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## Changing Spectres: Interweaving Loops in Kenyan Theatre

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### Abstract

Theatre critics have proclaimed the death of serious theatre on the stages of Kenya, arguing that all that could be seen are slapstick comedies which cannot survive beyond stage performance. Theatre and art in general is not static; it feeds on the changing needs of humans that produce and consume it. An analysis of the different facets of Theatre in Kenya since 1960 revealed that there is indeed a weaving loop which sustains the interest in theatre, although these genres mutate with changes in socio-economic and political realities of both the producers and the consumers. Noting that there are several milestones that could be used to determine the development of theatre, it is observed that this development, far from being linear, is multidirectional and multi-generic so that theatre could grow out of oral narrative as it has been the tradition as well as comedies off-shooting from day to day life engagements. This article, however, conclusively argues that the concept of intermediality is slowly catching up in the Kenyan theatre and this has blinded many critics into thinking that theatre is dying when in actual sense it is simply fusing itself with other genres/media to come up with other forms of performance.

**Keywords:** alternative theatre, intermediality, Kenya, national theatre, spectres



## 1.0 Introduction

Newspapers reviews and theatre critics have proclaimed the death of serious theatre on the stages of Kenya. Arguing that all that can be seen are slapstick comedies that cannot survive beyond the stage they are performed on, the critics have lamented that long gone are the days when the National Theatre was a respected institution in which Theatre worth artistic merit was brewed and performed. They also point to the fact that most of the other theatre avenues like, 'The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival' are no longer producing publishable plays since they cannot be sustained beyond the Festival. They further point an accusing finger at the lack of radio plays; an avenue that nurtured many theatre practitioners of the older generation. In contradistinction, I argue in this article that what we are witnessing is simply an evolving phenomenon. Theatre and art in general is not static; it feeds on the changing needs of humans that produce and consume it. An analysis of the different facets of Theatre in Kenya since the 1960 will reveal that there is indeed a weaving loop which sustains the interest in theatre although these genres mutate with changes in socio-economic and political realities of both the producers and the consumers. Noting that there are several milestones that we can use to determine the development of theatre, I observe that this development, far from being linear, is multidirectional and multi-generic so that we have witnessed theatre growing out of oral narrative tradition as well as comedies off-shooting from day to day life engagements. Furthermore theatre has been decentred from just the National theatre and other traditionally acclaimed theatre Halls to schools, churches, bars and even market places through the little village and town travelling theatres that perform school set-books as well as for corporate entities. Lastly I propose to argue that the concept of intermediality is slowly catching up in the Kenyan theatre and this has blinded many critics into thinking that theatre is dying when in actual sense it is simply fusing itself with other genres/media to come up with other forms of performance.

## 2.0 Mainstream theatre

Discourses on theatre in the post-colonial Kenya have tended to be span around two larger threads; the mainstream and the alternate. The mainstream is the most obvious; the one that declares that after political independence theatre in Kenya was still in the claws of the minority white British expatriate community and the African community had to wrestle it from them. This thread contends that the Kenya National Theatre and the Kenya Schools Festival were the two arenas of a contest that only abated with the installation of Africans as chiefs of the two institutions. The entry *Theatre and Performance* by Evan Mwangi in the *Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945* hints to the birth and tag of war for the Kenya National Theatre. Mwangi (2007) writes that

the KNT was built by the colonial government to serve as a hub of theatre activities and that the history of Kenyan theatre is tightly woven around this institution. In spite of the funding coming from the government grants and from Nairobi City Council, he notes that there was a feeling that the institution did not serve the interests of majority of Kenyans since the colonial structures were still in place and favoured European tastes even after independence. The National theatre was located in what was mainly a European rich end of Nairobi, it was led by Europeans and one had to pay high performance fees that African artists or even theatre goers could not afford. Thus then much of the 1960 and 1970s are considered years of the struggle to Africanise Kenyan theatre. The apex of this africanization came in the 70s when Seth Adagala was appointed the head of the Kenya National Theatre.

In the same book, Mwangi (2007, p.166) also notes that the Kenya Schools Drama Festival was established by British Council in collaboration with East African Theatre Guild, another expatriate outfit to serve the interests of schools under the white expatriate control. And after independence this minority group continued to exercise control of the schools drama festival until 1979 when Wasambo Were was appointed the first black organizing secretary of the festival. In between there was what Oyekan Owomoyela (1993) calls 'the Creative revolt of the Kenya playwrights, theatre actors and directors of the 70s' that involved a display of vibrant dramatic creativity in a variety of communication media including radio, and theatre. (p.156.) High school and University students wrote and produced plays in Swahili, vernacular and also English. With this explosion of theatrical energy rose names like F.D Imbuga, Micere Mugo, Kenneth Watene, Waigwa Wachira, David Mulwa, Seth Adagala, and Tirus Gathwe among others. (Mwangi, 2007, p.156.) These artists went on to sustain the mainstream theatre for many years thereafter. At the head of this creative revolt was Ngugi wa Thiong'o who wrote and produced *The Black Hermit* in 1968 and went on to collaborate with other writers in scripting the experimental plays that came from the Kamiirithu Centre i.e. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *I will Marry when I want* and the unpublished *Mother Sing for Me*. (Mwangi, in Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, p.156)

The mainstream thread showers immense laudation to these activities at the Kamiirithu Cultural and Educational Centre as a key plank on the raft of Kenyan theatre hence making Ngugi virtually the foremost celebrated theatre artist in Kenya in the 70s. It then goes further to point a few names like FD Imbuga and David Mulwa as some of the theatre artists who sustained the mantle of mainstream theatre in the 80s and 90s. And after noting some of the changes in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival; the introduction of primary school children as participants as well as the entries of Dance, verses and oral narratives as items of competition, the discourse of the mainstream

theatre in Kenya goes blank. It is at this point that theatre reviewers and literary drama critics announce the death of serious theatre in Kenya since we are not having anymore plays published by established theatre artists.

### 2.1 *Alternative theatre*

In contrast, critics of the alternative theatre weave a different thread noting that theatre in Kenya has always fed on both mainstream and the alternative in more ways than one. Theatre is no longer just serving its own sake but also other imperatives as it continues to be anchored in the many social demands made on individuals and communities in Kenya. A theatre anchored in the social demands cannot therefore afford to remain within the strict rules of the canon but experiment with many other aspects. The slow-down in publishing performed plays that the Kenyan theatre scene experienced between the decades of 1990 to 2010 has informed some of the critics in the mainstream theatre into erroneously singing the dirge of the Kenyan theatre as a whole. This mistaken view emanates from what Etherton (1982) calls, 'a tendency to regard the play text as the only *raison d'être* of theatre practice.' We agree with him when he says that indeed, 'there is a need to go deeper into the wider processes behind theatre productions; the contexts and the historical actualities that have given rise to particular forms and particular representations (Etherton as quoted by Odera Outa 2009, p.15). And again there is the assumption that everything serious must be published to be allowed through the gates of the canon because what is unpublished is considered either inferior or erased (not existing). What is lost in such imaginations of death of theatre is the fact of marginal theatre which thrives in alternative spaces and which has also expanded the meaning of the 'four walls.' These new frontiers of theatre include the popular theatre, theatre for development, theatre for education, travelling theatres, theatres in the vernacular, bar theatre, community theatre, radio theatre, street theatre, religious theatre as well as corporate theatre. These are forms that are bold and vibrant in their experimentation by employing inter/multi-medial and multi-generic strategies. They tackle issues ranging from the particular, religion to general and topical issues like development and education. They are forms of theatre that Odera Outa calls the theatres of the Margins since they are not considered proper by gatekeepers in academic institutions.

In his book *Performing Power; Ethnic Citizenship, Popular Theatre and the Contest of nationhood in Modern Kenya*, Outa (2009) deals with the politics and art/status of the theatre of the margins in the Kenya of the 1980s and 1990s; and its complex nuances of how power was literally performed and staged in various spaces but most importantly in marginal spaces. He dwells a great deal on what he refers to as the popular theatre; a theatre that is many forms and types of 'dramatic expressions created in the

contemporary postcolonial period which attempts to marry indigenous performance practices with various western styles directly or indirectly imbibed from the long contact with western theatre modes.' (p.2) Examples of the indigenous modes in the postcolonial Kenya that he gives include Oby obyero Odhiambo's use of *Sigana*, an ethnic luo narrative mode which Oby fuses with the western style of staging a play as exemplified in his play *Drumbeats of Kerenyaga*. Another indigenous mode is Wahome Mutahi's use of Gikuyu (vernacular) in staging his plays that revalorized Gikuyu nationalism and attacked the nationalism in Moi Era in his Citrus Theatre productions. Of greater significance, Outa concludes that performance spaces in Kenya whether marginal or national as Kenya Nation Theatre are both sites of 'ambivalence, complexities and contradictions which do not follow into neat, irreconcilable dyads of serious theatre versus unserious or national versus foreign' ( as is the case of Ngugi's argument for the Trials of Dedan Kimathi), (p.6). Thus he attempts to argue that contrary to the popular view that theatre had been silenced during the Moi years of 1980s and 1990s by the expulsion of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Miiri, and Micere Mugo from the country, actually alternative theatre thrived in this difficult moments of suppression. And it existed side by side with the few serious theatre productions of the moments like F.D. Imbuga's works and many others that were performed and written in Swahili. Even the so called serious theatre survived by employing tactics of the theatre of the margin. Outa hints to the fact that Imbuga's satirical theatre survived due to, what Ruganda (1992) calls, 'strategies of transparent concealment' where the playwright tells the truth but laughingly in a bid to hoodwink the censor into laughing at his own follies.

## 2.2 TFD and Intervention theatres

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a discourse of development emerged in response to the failure of government institutions to handle the country's development agenda, placing culture at the centre of the debates over national transformations. Once again Evan Mwangi (2007) notes that UNESCO's declaration, that made the 1980s the United Nation's decade for cultural development provided an avenue for many organizations to turn to performance as a culturally acceptable way of disseminating knowledge on their supposed 'development' that offered a better alternative to simply lecturing people. At this time and in response to the failure of the formal theatre, many Theatre for Development outfits emerged as formidable forces for provision of instructional and utilitarian theatre. Community theatres also emerged distinctly in this decade (local actors performing for local audiences about local issues). These types of theatres which are rarely discussed in mainstream theatre discourses employed folk cultural modes that were transmitted through song, myth, dance and narration. The composition of the theatrical

script usually lacked a particular author hence it became impossible to publish any of the scripts. These kinds of theatres survived the harsh political times by locating themselves in what Outa (2007) calls ‘unofficial places which include the bar, market centre, beer or dance floor village arenas or even churches across the national landscape.’ Many of the theatre for development outfits that sprung up within these moments have never been fully researched on and documented. Although Odhiambo Christopher (2008) has endeavoured to survey and analyse the practice of Theatre for Development in Kenya, more needs to be done to establish their practice and the value they portend. For example the activities and influences of the late Opiyo Mumma through KDEA have never been fully accorded academic discourse hence we still don’t know how they impacted on theatre in Kenya.

### 2.3 Corporate theatre

There is a new generation of poets, theatre artists and performers that have grown from the straitjacket schools and colleges’ drama festival to make their own kinds of theatre that is neither serious/academic nor popular. The mode of such performances include what Jäger (2015) calls *intermediality*. Their languages are simple and direct a staple of oral performances. They pursue, ‘aesthetics that defy the dichotomy between popular and serious art, and sometimes rebelling against political commitment and the semantic opacity associated with academic theatre.’ (Mwangi 2007, p.141). The themes range from serious political themes to popular themes like romance and sex or urban decadence and religious redemption. Their spaces of rendition are the least expected ones; ranging from bars, to public wedding functions, to corporate functions to entertainment joint to curtain raisings during serious theatrical performances etc. A branch of this kind of theatre exists as what can be called the corporate theatre in which artists attach themselves to corporate bodies for support and in turn perform in their functions or as one of the ways of marketing a company’s products. Caroline Nderitus’s poetic/theatrical performances exemplify this generation. She uses dance, recitation, enactment, popular Kenyan wisdom and puns to attract the interest of what Mwangi (2007) calls, “a younger generation of readers brought up on the rap music” (p.141). Caroline Nderitu started performing at the age of four but honed her stage skills with the Kenyatta University Poetry Lab while she was undertaking her studies for a Bachelor of Economics at Kenyatta University. Her profile on her private blog, <http://carolinenderitu.com/> tells of an accomplished writer, and performer. But what is most striking is the fact that most of her clients are corporate and large organizations like UN bodies and banks. It is from such influence that such small theatrical organizations that mushroom around the country are shoving each other when it comes to performing for corporate entities for the simple reason that such entities pay



them more than the ticket collections that they may get during their performances' in theatre halls. Of course it can be argued that this is commodifying art and selling it to the highest bidder; an engagement that can only lead to sterility and status quo. In contradistinction, it can also be argued that the elastic nature of theatre itself allows the theatre artist to bend it to suit the whims of the day and as such, Nderitu has bent her performance to suit corporate needs. It is thus in the same vein of this argument that theatre for Education, development communication, intervention theatre and theatre for development anchor their premise. Thus then one agrees again with Outa (2009) that the popular cultural practices of the postcolony Kenya should 'not be studied as single track narratives that have to be understood or defined through specific ideologies, or through exclusive binary of either resistance or collaboration with the postcolonial regime' as Ngugi did 'but rather a process that underpins the very establishing and contesting of power by people who share the same living space' (p.25).

#### *2.4 Comedies, Parodies and Street Theatres*

Another interweaving loop in theatre in Kenya arises from the idea of the thriving of the comedy industry and specifically in the urban spaces. It is worth noting that many of the present artists in the comedy industry be they film, television or stage artists have honed their skills at the Kenya National Theatre and thus confirming the symbiotic relationship between the institution as the custodian of the mainstream theatre and the alternative theatre that it feeds. Most of the comedies that are screened on the Kenyan televisions are by artists who are products of theatre comedies who performed at the French Cultural Centre or the National Theatre. However, there are other forms of comedy that have given a wide berth to the rule of the fourth wall and instead thrust their action in the most of the public spaces. Comedians such as Nyengese are what may be called street theatre performers as they made KENCOM bus stop their arena of performance. They were later to be emulated by the Zangelewa group and all its offshoot and splinter groups in performing on the streets of Nairobi. Their lack of adherence to the fast theatre rules made them even more experimental and marginal. But their parody of the fat government elites through stuffing their tummies and behinds to look ridiculously fat and in colonial attire made sense to the street users since it resonated well with their association of the government with the colonial regime and their fatness with excessive greed and corruption.

#### *2.5 Theatre of Evangelization*

It has become fashionable in the postmillennial neo-Kenya to claim religious / gospel celebrity. The country is experiencing an explosion of gospel creative artists in music and

theatre. This gospel creative thunder was not created in a vacuum but was precursor by the church music and drama Festivals organized mainly the Catholic, Anglican and PCEA sects of the Christian religion. As early as the advent of colonialism, church going youth and children were organized to perform such religious topics as nativity, passion and crucifixion of Jesus. This eventually evolved into performances of the gospel during Mass and services. In the postcolonial moment, church leaders felt that this theatre could serve a more important aspect of the church ministry like evangelization. That is how religious festivals came to be. Initially they were simple festivals organized at the Parish to Diocese levels but eventually they grew to be organized as a competition up to the National level and modeled on the structures of the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Music Festival. In the post millennial Kenya, the Festivals have grown so big, so fancy and so competitive that they threaten the initial idea of evangelization as the artists search for creativity beyond the confines of the gospel. The best example of this fancy theatrical evangelization that is informing the current wave of gospel creativity is the PCEA Mavuno Festival. Established in 1991 by an industrious theatre turned film director Bob Nyanja, the Festival was aimed at staging plays that were of sound quality as any other play performance but which also helps the congregation think deeper into its gospel message. Since then, the Mavuno Festival has grown to such a tremendous extent that it nurtures some of the best theatre and musical artists in Nairobi and beyond. Yet within the mainstream theatre criticism, it is still peripheralized. Jewels productions from Winners chapel, Igiza Festival, Christian unions from campuses and churches that have established theatre groups has produced artists such as Anthony Ndiema, Silas Owiti, Davis Ochieng, Martin Njuki and Aaron Kakunza who have organized serious religious oriented festivals at the Kenya National Theatre in August of, 2012, 2013 and 2014 (competitions of church theatre groups) where Best performers in all categories were pooled together into a project and Winning scripts were changed into screen plays and produced for the screen. The patron of this festival was Dr. Julisa Rowe.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.6 Radio Theatres

For a long period of time, the state broadcaster, KBC (earlier on VOK) produced the only Radio theatre in Kenya. The English service of the radio wing of the broadcaster started a programme called Radio theatre to imaginatively create plays on topical issues and air them on Sunday evening (9.30pm). Earlier on, the Swahili Service of the same radio wing used to produce a programme called *mchezo wa wiki* and then later *Ushikwapo shikamana*. There are critics who contend that the radio plays presented by the official



state broadcaster were heavily censored to please the Moi regime (see Nyairo 2004). Even if they were not directly censored, the producers already knew what will befall them if they were to air government-unfriendly content hence they remained on the narrow path of self-censorship so as to produce content that was in tandem with the official discourse. It would be worth the while to study some of these plays or the works of producers of such plays particularly the works of the late Nzau Kalulu, the producer of the programme *Radio Theatre*.

### 2.7 Modes of the theatres of the margin

The theatre of the margins survives on what can be called *intergeneric* modes. It is a theatre in the true sense of the performed text be it a poem, a play, or an oral narrative. It even uses modern technology through video and Radio theatre productions. It knows no linguistic boundaries as it is produced both in official and non-official languages, vernacular, and national, foreign and local. Sometimes the theatre of the margin storms the centre like when some schools bring to the KSCDF plays in vernacular languages e.g. Kisumu Days, 2007 choral Verse, *Japuonj on the Bicycle* or the play *Olkirinyi* by Olkejuado School in 1970's. This theatre of the margins is constructed by artists who are themselves on the margins and who are distinct for the fact that they 'remain largely unpublished and are virtually unknown in mainstream African critical practices', (Outa 2005; p.13). These specific individuals take it upon themselves to initiate new ideas or beat new paths by either fusing existing theatre modes or revalorizing the dormant ones. The loop that weaves through this theatre is the resistance to the order of the day in which the ideas it seeks to pursue are suppressed by the imagined nationhood of the moment. Indeed these forms of theatre open up other frontiers that feed on a long continuum of previous participatory performative practices like the *Sigana* of the Luo and vernacular languages. Thus the PPPs of the yesteryears form a very important strand in the interweaving loop of theatre in Kenya.

### 2.8 Professional Outfits

The Kenya National Theatre has been a site of establishment and growth of many theatre outfits either in rebellion to it or in search of alternatives to it. Right from independence in 1964, when the exiled South African playwright Eskia Mphahlele established Chemchemi Theatre Company in Kenya and used both English and Swahili as medium of performance (Oyekan 1993, p.156) through the 80s and 90s when Miujiza players, Mbalamwezi players and Mizizi arts centre, Sarakasi Ltd, Capricon theatre groups of the 1990s were established to the present day Heartstrings Ensemble among others, Kenya

National Theatre has indeed formed a core upon which the theatre in the postcolony revolves. (Obura, 1996)

### 3.0 Conclusion

The weaving loop in Kenyan theatre is not so much as to the written text but in its performed text that is realized through multi-generic and intermedial performances. It is a revalorization of the old traditional modes fused with Western modes of performance. To understand these loops in Kenyan theatre one must of necessity differentiate between literary drama which involves writing and publishing plays and the performance of the texts. This is because the bulk of Kenyan theatre exists outside the canon as it is rarely published (due to its urgency and immediacy) and relies on individuals outside the canon to take on the politics of the moment against the grain. Lastly, the intermediality and multi-generic nature of the theatre allows it to define its space within and beyond the four walls. It can be in the four walls of a school dining hall, Professional centre, Kenya National Theatre or church or the French Cultural Centre. It also redefines the four walls like the corporate theatre, bar theatre that ceases to be normal four walls but improvised and creative four walls. Lastly it can be in the open like the village arena or market place especially through intervention theatres; Theatre for Development or Theatre for Education.

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