. Yes, I think that is an accurate way of describing the process: just as in Nigeria, there is no full-time theatre professionalism in Jamaica.

It is a long haul from Leeds where you helped so generously to facilitate the production of *Beatification* by the West Yorkshire Playhouse, not forgetting the further assistance you rendered to one of the actors who could not return to Nigeria after the performances on account of his prominent role in the production. Kingston is much closer to the birthplace of *Beatification* than Leeds, and I had looked forward to making up for the disappointment of not having its premiere take place in Lagos, its true milieu.

Well, the wonder of it all! This is probably one of those rare instances when a play has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of an author even before rehearsals have begun. Does that sound like wishful

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thinking? Not when the sociology of an environment virtually begs for such a script, and there are committed artiste-citizens on the spot who see the possibilities, and resolve to exploit the coincidence in truly imaginative ways.

Kingston is a violent city. The nature of the violence in Kingston differs, however, from that of Lagos. Here, the area boys are the products of *garrisons* – as they are known locally – created and often maintained by politicians. The youths grow up in an atmosphere of mutual, predatory neighbourhood hostility. You do not stray from your own turf on to another – the result can be fatal. The politicians have apparently made it their life mission to maintain these bunker relations in their constituencies – for political control and sense of power even when out of power.

Each garrison – they go by such names as Barbican, Tel Aviv, Georgetown, Tivoli Gardens, Trenchtown, etc. – has its own schools, some have their own police, clinics and internal judicial system – or more accurately, means of dispensing justice, etc. The children grow up, attend school (or drop out), marry etc. within these garrisons, rarely into another. The zones are just suburban quarters, the same as you'll find in Lagos or any other city. They are defined by nothing more than the usual innocent-looking street, playground or neighbourhood shop – but you cross that demarcation strip at your own peril. Taking public transportation through other zones – as is unavoidable – means one thing only: don't descend at the wrong bus stop!

I should mention something also about the theatre where *Beatification* is scheduled to perform. We had a choice of a number of theatres, but the Ward Theatre, which is in the same contentious 'inner-city' category, happens to constitute a war-zone of its own. Remember the new – well, the seventies replacement for the old – Glover Hall in one of those Lagos side-streets that link Broad Street and Marina? It was a favourite stage for Orisun Theatre and the 1960 Masks whenever we performed in Lagos. And you will recall of course that parking your motor car to attend a show meant first 'seeing to' the area boys. If not, you might find your side-mirror missing on return, or your car sitting on wooden or cement blocks with one or two or all four wheels missing – or the entire car vanished into thin air! Of course we maintained an easy rapport with the area boys – it was mutual respect – and I don't

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recall any of our supporters undergoing such instructive experiences. Mind you, the 1960s were an immeasurably different climate from the Lagos of the 1980s till now – nowadays the thug is armed, waits for you to leave the theatre and then calmly demands your keys. He might also just shoot you for the fun of it – even after you have surrendered your keys!

It was a case of no contest – I settled for the Ward Theatre immediately we drove up to the building. It was as if I had been transported to Broad Street or Yaba, Lagos! Groundnut sellers, cigarette hawkers, rickety stalls with the usual knick-knacks were all on display, layabouts lolled on broken walls, tree stumps and pavements, in various stages of boredom and alert opportunism. Present and vacantly ambulatory was the mandatory quota of an indulged street lunatic or two . . . summatively, in short, an exterior of dust and noise and vitality but – an efficient sound-insulated interior. (I prefer productions without unscripted ‘noises off’.) The environment of Ward Theatre is unbelievably the environment of Glover Hall of the 1960 Masks/Orisun Theatre days – maybe just a touch more risk-laden. Here, if you want the uptown crowd at your production – and hardly any productions can make their way without that clientele – you first let your prospective audiences know that they can park their vehicles in a designated parking lot at a shopping mall, well-lit and policed, and that shuttle buses will be available to bring them to the Ward. Well, my production hosts – The Company Ltd – decided that they would break this tradition with *Beatification!* Involving the City Council and some business companies, they set out to clean up the Ward Theatre environment, engaged the locals in the exercise, and plans have been laid out for landscaping and general reclamation.

You will have surmised already that this will be a very different kind of animal from the West Yorkshire Playhouse production – for one thing, it is a community-theatre-project-within-a-community-project. The Company’s motivations for the production, plus the context, tallied neatly with what I had envisaged for Lagos, except of course that their goals went much further. It was an opportunity to break the ‘garrison mentality’ among youths, and this constituted the group’s primary goal. There was a formal launching of the ‘Area Boy Project’ in February – it was a most eloquent affair! Every aspect of Kingston civic

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life was present – the media, business firms, local councils, university, hotel management, politicians, tourism, social workers, the Minister of Culture and of course – representatives of the troubled inner city population – the area boys themselves. It was a new experience for me to listen to all these sectors articulate a *problem* in a situation where they had been brought together by an artistic project, one which, they felt, could provide the beginnings of a *solution*! Monetary and material pledges were made and, as I write, they are being fulfilled, and new ones made by others who have been following the project in the news. They call up the television station, the newspapers or The Company.

The first step of The Project was a talent-scout throughout the inner city. This was a bold device that took the project leaders into those fortified ghettos. There, they auditioned youths and then brought the successful ones together – seventy altogether! It was the first undertaking of their lives across zones, the first time they were able to see that their age-mates across the street did not hide devil's horns beneath their rastafarian locks, that there was not a gun lurking behind every lamp-post. Encouraged to narrate and reproduce their experiences for the stage, they – as is proved again and again in every corner of the world – revealed unsuspected creative talents in all directions. For eight weeks they rehearsed their own scripts under the guidance of the project leaders and had their first outing just two weeks ago, in the same Ward Theatre, in a show that was appropriately titled *Border Connections*. The enthusiastic response of the audience was amply deserved. They have since performed at various venues, mostly open air, including the Independence/Emancipation celebrations, weekend of 1 August 1997. Ah, the days of your Unibadan Traveling Theatre (and memories of Geoffrey Axworthy!), of Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo or Orisun Theatre at Mbari, in sports fields, marketplaces and expropriated courtyards!

Such was the initiative of these kids that they started their own newspaper – *The Area Boy News!* – an eight-page mimeographed edition with cartoons, Agony Column (quite witty), poetry, etc. which they sell to raise funds. At the early stages when funds were somewhat slow coming in, they undertook a walkathon on their own, raising 13,000 Jamaican dollars (about US \$450) for the project. Their enthusiasm obviously swept ordinary folk off their feet, the same energy and

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vitality that electrified the air when all seventy of them poured into the Ward Theatre stage from all sides of the auditorium to plunge into their opening number!

Eleven of the seventy had been selected for minor roles for the second stage of the project – the play itself; others are apprenticed to the technical department – design, set and costume building and lighting. You may recall that Orisun Theatre had its beginnings with just such a component of area boys, so you can imagine the weird sensation that their presence triggers off in me – back to the 1960s in my sixties! Their lives have been more violent, of course. One actor lost a brother in a shoot-out, and then his father was wounded, and is still invalided, in yet another. A girl (15) has been looking after both herself and her junior sister since they were abandoned by their parents when she was 11. The father gives her a small stipend which she ekes out with after-school jobs. Another girl lost an eye in circumstances that have probably traumatised her, since she tells a strange, improbable story of how it was supposed to have happened. She has refused medical aid, even examination, insisting that she is not really blind in the eye but that she has acquired a kind of special sight that enables her to see into the supernatural world! After rehearsals, some may find that they have to stay the night with friends because the passage home has become too hot! I had a drink in a bar in Barbican one late afternoon and learnt that a woman was shot later that evening – caught in a cross-fire – in front of that very bar.

Some of the company turn up late or do not turn up at all for rehearsals because the shifting war-zone made it unsafe at the time – indeed a strapping sixteen-year-old was locked up at home by his mother for three days: she was scared that his physical over-development would make him a target of enemy violence . . . and so on, and on. (Of course some of the company simply do not turn up, and then wonder why there should be any fuss!) For all of them, however, this is a break that they never envisaged in their wildest dreams. They are paid only their transport fare, though fed when attending rehearsals – courtesy of Kentucky Fried Chicken, one of the project sponsors. Some have already obtained short-spell scholarships to receive further training with dance company groups like Ashe. For their *Border Connections* they learnt how to design and make masks – each of the seventy made

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his or her own mask for one of the more sobering skits in the show – an indictment of the forces that use them as cannon fodder, blighting their childhood and lives. The greatest experience for all of them, however, has been to be able to do the impossible – go into the enemy camp, and perform to an enthusiastic audience.

Now, perhaps you will appreciate the extravagant claims I made at the beginning. *Beatification* itself has run into difficulties – professional theatre does not exist in Jamaica, alas!, and a professional *attitude* is a strange concept for many. Add to that the usual problem of funds and, well, after two weeks of rehearsals, we are not totally confident of the fate of this production. The strange feeling for me, however, is that this seems so secondary, almost trivial, given the transformation the project has wrought in the lives of these garrison kids, and the possible – just possible – re-thinking it may begin to provoke in the minds of the politicians. How they will undo the evil they have done to these young lives, I do not know, and certainly *Beatification* is not the magic wand whose wave will achieve the miracle – those power-blinded men are a long, long way from beatification. The *potential* social implications are, however, far-reaching, and the level of identification and commitment of these young reformers is often startling. Can you imagine what it means to listen to a thirteen-year-old girl from the garrison declare, with a laugh that had just a hint of menace: ‘*Anyone who wants to remove me from this project had better start looking for a tractor?*’ She was referring to her father who had come once or twice to express misgivings about her participation.

Several of them have narrated their lives on video, assessing the impact that the Area Boy project has already made on them in its brief existence, quite apart from unlocking their creative assets. For both sociologists (and psychologists) as well as theatre practitioners they provide some remarkable insights into the actual operations of theatre on the human personality. A few titles of the sketches and songs will give you an idea of the main thrust of their performance, and explain why one of the younger project supervisors voiced a fear that the movement would not last, because ‘the politicians will kill it’: *Youth Oppressed; How we come to Dis; Mi Son Dead; Mi Hungry, Mi Angry; Skeletal Dance; Isn’t There another Way! Put Down de Gun; Look ina Yu’self* etc. That last item is indicative of their refreshing

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impulse to self-criticism, in addition to the robust indictment of the negative forces in their lives – social marginalisation, political manipulation and violence as sung, danced and mimed in other items such as *Youth Oppressed; Mi Hungry, Mi Angry* etc. Let me emphasise again that all the sketches, songs and thematic outlines are provided by these youths themselves. All their advisers do is provide the aesthetic structure and rehearse them, as well as minister to their logistical needs.

That young supervisor's fears will prove unfounded, I am convinced, the politics of Jamaica being very different from the politics of Nigeria, even in the less malevolent (in hindsight) sixties. And the message of the youths can by no stretch of the imagination be interpreted as partisan. So I do not see the Area Boys Crew training backstage in the use of fire extinguishers, etc. for self-defence, as became the norm for Orisun Theatre at the height of the sixties' political madness!

Well, that is the state of play for now. I cannot think of a more appropriate experience to share with you on this occasion of your *festschrift*, given its overall theme. Repression takes many forms, some quite subtle, and the tools of resistance must adapt to its every manifestation, which is nearly always unique. Hopefully, the foregoing will provoke pleasant memories of the work you were involved in during your stint in Nigeria with the university equivalents of the area boys – 'same difference' really, most of the time, I am sure you'll agree.

A footnote – I cannot resist it – provoked by one of these same politician types who try to prove that they are not illiterate, but are indeed up-to-date on contemporary trendiness. Having had my fill of it in the United States, I was confident that, in Lagosian Kingston, I had escaped, for a while at least, the rampaging beast of Political Correctness. I was due for a shock. After the Emancipation Day performance by the Area Boys Crew – as they style themselves – a lady something from the Town Council's cultural division got up to make a speech that was supposed to be a vote of thanks for the various performing groups. She spent most of her time on *Border Connections* – but not on the performance. No, her recriminations were reserved for the hapless organisers and their choice of name for the project. Why 'Area Boy'? she demanded. Why was the opposite sex ignored? She launched into a public tirade against what she regarded as its overt sexism, totally forgetting even to commend the kids – boys or girls – for their performance.

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The pall of Political Correctness was cast over what, until then, had been very simply a festive and thought-provoking outing at a national occasion.

Of course this political functionnaire was fully aware of the origination of the project, had had more than ample opportunities to speak to the project leaders whom she knew personally, and with whom she frequently interacted. That course was far too rational. Where would Political Correctness be without grandstanding? What she would have learnt, had she opted for that course, was that most of the running of the group was done by democratic decisions. The project leaders had in fact made the suggestion to the group that they might want to consider a different title for themselves – ‘Area Kids’, ‘Area Youths’ or whatever. The boys had no objection, it was the girls who vociferously rejected any change in the name. They wanted to be known by the title of W.S.’s play and nothing else. T-Shirts, stickers, brooches (bearing their individual names), all donated by supporting firms – everything must be ‘Area Boy’, including even the name of the club which, again on their own, they have formed, and to which they have elected their own officers.

Who did that politician/civil servant instantly remind me of? That schoolteacher in your part of the world (somewhere near London, I recall) who denied her pupils the opportunity to attend a ballet based on *Romeo and Juliet* because she considered Shakespeare’s treatment of heterosexual love stereotyped and politically incorrect! In the implacable war against the imbecilities of Political Correctness, do let the forces of creative rationality – theatre regiment – know that we have a volunteer army in Kingston, Jamaica, ready to take on demented schoolteachers and other p.c. philistines at a moment’s notice!

Wole Soyinka

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Preface

The origins of this book lie in the determination of its editors and their colleagues to mark the retirement in 1998 of Martin Banham as Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies and Director of The Workshop Theatre at the University of Leeds.

A *festschrift* was an obvious way of allowing some, at least, of Martin's many friends and colleagues the opportunity of honouring his achievement as teacher, scholar and academic. What was less immediately clear was the precise form such a book might take. It is a testament to the breadth of Martin's interests and expertise that this collection of essays could quite easily have concerned itself with the history of British theatre, or with Shakespeare, or Victorian melodrama (especially or even only Tom Taylor!); with designing for the stage, or with part or the whole of that great range of educational and developmental uses to which drama and the theatre have been put. All would have been both appropriate and legitimate. In reality, however, our choice of subject was a simple one. Since he began his academic career in the 1950s at the University of Ibadan (a time fondly recollected by Wole Soyinka in his Foreword), a large part of Martin's heart has belonged to the theatre of Nigeria. Indeed, the importance of his influence on the creation of the modern theatre of that troubled country has long been recognised. (Only recently, Martin was greatly embarrassed, on meeting a young theatre director who had just returned from a visit to West Africa, to be greeted by 'Martin Banham? You're a legend!'.) Prompted, no doubt, by the extraordinarily rich and diverse theatrical culture of West Africa, Martin's interests grew quickly to embrace the theatres of Africa generally, and these interests have remained very much at the centre of his teaching and research ever since. The

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contributions made to this volume by Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ian Steadman, and Jane Plastow and Solomon Tsehaye go some way, we hope, to recognising and reflecting what has been a genuine and lifelong passion. The other essays found here, dealing with theatres and theatrical activity in the Caribbean, in North and South America, in India and in Britain, similarly seek to acknowledge not only Martin's belief in the social power of theatre, but his continuing fascination with performance of all kinds in a variety of cultural contexts. It is the persistent strength of that fascination which lies behind and accounts for two of his greatest achievements.

On his return to Britain in the late 1960s, Martin established The Workshop Theatre at the University of Leeds, and went on, in 1969, to create with Trevor Faulkner what was the first (and remains the longest-established) MA in Theatre Studies in the country; although the title would doubtless cause him some embarrassment, it remains true that he is one of the 'founding fathers' of theatre studies as an academic discipline in British universities. From the beginning (and long before it became financially expedient to do so), the MA was committed to recruiting students from around the world, and to exposing them to and challenging them with a rich diversity of multicultural theatrical practice. African students were always a theme, especially students from West Africa, from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon and Sierra Leone; but Kenyans, Tanzanians and Ugandans also featured, as did Americans, Syrians, Iranians, Chinese, Japanese, Australians, Koreans, Canadians, Turks, Lebanese, Brazilians, Indians . . . as well as most varieties of European, including, of course, Britons. Many have gone on to achieve distinction as academics or practitioners (Martin has always resisted conventional distinctions between the two), their numbers swelled by the many research students whom he has supervised. One of the latter, Father Jacob Srampickal, makes his own contribution to this book. Whether student or supervisee, all, we may say without hesitation, would acknowledge the magnitude of the debt owed to Martin, as would students of the BA programme in English Literature and Theatre Studies inaugurated under his leadership in 1989.

In his editorship of the *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Martin was able to draw on his expertise as an Africanist, his experience as a teacher of students from many cultures, his own professional travels

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(often under the auspices of the British Council) and an international network of colleagues and friends in the academy and 'the profession' to create a unique, fascinating and endlessly informative scholarly reference work. Whilst he would be the first to acknowledge the collaborative nature of the enterprise, and the huge contributions made by Sarah Stanton and others at Cambridge University Press, by the Editorial Advisory Board (two of whom, Christopher Innes and George Woodyard, appear here), and by a host of contributors, it is hard to imagine anyone else who would have possessed the breadth of knowledge and experience, the wisdom and the patience, necessary to give birth to so monumental an undertaking. Moreover, although he appears himself as contributor only sparingly, his *imprimatur* is felt everywhere within the book. In the space of twenty pages are to be found entries not only on Stanislavsky, Stein and stage lighting, but on Sri Lanka, stage food and 'Stainless Stephen' (a music-hall comedian and childhood hero). In its ambition, the richness and range of its variety, the rigour of its scholarship, its occasional flashes of wit and general lightness of touch (the last two qualities fast disappearing from the contemporary academic scene), the book stands as clear testament to the character of its editor.

These were qualities which we wished to celebrate in our *festschrift*. Our initial approach to the Press was greeted with warm support, but it was also made clear, quite properly, that any book could not 'only' be a *festschrift*, but must also stand on its own as a serious contribution to theatre scholarship. We hope and believe that we have achieved that, not least because anything else would be a grave disservice to Martin's achievement. Our punning title, with its implications of the positive, the optimistic and the up-beat, attempts to mirror in our own (perhaps rather unfashionable) argument – that theatre can and does 'make a difference' to the societies and cultures of which it is part – something of the character and career of the man we seek to honour, for whom theatre has always 'mattered'.

Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

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