



STUDIES IN  
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# Studies in Theatre and Performance

## Volume 26 Number 1

*Studies in Theatre and Performance* is the official publication of the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments in the UK. It incorporates *Studies in Theatre Production*, which had been a leading forum for the analysis of theatrical practice, processes and performance for a decade.

The journal is now published three times a year. We encourage the submission of articles which are not only descriptive of practical research, but which delineate the ongoing analysis that formed a part of that research. Articles may also describe and analyse research undertaken into performance pedagogy. They are particularly welcome when all this is related to broader theoretical or professional issues.

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# Reviews

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***A History of Theatre in Africa*, Martin Banham (ed.), (2004)**  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 495 pp., ISBN  
0521808138, (hbk), £80.00

In attempting an edited volume of a composite history of the theatre and its multifarious forms in Africa, Martin Banham, with his team of researchers, has ably attempted the equivalent of what the eminent Nigerian historian, Adiele Afigbo once described as the making of ropes from quicksand. As Banham himself admits, 'To attempt a history of theatre in Africa is a daunting task' (p. xv). Attempts at cultural or geographical definitions of Africa, not to think of what etymologically constitutes theatre on the African subsoil, are themselves mind-boggling phenomena. For these reasons alone, a short review of this encyclopaedic work cannot do justice to the epoch-making book. I must warn that the editor has cleverly avoided further complications by not saying that he is presenting a history of the stage in Africa but a history of the theatre. That, undoubtedly, would bring a culturally biased distinction to the study.

The book is a nuanced, polyphonic and sensitive presentation, which recognizes that theatre or performance is first and foremost an extension of language and communication, and therefore an index of cultural value. Language and performance are intricately linked with the routine and chores of daily life. Expressed more formally in the words of May Joseph, theatre is the ritual performance of citizenship. It abides in greetings, socializing, lullaby, birth, marriage, storytelling, negotiation and death. This book takes into consideration post-colonialism and hybridity. This is why, I believe, Kole Omotoso in the opening chapter negotiates the matter of language and polyphony thus:

This is not to say that there are no African plays written and performed in French, English and Portuguese. The point is that these do not exhaust the totality of theatre writing and performance in all parts of Africa. It is necessary to search and locate the bulk of the theatre and performance that exists in African languages.

(p. 5)

The only exception is in those parts of Africa with dominant Arab and Islamic cultures because Arabs do not have elaborate religious rituals and theatrical performances indigenous to the culture. The contributions of

Ahmed Zaki, Kamal Salhi, Khalid Mustafa and Kole Omotoso clearly reiterate this point. However, Omotoso's brilliant and perceptive paper does not resolve the issue of the post-tribal, post-colonial or neo-colonial state. It will be necessary to conflate his views with those that have been addressed in the context of 'Colonialism and the two publics in Africa' by Peter Ekeh three decades ago.

The very extensive contributions by John Conteh-Morgan on the 'Francophonie' and the one by Yvette Hutchison on South Africa help to focus on the concept of the multi-generic form in terms of theatrical content and historical panoply based on the overlapping experiences of social groupings and nationalities. Conteh-Morgan observes, there is a 'porous nature of generic boundaries in African performance forms' (p. 88) just as Hutchison echoes Kruger that performance in South Africa is 'Not essentially European or African; rather it takes place between and within practices, forms and institutions variously and contentiously associated with Europe, Africa, America and ... African America' (p. 313).

This concept of the multi-generic in terms of the content, form and historical circumstances has become the reference point in a work that genuinely attempts to see Africa as a whirlpool of creative expressions that combine space, time and memory in a way that often baffles the modern imagination. In African drama, legends become history, which in turn echoes pristine ritual and archaism within the same breath in a way that is otherwise impossible in other epistemologies.

The structural pattern in the work is such that contributions in Chapters 1, 3, 5 and 7 are used as templates for those of 2, 4, 6, 8, 9 and 10. For instance, Omotoso's contribution reflects those of Adelugba, Obafemi, Adeyemi, Gibbs, Sheriff and Kilo whilst those of Kerr, Chifuyinse and Hutchison tend to converge. Equally, those of Plastow, Chesaina, Mwangi, Lihamba and Breitingner help to illuminate those of the literary and linguistic minorities as described by Luis Mitras, Roshni Mooneeran and that fragile link by Okagbue. There appears also a certain conceptual unity, a tight interiority in the performance types. The sub-genres reflect and echo each other as to suggest a cultural unity. For instance the discussion of Sudanese dramas by Khalid Mustafa reflects performances from west and southern Africa. His discussions of *Zar* performances in skit and costume formation are exactly like those of the Yoruba *Alarinjo*; the trance and mediumistic sequences of women are like those of the Hausa *Bori*. His description of the Azande 'stylized invective' is similar to 'joking relationships' in Zambia and Zimbabwe as exemplified in Kalela Dances. The same applies to John Conteh-Morgan's description of the art of the troubadour among the Wolof of Senegal. It not only symmetrically reflects the invective of the Azande and the Kalela; it also echoes the *Alarinjo* mummer of the Yoruba. In conclusion, the contributions are rich in cultural spread and historical diversity. The book is, in fact, a reference book for the study of theatre in Africa.

*Reviewed by Professor Dele Layiwola*

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