

Performative Inter-Actions
in African Theatre 3

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Making Space, Rethinking Drama
and Theatre in Africa

Edited by

Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5250-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5250-0

As a three volume set: ISBN (10): 1-4438-5611-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5611-9

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INTRODUCTION

PERFORMATIVE INTER-ACTIONS IN AFRICAN THEATRE

KENE IGWEONU AND OSITA OKAGBUE

Introduction

Theatre and performance have always existed in Africa as part of the cultural process and practice of what it means to be human. In effect, this means that theatre and performance have usually been perceived as one among a multitude of cultural practices that communities have, and engage in. Thus, theatrical performance as both a cultural practice and a process continues to contribute—like all the other cultural practices—to the well-being of community members and the societies in which they exist, and sometimes this contribution can take the form of cultural revision and/or social change. For us, this is the basis for the *famed* principle of functionality that is believed to underpin all forms of theatre and performance in Africa.

It is our view, and this is clearly borne out by analysis and study, that all traditions of theatre in Africa—from the various indigenous performances such as the masquerade theatre, ritual performances, musical theatre, and Theatre for Development, to the more contemporary forms such as the video films of Nollywood—are functional at their most basic level. In other words, each performance form engages in a dialectical relationship of mutual affect with their respective local socio-cultural contexts. Consequently, we take the view in this book that the notion of performativity serves as an enabling and encompassing framework under which all forms of theatrical practice in, and about, Africa can best be analysed and understood.

The last four decades have witnessed an unprecedented rise in African theatre and performance scholarship. Following on from the early 1980s, much of the debate surrounding whether indigenous African performances

—rituals and festivals—constitute drama and theatre was quickly displaced by the rise of performance studies, which provided a useful framework with which to theorise non-western forms and practices. Since then, there has been a rise in the number of Africanist scholars who are beginning to theorise and analyse African theatre and performance by drawing on a range of indigenous frames of references—most of which acknowledge and extend, but do not necessarily accede to dominant western discursive frameworks.

As a consequence, in putting this publication forward at this time, we seek to acknowledge the concept of performativity—in the way it has been theorised in western performance scholarship—but ultimately go on to explore its relevance for African theatre and performance. However, in doing this, we hope to move on from the debates around the term “performativity”, to explore notions of *inter-actions* in African theatre and performance. We equally extend our examination to how African theatre practitioners work today, with an active (not passive) recognition of international theatre practices, while striving to create works that remain locally relevant and that are rooted in indigenous practices—thus successfully negotiating the global vs. local shifts in theatre practice.

African theatre and performance is functional. In other words, it is not just entertainment but is often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions—hence, it is performative at its core. By focusing on the many and varied inter-actions evident in African theatre and performance practice, the chapters in this book set out to examine how recent advances in global citizenship, technology, economics, and trans-/inter-cultural transactions and borrowings have impacted on theatre and performance in Africa. In doing this, we take our lead from the recent debate about the significant challenges facing African theatre and performance practice, and broaden the discussion to include the many ingenious solutions adopted to tackle them by exploring the notion of inter-actions from different perspectives, including contacts, dealings, and connections across cultures, discipline, and media.

Importantly, our focus also extends beyond the debates on hybridity to examine contemporary performance forms in, and about, Africa that are *comfortable* in that very active process of negotiating an African identity that is globally aware, and yet locally relevant. However, a first step in this task is to set out how we understand and articulate performativity, and how it might relate to our unfolding discussion of these inter-actions that are so pervasive in African theatre and performance practice today.

Performativity in Performance or the Performativity of Performance

To begin with, a few questions that will be addressed in this introduction include: How does performativity differ from performance? Is performativity a central quality of African performance? How does the notion of performativity help us to understand ideas of presentation and representation in performance? Does performativity help in the understanding and presentation of the Self and Other? Is performativity a key element in the perception of theatre as culture in action, or of performance as a cultural process? Finally, is performativity a performance that does not end?

Ever since J. L. Austin, in his linguistic lectures, introduced the concept of the performative utterance, the idea of performativity or performative acts entered the language of performance theory. This concept has since continued to exercise scholars because the distinction between performance and performativity has not always been clear. We do not look to resolve this debate in this introduction, but we intend to show—through the various readings of scholars, from Austin through to Lyotard (who sees performativity as efficiency), Derrida, Lacan, Butler, Schechner to Harris, and Brocker—that it is the idea of performativity within performance that affords it its transformative potential.

In his lectures and, latterly, in his seminal book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin differentiates between two kinds of utterances. The first he calls “constative utterances”—these are utterances that merely describe or report on a state of affairs—and the second he calls “performatives”—these refer to utterances which in their enunciation do things, bring the things they describe into being, or even *are* the things they describe. As Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick assert in the introduction to their edited collection, *Performativity and Performance*, that in doing so Austin unwittingly initiated the process that has led to an “oblique intersection between performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance” (1995: 1). However, they also point out, and as we indicate above, how very “un-articulated” the cross-purpose appropriation of Austin’s term has been for performance theory.

The key problem for performance theory is that this appropriation of Austin’s term does sometimes lead to an indiscriminate interchanging of the two terms by scholars, leading at times to imprecision and uncertainty in the meaning of the term, and at other times to total confusion. As Geraldine Harris correctly argues in *Staging Feminisms: Performance and*

Performativity (1999), much of this confusion can be attributed to Judith Butler's use of drag to demonstrate the performativity of gender in her seminal study, *Gender Trouble* (1990). But Butler, it should be pointed out, has also been at pains in her later work, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), to make "it clear that performativity refers to a 'process, a reiteration of a norm or set of norms' while performance 'is a bounded act'" (Harris, 1999: 72).

Butler's differentiation, notwithstanding, this confusion still persists as both terms do have so much in common—so much that binds them to each other. In this book, we see the difference between performance and performativity as being in many ways reflective of the difference between reality and make-believe, between the real and the mimetic, between the presentation of reality and representation of the real. One other key difference between performance and performativity, as both Butler and Harris point out, is that although both share in the quality of citationality and reiteration, it is in the nature of what is being cited that they differ. For instance, one may ask the question, what is cited or repeated in performance—and for what purpose—and what is cited or repeated in performativity—and for what purpose. The fact that in performance the citation is foregrounded and acknowledged, while this is not always the case in performativity, is one useful way of marking the difference between the two terms.

Thus, while a performative act and a performance act are alike in many ways, performance always involves and implies an awareness or consciousness of performing on the part of the performer. Whereas, in a performative act the "performer" is not always conscious of the fact that they are performing—hence the reason that Butler's study was groundbreaking, as well as controversial, in its claims regarding the performance of gender in everyday life. This is perhaps what Harris, echoing Butler, means, when she observes, "performance foregrounds its quotation marks (citation) whereas performativity in real life strives to conceal its citationality" (1999: 76). In other words, in performance the conventions of theatre, such as the framing, as well as the contexts and the rules are clear and often foregrounded, whereas in performative contexts these are mostly absent or are not necessarily rendered operative.

Performance, for Austin, is "acting or mimetically re-creating the real", while "the performative effects real change. It constitutes reality". (Blocker, 1999: 26) Blocker thus argues that performativity makes an artwork more than just an object or a theatrical performance, because "it helps reinforce the claim that the work actually makes something happen" (1999: 26). Performativity, therefore, when understood in uncluttered

Austinian terms as “doing” rather than “describing” can be very useful in appreciating and analysing the functionality and other characteristic manifestations of theatre in Africa. In most instances, theatre in Africa does not attempt or claim to represent reality; rather it presents a form of reality. It acknowledges that the line between the reality on stage and the reality in everyday life—between the worlds inhabited by the characters on stage and the performers that embody them—is not always as clearly demarcated or separated in Africa as it is in some other cultures of the world.

Another way we can explore the notion of performativity in African theatre, is to draw on the discursive framework derived from Jacques Derrida’s idea of a generalised iterability of speech acts, which—according to Richard Schechner—supposes that “...meaning cannot be permanently fixed: every utterance is a repetition—just as stage speech is the repetition of a script” (2002: 125). By this approach we move away from Austin’s argument for the exclusion of theatrical speech from the discussion of performativity, based on his claim that speech uttered by an actor on stage is “infelicitous” and does not truly reflect the speaker’s intention. In fact, Austin’s position is akin to that held by John R. Searle who “separates ‘normal real world talk’ from ‘parasitic forms of discourse such as fiction, play acting, etc’” (Schechner, 2002: 126), when he contends that “people constructed their realities largely by means of speech acts; and they communicated these realities to each other by means of speech acts” (Schechner, 2002: 126). However, by drawing on Derrida and evidence of the continued blurring of the boundaries between what is generally considered to be fiction and reality, Schechner remarks that:

Searle and Austin took this position because they didn’t recognise that art can be a model for rather than, or in addition to, being a mirror of or escape from life. (2002: 126)

In his attempt to rehabilitate Austin’s original thesis, however, James Loxley cites Austin’s argument “that speech actually has the power to *make* a world” (Jackson cited in Loxley, 2007: 2), and uses it to claim that:

The creative connotation of this “making” have also drawn in theorists of literary language, and a possible relation to theatrical performance has stimulated the interest of thinkers on drama. (Loxley, 2007: 2)

In putting forward this re-reading of Austin, Loxley articulates what he terms the standard narrative of origins and subsequent development of performativity, by which he attempts to bridge the gap between Austin’s

views and those expounded by the likes of Derrida and Butler. Going further along these lines, Loxley argues that Derrida's radical deconstruction of the notion of performativity led to its wider application to "pressing issues in cultural politics" (2007: 3). He goes on to add that:

Such illumination of the way we "act" our identities also had radical implications for how we might think about the relation between theatrical performance and the apparently real or serious world offstage, implications that performance theorists have themselves sought to spell out in recent years. (Loxley, 2007: 3)

In this sense, performativity points to a variety of topics, among them the construction of social reality including gender and race, the restored behaviour quality of performances, and the complex relationships of performance practice to performance theory (Schechner, 2002: 123).

By way of going back to definitions, we cite copiously from Henry Bial who describes performativity, on the one hand, as a term that is often:

invoked by those who wish to describe a performance without the connotations of artifice or superficiality that accompany the word "theatrical". (2007: 175)

Bial also goes on to add that, "[O]n another level, the term 'performative' refers to a specific philosophical concept concerning the nature and potential of language" (Bial, 2007: 175), in which speech denotes action, and saying *it* means to do *it*, or as Schechner puts it:

[I]n uttering certain sentences people perform acts. Promises, bets, curses, contracts, and judgements do not describe or represent actions: they are actions. (2002: 123)

Seen from this perspective, and by interrogating the relationship between *speech* and *action*, we contend that utterances in African theatre do not always constitute attempts to express or convey existing reality in everyday life, but work to construct new, and often parallel, realities. This idea is deeply rooted in indigenous performance practices, such as the *mmonwu* (masquerade) performance of the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. In most of these performances the poetic utterances of the *mmonwu*—who is seen as an embodiment of both ancestral and extant traditions of the people—lay bare present realities as they exist within the society, while simultaneously weaving their poetic narrative around an alternative reality drawn from a parallel universe or a vision of the future for the community at large.

Discussing the performative use of speech or narrative in African theatre, and the role of the playwright in that process of constructing a new or alternative reality, Esiaba Irobi argues that:

Speech, you see, is a performance. Utterance. Incantation. Invocation. Chant. Ululation. Prayer. Even breathing is a performance. (That is why sometimes we snore heavily in a play to indicate—in the context of our make-belief—that we are asleep). (Azuonye, 2003)

While this idea of using various forms of *speech* to create new realities constitutes an interesting concept, African authors often find it difficult to capture some of the nuances of their indigenous languages in English or other languages of colonisation. Consequently, Irobi goes on to add that:

an important qualification or credential for being a poet is to have that self-destructive perfectionist streak that makes you want to panel beat language into a shape accurate and broad-shouldered enough to carry the full weight of your experiences. (Azuonye, 2003)

On the one hand, therefore, this idea of “panel beating” western languages to fit indigenous references describes an approach used by successful playwrights on the African continent to respond performatively to the challenge of writing in an imperial language. Consequently, African theatre can be described as being dynamic—often making subversive use of English or other imperial languages in ways that are evocative of the idea of “panel beating” in order to convey indigenous imageries through the performative utterances of their characters.

On the other hand, however, African playwrights from the diaspora do not create characters that deliberately set out to undermine western languages by “panel beating” them in the same way as their continental counterparts. Instead, the performative utterances of their characters are often seen in the way they articulate their *migrant* identities in the western societies they have come to consider as *home*. Their characters speak in the same way as their non-African counterparts, but their utterances are often laden with deep political symbolisms and meanings that do not go unnoticed to the *Other* characters. In fact, their performative utterances are underpinned by a glaring realisation that their social condition is largely informed by their racial identity. Consequently, characters created by African diasporic playwrights often make performative utterances that position them firmly in the location in which they find themselves.

A good example of this can be found in the works of Dipo Agboluaje, who is famous for writing plays that satirise contestations of cultural

identity in British society. His plays are inspired by both his Nigerian and British heritage, and strive to convey the experiences of the Nigerian diaspora living in Britain as “distinct in its finer details” from that of other black peoples living in Britain. Explaining this in a 2008 interview with Belinda Otas, he argues:

Understanding the minutiae of life is what I try to do. I'm not one for emphasising the liberal assumption that we are all the same and that my job is then to go on and prove it. That breeds smug theatre, a theatre of recognition, preaching to the converted. There's no challenge in that. (Otas, 2008)

Through his plays, Agboluaje goes beyond posing a challenge to what it means to be a black person living in a “so called” multi-cultural British society, to raise questions about what it means to be British and Nigerian at the same time. In the same interview with Otas, Agboluaje explains:

My voice has been created by two societies: Nigeria and Britain. For me that is an inescapable fact whatever politics of writing I might claim. As people of the Diaspora we inhabit diverse worlds: home communities back home, *home* communities within the host nation and relationships with other Diaspora communities. We respond to the politics of the society we are in. (Otas, 2003)

It is the complex nature of such a relationship, articulated in Agboluaje’s plays, that is also echoed in different ways by various authors in this book.¹ For instance, in *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*, we feature chapters such as Joseph McLaren’s “Tess Onwueme and Diaspora Representations in *The Missing Face*”, which depicts characters that retain the western mode of speech as their non-African counterparts, but whose utterances convey their deep identity. Mwenya B. Kabwe, on the other hand, in “Performing Africa Differently: Articulations of Migrant Identity in a Re-imagining of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of A Negro*” situates a diaspora play in a South African context—in a way that foregrounds embodied utterance as opposed to the spoken word.

Performing the World into Being

Joanne Spooner, one of the contributors, writes that “culture is a mechanism of identification, a repository for people’s sense of identity that requires constant re-affirmation through performance”, and—

according to Homi Bhabha—it is the performativity in and of language that ensures that the narrative of the nation is carried out, and that the nation needs this narration in order to come into being (1990: 3). In *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (1999), the editors Jeffrey Mason and Ellen Gainor explore in the introduction to the book how the theatrical representations of the United States has helped to shape the national identity of the country. They specifically demonstrate the role the theatre has played in the construction of American identity.

Thus it is valid to say that African theatre performs the African world, and through it the African identity, into being. This is mainly because of its nature and also because it is perceived in, and by, most African societies, as a cultural process and practice—it is not an activity that is outside of the normal things that people do or take part in, because African cultures demand of its people a certain amount or level of performance every once in while. When an individual is born, that individual performs or has others perform for, or on their behalf—whether it is their naming ceremony, puberty initiation, or rites of passage into a masquerade fraternity or women’s associations. As the person gets older, they begin to perform themselves, supported by others, into new states of being. For example, if they become wealthy, they may acquire status as leader, chief etc. through engaging in further performances.

Finally, when the person dies, there are the rites of transition into the realm of the ancestors or the respected dead, who are often performed into being by the living as masquerades. In other words, performances are done on behalf of the dead person who becomes a passive participant in their own performance—just as they had been as a new-born baby at the first performance of their life. Whether one is an active or passive performer in their life performances, they remain or perform as themselves—this goes back to the idea of performativity in which the conventional rules of framing a performance are rendered inoperative in African theatre. They can also be seen as performing alternative realities into being, because they mark palpable changes or transformations in the lives of those involved.

African performances flow out of and back into society. They are time out of time and yet they remain, and are firmly anchored, within the moment of performance. This is because the distance between the performed reality (the performance) and the lived reality (society) is constantly negotiated and breached, so that the boundary between them is forever porous and therefore ultimately they remain as one. The audience, on the one hand, are themselves, yet on the other hand they are performing

a role. However, they are very much aware that they are doing so—which is to say, they are never not themselves.

This is true of performers in a variety of African performance traditions, such as Theatre for Development, trance and possession rituals, and the masquerade performances. It is, therefore, the performative element of so many indigenous African performance practices and traditions that gives African theatre its manifest theatricality—African theatre has previously been referred to as a theatre that consciously embraces and broadcasts its theatricality (Okagbue, 2007: 181). The performative element carries the famed functional quality of African performance, because African peoples perform not just to entertain themselves, but they do so to also impact on their world—to question, understand, challenge, and ultimately order and reorder their world. They use the theatre to celebrate and affirm what is good and to also to censor, admonish, and hopefully correct behaviours perceived not to be good. Performance is the tool for negotiating the complexities and anxieties of existence, and it is the phenomenon of performativity that enables this to happen—African peoples, it can be said, perform to be.

The essays contained in this three-volume book attest to these transformative qualities and impact-driven imperatives of African theatre and performance. The broad range of traditions and practices, and cultural and national contexts covered in this collection demonstrates the breadth of styles of theatre which exist, and the fact that each theatre practice or form is more or less in dialogue—either of affirmation or confrontation with its society and culture, and informing and being informed by, and changing and being changed by the environment in which it exists. These qualities apply to African theatre on the continent and in its various manifestations in the African diasporas of the Caribbean, South America, the United States of America, and Canada. Thus, a great many of the essays in this collection look at a diverse range of theatre and performance practices from different parts of Africa and the African diasporas. The essays all suggest that these performances, in their different ways, engage in this process of performing the world into being through their performative articulations or exploration of the divergent African and African diaspora experiences of Africans or peoples of African descent.

It is the idea of the performances captured by the majority of the essays in these three books as performative engagements, which underlines the unity of the collection. The essays and the theatrical engagements and traditions which they discuss capture either the overall performative imperative which informs the type of theatre, or they record the

performative moments when the actual transformation desired occurs or is expected to occur.

Themes and Approaches

Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre explores three major themes, which are captured in the subtitles of each of the three books within the set. The first of the three books is subtitled: *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*. This is followed by Book 2 which is subtitled: *Innovation, Creativity and Social Change*, and Book 3 is subtitled: *Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa*. The volumes are written by a wide range of international scholars, thus topics are discussed with an in-depth critical vocabulary and focus appropriate for a publication written for an international readership—the contributors' backgrounds and global spread reflect our international focus in putting this book together.

The contributions, in their various ways, demonstrate the many advances and ingenious solutions adopted by African theatre practitioners in tackling some of the challenges arising from the adverse colonial experience, as well as the “one-sided” advance of globalisation. The contributions attest to the thriving nature of African theatre and performance, which in the face of these challenges has managed to retain its distinctiveness, while at the same time acknowledging, contesting, and appropriating influences from elsewhere into an aesthetic that is identifiably African. Consequently, we present the three books published under this title—*Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre*—as a comprehensive exploration of the current state of African theatre and performance, both on the continent and diaspora.

In Book 1, *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*, we present essays that show that even though the plays of the African diaspora acknowledge and pay homage to the cultures of *home* in the various locations around the world, they do not lose a sense of their Africanness in their various inter-actions. This sense of interweaving of cultures—without losing a sense of their indigenous African influences and sensibilities—is evident in the contributions that explore performances from the African diaspora, as well as those performances located on the continent that engage with this idea of interweaving in much the same way as their diaspora counterparts. Thus, the idea of *Diaspora Representations* attests to the notion that the diaspora—as we see it—is not solely located outside of the African continent itself, but can be found in those

performances that engage performatively with the West in that process of articulating identity.

Book 2, *Innovation, Creativity and Social Change*, on the other hand, contains contributions that address performativity as a process—particularly in the context of theatre’s engagement with social realities with the hope of instituting or achieving social change and the transformation of society. The innovativeness of some of the applied and community theatre practices explored within the book points to the ingenuity and adaptiveness of African theatre in a way that enables it to engage indigenous forms in the service of contemporary realities. This privileges an approach to theatre and performance that constantly redefines and reshapes itself, so as to remain relevant and in tune with contemporary realities in the quest for social change. The contributions deal with forms such as Theatre for Development, community and applied theatre, and indigenous juridical performances, as well as the use of indigenous performance forms by contemporary dramatists and performers to instigate change in society.

Finally, in Book 3, *Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa*, we present essays that seek to reconceptualise notions of drama and theatre in Africa, and therefore redefine our understanding of the practice, role, and place they occupy in a constantly evolving society. Contributions in *Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa* range from essays that explore notions of space in performance, to those that challenge the perceived orthodoxy of conventional forms and approaches to theatre.

The individual themes of each of the three books intersect at various points and consequently the overarching theme of all three is the fact that they are linked in their exploration of the performative and interactive nature of performance in Africa and the African diasporas. Thus in this concluding section of the introductory chapter, we go on to discuss the various approaches adopted by some of the contributors in the volumes in their attempts to engage with notions of performativity and inter-actions.

In Book 3, for instance, in his essay “Dreams Deferred: National Theatres in National Development”, Osita Okagbue in arguing for the national theatres in Africa as institutions responsible for preserving, nurturing, and disseminating each nation’s theatrical traditions and art forms, invokes the Owerri Igbo *mbari*. *Mbari* is understood as “a house of art” in which a group of young men and women of the community are selected to devote a period of time in utter seclusion. While in seclusion, they are tasked with using the process of “making” art to begin a programme of knowledge, communal engagement, and healing. The

process of making the art is simultaneously the process of “healing and empowerment” for the community for whom, and in which, the *mbari* house is situated. The *Mbari* house and art are made and then abandoned, left to decay and fall apart. Thus, its efficacy is not in the art or the house that people behold, but rather in the selection of candidates and the process of making or constructing the house, as well as the art objects that adorn it.

Okagbue’s essay, however, does not suggest that the impermanence of *mbari* be transferred to how African countries manage their national theatres, but rather it emphasises the idea that the usefulness of a national theatre is ultimately dependent on what happens, when it happens, and how it happens within it as an institution. In a similar vein, Benita Brown’s essay in Book 1, which is titled “The *Òrìsà* Paradigm: An Overview of African-Derived Mythology, Folklore, and Kinaesthetic Dance Performatives”, explores the jazz dance of the African diaspora in the United States of America—which she terms a “dance performative”. In it she argues that the inspiration and modality of this dance performative affords its African-American participants the opportunity to be touched by the “*Òrìsà*”. Brown’s premise of jazz as a dance performative facilitates, for participants, a context and a moment for the recovery and embracement of their African ancestral past—through the *asé* (the Yoruba concept of power utterance to bring about change) that is generated, the individual participants are able to engage and come to terms with their current realities.

In much the same way, Krueger’s chapter, “*Zef* / Poor White Kitsch Chique: South African Comedies of Degradation” (Book 3)—in looking at the new phenomenon of *Zef* derogatory comedy in South Africa—concludes that:

within *Zef*’s mockery of poor white Afrikaner resides an attempt to come to terms with some of the unsettling qualities inherent in a new South African white identity... an identity which has had to reshape itself within the context of a hybrid culture.

We see thus in this performance how a character becomes a mode of appropriating and coming to terms with the past in order to move forward in the present. This idea of moving forward in the present is precisely what the *gacaca* court performances of Rwanda—the subject of the opening chapter of Book 2 entitled “Juridical Performatives: Public Versus Hidden Scripts and Transcripts”—illustrates. In this essay, Ananda Breed argues that the court hearings demonstrate the power of the performative utterance, and that the moment of confession, atonement, and reconciliation brings about healing for a community and country that is

traumatised and still reeling from its experience of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The confessions serve as appeasement to those who had been wronged, and for those who perpetrated the wrongs, by confessing they own up and take responsibility for the crimes committed.

Annette Bühler-Dietrich's contribution in Book 2, "Burkina Faso: Theatre's Impact on Creating the Future" examines a range of Theatre for Development events and programmes that take place mainly around the capital, Ouagadougou, but also in other towns and villages. She equally argues that even the literary plays are geared toward making a transformational impact on the audience and thus playwrights have that in mind when they write, which means that the notion of "art for art's sake" has no place in such an environment.

The same attempt to use the theatre to create the future is the topic explored in Book 1 by Joanna Spooner in her chapter "Enacting the Nation: Transcultural, Performativity in the Construction of National Identity in *Juliush Siza* and *Moses, Citizen and Me*". Spooner shows in her essay how Thomas Dekker's *Juliush Siza*—a Krio translation of *Julius Caesar*—is a political act that performatively serves as the process of imagining the Sierra Leonean nation, while *Moses, Citizen and Me* constitutes a re-enactment of the conception of the nation already imagined by Dekker in his play. Spooner's argument, therefore, is that the enactment of the nation can become performative, and that performance contributes to the construction of the nation and ultimately the national identity.

"Cultural Factors, Power Dynamics and Effective Theatre in HIV/AIDS Education in South Africa" found in Book 2 is the title of the chapter by Chijioke Uwah and Patrick Ebewo. In it, they examine theatre as an intervention in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been decimating a sizeable number of the potentially productive population in South Africa. They argue that the theatre played a significant and successful role in the fight against apartheid because it was made from the grassroots. Consequently, they argue that the reason why the interventions against the spread of HIV/AIDS have not worked is not because theatre has lost its potential to be efficacious, but simply because of the practitioners' "inadequate knowledge of their target audiences' cultural norms and values" and the fact that they did not get the audience involved at the early stages of the theatre process.

So the choice of *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre* as a title for this book is not fortuitous. It was carefully chosen firstly because of the editors' awareness that the theatre traditions, styles, and forms found on the African continent and the African diasporas are predicated on

the notion of performativity. And secondly, on the belief that in instituting art forms and practices, African peoples set up mechanisms, instruments, and contexts for engaging, examining, understanding, and affecting their worlds—by making the invisible visible and bringing the past into the present in order to predict and manage the future. Underpinning all of this is an understanding that whatever is said or done within the theatrical space, has the capacity to affect what happens in the world outside it because the boundary between the imagined world of the theatre and the world outside it are porous, in the same way that the boundary between the performer and spectator in indigenous African performances is deliberately made porous—always flexible with performer occasionally becoming spectator and vice versa.

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CHAPTER ONE

IN SEARCH OF NEW PERFORMANCE SPACES: THEATRE PRACTITIONERS AND FM RADIO STATIONS IN KENYA

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH ODHIAMBO

Introduction

In Kenya, the performing artist has always been nomadic—forever searching for performance spaces—and in the postcolonial Kenyan state this is even more so. In the pre-colonial period, however, there were some artists who were not mobile. These artists operated in defined and recognisable performance spaces. For instance, among the Luos of the Lake region of Kenya, the grandmother’s house—known as *siwindhe*—was in the evenings, a designated performance space. Here the elderly members of the community initiated the young girls and boys into the ways of the community, as well as the art of oral performance. The same also happened in the grandfather’s house—known as *duol*—where the young male adults were initiated into the ways of the community through oral performances especially on matters to do with manhood such as war, hunting and security. It is worth noting that the performances that took place in the *siwindhe* and *duol* were expressly didactic, though also entertaining.

Those who performed in these spaces were, however, non-professional performers and construed their roles as educators. However, the more professional performers, known as *jothum*, who play a range of musical instruments such as the *ohangla*, *nyatiti*, and *onanda*, traverse villages in the quest for spaces, where cultural activities and rituals take place and bring the community together—such as marriage ceremonies, funerals, beer parties, and installation of chiefs—where they can perform their art. With the invasion of colonial modernity, however, the use of these spaces for performances became restricted. This sense of “open space” was

replaced with “confined government-supervised urban community halls, school halls, church buildings, theatre buildings with proscenium stage” (wa Thiong’o, 1981: 38).

In pre-colonial Kenya, performance space was unrestricted and the artist could perform in any “empty space” without any inhibition whatsoever. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o rightly points out in regard to the way drama manifested itself in pre-colonial Kenya:

...it was not an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment; it was moral instruction; and it was also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival. This drama was not performed in special buildings set aside for the purpose. It could take place anywhere-wherever there was an empty space... “The empty space”, among the people was part of that tradition. (wa Thiong’o, 1981: 37)

As mentioned earlier, the performance space in Kenya became problematic because it was no longer unrestricted in usage—especially with the intrusion of colonial modernity which disrupted the cultural practices that were accompanied by drama and theatre performances. Admittedly, the issue of performance space became even more problematic and complex in the postcolonial Kenyan state. For instance, the Kenya National Theatre as a performance space:

remained the preserve of the British expatriate community even after Kenya had her own national anthem and national flag in 1963. It was run by a wholly expatriate governing council with the British Council retaining a representative many years after independence. (wa Thiong’o, 1981: 40)

But this domination of the official space by agents of the former colonial power was not the main problem. The use of performance spaces, whether formal or informal, was further complicated by the nature of the postcolonial state that emerged in Kenya. As wa Thiong’o would remind us:

The performance space for prayers, funeral dirges, marriage ceremonies, naming tea-parties, family gatherings, sports, are dependent on issuance of a permit. Thus when the police break into any gathering and break up story-telling sessions in people’s homes, they are absolutely within the law. Performances have to be contained in controllable enclosures, in licensed theatre buildings, in schools, especially, but not in open spaces where people reside. (wa Thiong’o, 1998: 69)

It was more than just the postcolonial state controlling and containing performance spaces in Kenya, however, because the physical geographical locations of most of these vestiges of colonialism were inaccessible to most audiences. As Richard Frost, (cited in Mwangola, 2008: 20), reports:

The National Theatre was built where it was built because those who planned the scheme, including Thornly Dyer, the architect who designed the parliament Building and conceived of the Master plan of Nairobi wanted to build the National Theatre in the “snob area” of Nairobi... As it was not to be a working class theatre, it was built in the middle of well-to-do Nairobi... “people’s theatres” could be established elsewhere, but the National Theatre and Cultural Centre were to be at the Centre of Nairobi.

The isolated, and isolating, geographical location of the Kenya National Theatre and Kenya Cultural Centre have had adverse economic implications for theatre practitioners who depend on box office sales for their income. They persistently perform to empty theatre houses which, as Frost indicates, are far removed from the proximity of their intended audiences who are mainly the working class population who cannot afford the cost of travel to these spaces. Yet the elite, who can afford to travel, are not interested in these popular performances.

Besides the problem of proximity, most of the theatre houses in Kenya are too expensive for theatre groups to hire. Many groups—apart from those performing school-set plays, where schools buy tickets and ferry their students to watch the shows—cannot recoup their overhead costs after paying the costs for the hire of the theatre. However, for many years the British Council Cultural Centre(s) auditoriums and French Cultural Centre in Nairobi—which are often accused, ironically, of cultural imperialism—became the preferred performance spaces for upcoming artists as they are considerably cheaper to hire and more accessible in terms of geographical proximity to ordinary residents of Nairobi. The theatre groups that perform in these spaces include: Falaki Arts (now known as Heartstrings Ensemble), Friends Theatre, Mbalamwezi, Fanaka Arts, Festival of Arts, and Uzinduzi Productions. The other alternative performance space was the University of Nairobi Education Theatre II, which readily opened its doors to a number of theatre groups from the early 1980s till the late 1990s.

The control and containment of the performance space in the postcolonial Kenyan state is not restricted only to the more physical theatre spaces, but also extends to virtual technologically mediated spaces such as radio and television. Before 1992, the state-owned radio and television station, Voice of Kenya (VOK)—which later became known as

Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC)—determined through a rigorous censorship board, the kind of radio and television dramas that could be aired to the public. Only apolitical plays (perceived by the board as morally correct) and developmental message oriented drama and comedies that were perceived as uncritical of the government were aired. However, this situation changed dramatically in 1992 with the end of the cold war era and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The authoritarian regime of the then president, Daniel Arap Moi, conceded to both internal and external pressure to open up the democratic space, amending Section 2A of the constitution that had previously denied Kenyans a number of freedoms and rights, such as the freedom of assembly and expression. The opening up of the democratic space heralded a more liberalised society: economically, socially, culturally, and politically. This liberalisation also saw the expansion of both physical and virtual performance spaces in the postcolonial Kenyan state. Theatre, especially the awareness-raising types, could now find their way into the previously restricted “open spaces” in various communities. For instance, the Centre for Law and Research International (CLARION) was able to tour its civic education forum theatre productions to different parts of the country to conscientise the populace on their rights as citizens.

Initially, this expansion of the democratic space, and the consequent liberalisation of the physical performance and virtual spaces, adversely affected the proscenium stage theatre. Many of its practitioners shifted to developmental and educational theatre where they were commissioned to do plays, which guaranteed them a more predictable income stream from international and non-governmental organisations. Many others also “migrated” to the new FM radio stations that were fast appearing. For instance, actors such as Walter Mongare (aka Nyambane or Baby Nyams), Daniel Ndambuki (aka Churchill), Jackie Nyaminde (aka Wilbroda), Felix Odiwuor (aka Jalang’o), James Chiaji (aka Mshamba), Chris Okinda, Larry Asego, and Cindy Ogana moved to FM radio stations as presenters.

It is the effect of this shift of theatre practitioners to FM radio’s virtual space as a performance space that the rest of this chapter will focus on. I am specifically interested in how the technologies of radio and mobile telephony have combined to create a theatre of the everyday life in Kenya. As such, I am not going to belabour the vast impact of technology in the development of theatre/drama performances, whose influence of course can never be underestimated.