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African Theatre Contemporary Women



African Theatre

14

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Martin Banham, James Gibbs,
Yvette Hutchison, Femi Osofisan
& Jane Plastow

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Martin Banham
4 Oakwood Gardens, Leeds LS2 2JE, UK

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Christine Matzke
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Editorial address

African Theatre, c/o Jane Plastow, Workshop Theatre, School of English,
University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK • j.e.plastow@leeds.ac.uk

Books for review & review material to:

Professor Martin Banham, Reviews Editor, *African Theatre*,
4 Oakwood Gardens, Leeds LS2 2JE, UK
martinbanham@btinternet.com

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Contemporary Women

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Jane Plastow & Yvette Hutchison

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Notes on Contributors

Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria. She was educated in Nigeria, England (where she qualified as a chartered accountant) and the United States (where she qualified as a CPA). Atta's recent theatre credits include *An Ordinary Legacy*, which premiered at the MUSON Festival, Lagos, in 2012; *The Naming Ceremony*, which premiered at Theatre Royal Stratford East, London, in 2012; *The Cost of Living*, which was commissioned for the Lagos Black Heritage Festival in 2011; and *Hagel auf Zamfara*, which premiered at the Theater Krefeld/Mönchengladbach, Germany, in 2011. She is also the author of the novels *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), *Swallow* (2010) and *A Bit of Difference* (2013) and a short story collection *News from Home* (2010). She received the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa in 2006 and the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 2009.

Marvin Carlson is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has received an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens, the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the ASTR Distinguished Scholarship Award, the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism and the Calloway Prize for writing in theatre. He is the author of twenty-two books on theatre studies.

Nicola Cloete is a lecturer in the History of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is currently completing her PhD thesis, which examines the memory politics in representations of slavery in post-Apartheid South Africa. She is the recipient of a Harvard South Africa Fellowship for 2011 where she conducted research on feminist methodologies and memory politics. Cloete's research areas include slavery in South Africa, gender studies, memory studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, visual studies and post-colonialism. Cloete currently teaches undergraduate courses in film, visual and performing arts, and postgraduate courses in postcolonial theory, feminism and visual culture.

Lebogang Disele is a lecturer at the University of Botswana. She holds a BA Degree in Film and Media Production [Radio] and a BA Honours Degree [Drama] from the University of Cape Town as well as a Master's of Arts in Dramatic Arts (MADA) from Wits University. This article is drawn from a research project which sought to interrogate and shift representations of black women in Botswana through theatre. Lebogang Disele is interested in work that explores issues of marginalization, discrimination, prejudice and oppression, especially in relation to gender.

Yvette Hutchison is a reader in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on anglophone African theatre and history, and how narratives of memory inform individual and collective efficacy and advocacy. She is currently considering the ways in which ethnographic images and narratives of the colonial period are being renegotiated in and through contemporary performance; and exploring how a mobile application for feature phones can support a network of contemporary African women artists and researchers in exploring their work in relation to everyday lived experiences, and the development of new methodologies related to gender studies.

Susan Kiguli is a poet and academic. She is currently head of the Department of Literature at Makerere University in Uganda. Her best known volume of poetry is the award winning *The African Saga* (1998). Her work, in both English and Kiganda, has been published in many international anthologies and journals, and she has been invited to give poetry readings worldwide. She also writes academically on oral culture, poetry and song in southern and eastern Africa.

Alude Mahali is a post-doctoral fellow and research specialist in the Human and Social Development Program, Human Science Research Council, SA. She holds a PhD in Performance/Cultural Studies from the University of Cape Town, and has taught most recently at the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica. She has published several book chapters on her research interests, which include identity, performing blackness and memory, language, sexuality, family and youth empowerment.

Sara Matchett is a senior lecturer in the Department of Drama at the University of Cape Town. She is the co-director of The Mothertongue Project and is also an Associate Teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework®. Her Teaching profile centres around voice, acting, theatre-making, applied drama/theatre, and performance analysis. She is interested in integral approaches to performance making. Her area of research investigates the soma as a site for generating images for performance making, with specific focus on breath as catalyst.

Christine Matzke teaches English and African literature at the University of Bayreuth. Recent publications include chapters on *Hamlet* in Africa (2014) and a South Sudanese *Cymbeline* (2013), and she co-edited *Life is a Thriller: Investigating African Crime Fiction* (2012) (with Anja Oed). She specializes in theatre and performance in Eritrea.

Jane Plastow is Professor of African Theatre at the University of Leeds. She writes widely on African theatre and Theatre for Development, and has worked in many nations in the Horn and East of Africa. She is currently working on a book on the history of East African theatre, and on a theatre project looking at environmental concerns with the people of Walukuba, a working-class area of the town of Jinja in Uganda.

Sandra L. Richards is Professor in Residence and Director of the Liberal Arts programme at Northwestern University in Qatar. She is also Professor of African American Studies, Theater and Performance Studies at Northwestern's home campus in Evanston, IL. She specializes in African American, African, and African diaspora theatre and drama, having authored *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze: The Theatre of Femi Osofisan* and numerous articles on black dramatists. Richards is co-editor of the forthcoming *MLA Handbook of Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*.

Vicensia Shule is a scholar at the Department of Fine and Performing Arts, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Her areas of research and consultancy include film and theatre analysis, production, distribution and exhibition in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa. She has also worked as an independent producer/director for theatre, video, radio and television productions.

Mahlet Solomon is an assistant lecturer in the Theatre Arts Department of Addis Ababa University. She has published on the early history of Ethiopian theatre and is interested in issues of disability, women's rights and Ethiopian culture.

Ariane Zaytzeff is a theatre artist and a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. She is writing a dissertation on the role of the performing arts in the transmission and transformation of cultural memory in Rwanda.

Editors' Foreword: Women on the Front Line

JANE PLASTOW, YVETTE HUTCHISON
& CHRISTINE MATZKE

It is thirteen years since the *African Theatre* series published its previous volume discussing the role of women in the performance cultures of the continent, where it became, and remained, the best selling volume in the series. There is an undoubted hunger amongst scholars, not only of theatre, but more widely of African culture and of African women's studies, to know more about women's contributions to the dramatic arts, and it is a hunger which the editors think remains to be satisfied. We therefore decided to produce a volume looking specifically at women working in the twenty-first century, soliciting articles from as wide a range of perspectives – and countries – as we could find.

Women's contributions remain obscured in many discussions of African theatre. While thousands of women work in the industry, and some, for example Penina Mlamba and Amandina Lihamba in Tanzania, and Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme of Nigeria, have won national fame, relatively few have achieved an international profile. This is partly because in many places theatre is performed in local languages, uses local theatrical idioms, and speaks to local concerns, so that someone like Elizabeth Melaku (discussed below in our article on Ethiopian actresses) who is a huge national star of stage and screen in Ethiopia, is utterly unknown to the non-Amharic speaking world. However, the issue of localism is not, of course, gender specific. So the question remains: why, while at least a small number of African men have become regular subjects of scholarship, is it still extremely hard to find out about the work of contemporary African women theatre artists?

On reading the articles in this volume it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that sexist inequalities, in a range of forms, have much to do with the matter. Actress, director and playwright Dalia Basiouny discusses the huge problems she experienced from a jealous, obstructive husband in developing her career; the essential context of the intergenerational women's theatre discussed by Kiguli and Plastow was that the Ugandan government and Buganda society at domestic and state levels discriminate against women's

rights; and Sefi Atta's play, *The Sentence*, explicitly discusses the predicament of an underprivileged northern Nigerian woman faced with the 'justice' of an extreme interpretation of shari'a law. It is also important to consider that many of our writers and subjects have had to contend with an internalization of the idea that as women they should not put themselves forward for 'leadership' positions. Time and again we see women 'daring', with few role models, either to use theatre to launch discussion of their position and oppression in society (see Lebosang in Botswana and Matchett and Cloete in South Africa), or simply 'daring' to take on the role of actress, director or playwright in situations where this is seen as presumptuous or improper.

As Sandra Richards states at the end of her contextualizing article on this volume, much remains to be discussed. Questions of audience reception for much of the ground-breaking work discussed below demand further exploration. She also raises the important issue of how, going forward, we should begin properly to profile and analyse the changing place of women in African theatre within theatre scholarship, both on the continent and internationally, taking into account questions of access, of specificity *versus* general points one might reasonably make, and what theorization might be relevant and useful to the field.

In our editorial discussions about framing this volume, we kept coming back to the idea of 'writing from the front line'. All the articles below are either by or about women putting themselves at some professional risk to try out ideas, roles and dreams which they see as vitally important. Some of these 'risks' are specifically related to challenging gendered inequality, while some involve engaging with broader national discourses, and some concern experimental processes and form. A number of our writers are also 'risking' writing for an international academic journal. Lebogang Disele is a new theatre maker and writer; Mahlet Solomon is a young academic; and for most of them, trying to position either their own work or that of those they write about in the contexts of theatre scholarship, African theatre, and the areas of women's and gender studies, is an experiment. We hope we are facilitating the process of raising the profile of women in African theatre today, and developing relevant scholarship for others to build on. And of course we trust you will find this volume as informative, intriguing and provocative as we have found the process of putting it together.

Postscript – In a practical attempt to create a platform through which African women artists can easily profile themselves and their work through mobile phone technology and engage in forum discussions with one another, researchers and any interested parties, Amy Jephta and Yvette Hutchison have launched the *African Women Playwrights' Network*, with which you can engage these women on the frontline at awpn.org.

Introduction: Citizen & Artist African women making theatre

SANDRA L. RICHARDS

Jalila Baccar of Tunisia once characterized herself as a ‘citizen actress’ (Carlson). That term could be equally extended to all the women featured in this volume of *African Theatre*, for whether working as a member of a women’s troupe, a solo performer, director or playwright, these women practise art as a means of imagining a world of greater possibilities for themselves and their communities. Editors Yvette Hutchison, Christine Matzke and Jane Plastow are to be commended for presenting a wide survey of work that might otherwise have gone unnoticed because, to varying degrees, these citizen artists are focused on speaking about women’s concerns first and foremost to their local communities, and are typically not included in high profile festival venues (such as Grahamstown or Edinburgh) where they might gain international press coverage and scholarly recognition. Readers will encounter: accounts of women’s performance troupes in Uganda and Tanzania; a description of a mixed-gender, multi-media physical theatre production in Botswana; histories of female performers and directors in Ethiopia, Tunisia, Egypt and Rwanda; reflection on the relationship between online activism and a Cape Town performance event that drew inspiration from India; and a play about the imposition of shari’a law in northern Nigeria.

Experiences of gender-based violence, discrimination and disregard for women’s lives and knowledge resonate across national and linguistic borders. Indeed, as is evident in Sara Matchett and Nicola Cloete’s article on online activism, inspired in part by Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* and a horrific rape and murder in India in 2012, knowledge of these experiences circulates globally. I want to suggest two large categories or umbrellas

under which readers might consider the ten essays gathered here: accounts of performance-making targeted at local audiences in particular, and those that also engage large national issues but deploy an aesthetic vocabulary and linguistic register which render them more accessible to outsiders.

Susan Kiguli and Jane Plastow's report on a Ugandan intergenerational women's theatre is an example of a project targeted at local audiences. Participants capitalized on traditional skills of poetry-song creation to fashion narratives that would compellingly link women's personal and collective experiences. Unlike other Theatre for Development (TfD) projects, this one offered viewers multiple perspectives in probing, for example, tensions between being a good, family-centered Bugandan woman and having 'modern' opportunities, goods or experiences. Most important for project participants, and also for audience members, was the sharing of knowledge concerning the lives of older women, a topic more often left in respectful silence in this hierarchical society. Vincensia Shule offers an interesting account of Tanzanian women's involvement in the arts, a subject that has received virtually no scholarly attention. Founded in 2005, Binti Leo initially brought together women from the performing arts but later extended its membership to include women practitioners in all art forms. One of its most notable successes was Amandina Lihamba's production of *Nkhomanile* (2006), a play that re-writes Tanzanian history to argue for the critical role of women in the *maji maji* wars against German colonial rule. But as Shule notes in closing, because Binti Leo is a membership organization, many women struggle to pay membership fees, and the post 9/11 shift to security issues by international NGOs has adversely affected the group's advocacy abilities.

Jane Plastow and Mahlet Solomon's interviews with six Ethiopian actresses, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty-eight, capture what appears to be an intriguing contradiction between societal constraints surrounding women performers and their love of theatre. Although Ethiopia has the longest history of state-supported theatre on the continent, women have appeared on stage only since the 1950s. Gaining training through informal clubs or in university classrooms, women face an array of hostile forces rooted in a patriarchal culture and the continuing influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. While some gain public recognition, a mismatch between their celebrity status and low wages leaves them vulnerable to harassment, for example when they take public taxis home after night-time performances. Against such odds, why do these women perform? 'Respect' and 'love' are words that recur in the interviews: the respect that they earn from audiences, coupled with their love of the creativity that performance allows them.

Pleasure also explains why the women of Ingoma Nshya perform, although prior to their establishment in 2004 only men drummed in Rwanda. The group was established by playwright, director and musician Odile Gakere Katese, who as the first recipient of the League of Professional

Theatre Women's Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award is exemplary of those women whose work speaks beyond the nation and region. Having grown up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and then returned to Rwanda, Katese had to learn Rwandese culture as an adult, a circumstance she considers a gift, because it enables her to re-invent cultural practices with what interviewer Ariane Zaytzeff characterizes as a 'critical care and curiosity', which those who lived through the genocide seem unable to do. Interestingly, although Rwandese audiences accepted these women drummers fairly easily because of their disciplined artistry, state bureaucrats have complained that Katese is perverting Rwandese culture by inviting foreigners from other African nations to teach and collaborate.

Of all the artists featured in this issue, Lebogang Disele is the only one to involve men in her project to challenge media representations of black women. Her 2012 devised piece *Un/Skin Me* took the form of an art gallery installation in a high school's black box theatre. Much like the Ugandan women who started with their personal stories, these Botswana performers used Grotowskian techniques related to the 'heightened self' to produce a physical theatre piece that constantly shifted in response to audience members who moved through the installation. Although Disele theoretically grounds her claims about using a black box space as a multi-modal site of response (as one would expect in a master's thesis) she says nothing about whom the performance, through its mode of presentation and venue, attracted, or how audiences in fact responded.

Dalia Basiouny of Egypt offers an account that is both a personal biography of her experiences as a director, playwright and academic and a history of Egyptian theatre over the last three decades. Seeking to carve out a career as an independent artist challenging the staid offerings by state-run theatres, Basiouny found herself increasingly responding to political events around her, such that she abandoned rehearsals for a women-oriented play (*Solitaire*) to join protestors in Tahrir Square. Their stories became *Tahrir Stories*, performed first in February 2011. Later, declaring 'I am a citizen first and an artist second', she used a commission from the American Cultural Center in Cairo to create a critical piece that had to carefully navigate the government crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs. Responding to the narrowing space of freedom that the military regime permitted, Basiouny performs the Revolution's rallying cry of 'Bread! Freedom! Social Justice!' by participating in community baking projects.

Marvin Carlson presents a fascinating portrait of actress-playwright Jalila Baccar of Tunisia, who with her husband, Fahdel Jaibi, heads the private, professional company Familia, founded in 1993. Until 2001 they were largely able to confront sociopolitical issues while escaping censorship, even though theatre was the only cultural form that the government censored. But her 2006 *Khamsoun*, commissioned to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of independence, tackled questions of religious fundamentalism, profiteering and power struggles, making her a target of the National Review Board.