

# African Studies Quarterly

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**African Theatre Women. Martin Banham, James Gibbs, Femi Osofisan, and Jane Plastow, eds. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002. 178 pp.**

The guest editor Jane Plastow's stated aim in this volume is "to contribute to the discussion and understanding of women's place in the development of African theatre" (xi), by going beyond theatre-women like Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Fatima Dike, Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme who have already received critical attention, to focus on playwrights and theatre practitioners lesser known outside their immediate areas of activity. This is a challenge that the contributors rise to admirably.

Dunton's essay on Nigerian playwright Stella Oyedepo (99-108) and Kuria's on Kenyan playwrights Mboya and Mwachofi (47-57) provide insights into the work of women who have not been published or performed often outside of their immediate locations. This does not mean that such works occur in a vacuum. Even those women whose works are well known to theatre enthusiasts outside Africa find mention here from a fresh perspective. Thus Ajayi's analysis of the later work by Onwueme (109-121) enables the reader to compare Onwueme and Oyedepo, both Nigerian playwrights. This is an opportunity to inflect the blanket term "women's theatre" or "women's issues" with subtlety and difference. It also fulfills the aim that Plastow indicates, of celebrating past contributions and linking them to present work. As such, the volume seems designed to enable the reader to appreciate the histories of struggle and engagement that underwrite the practice of theatre by women in postcolonial societies.

Coming from such a society myself, I especially appreciate the refusal of contributors like Kuria and Ntaangare (58-67) and Dogbe (83-98) to use conceptual categories like "feminism", "emancipation", "development" and "power" without problematizing them with reference to the realities of location, history and politics. Indeed, the crucial issues for women's theatre work in areas that have a history of violent contact with other civilizations, whether that violence is overtly political or covertly epistemological, inevitably foreground questions about what constitutes "feminism", "development" and "emancipation." Theatre is a public form, and within it the female body is presented as occupying a gendered public space. Ntaangare shows the implications of this for gender ideologies in transition in her analysis of depictions of women in Ugandan popular theatre. Thus, it is important not only to understand women's writing of plays, but also their active participation in the very making of theatre itself.

Kuria and Dogbe explore the social and political ramifications of active participation of women in all areas of theatre craft. Actual experiences of female theatre workers across Africa place these women in the context of the "modernising" society that they seeks to represent, understand and change : the society that they, as women, also have to struggle against. An example of this is the interview with Efua Sutherland's protege and co-worker, actress Adeline

Ama Buabeng by Sutherland-Addy (66-82). Buabeng recreates, through her memories, the theatre milieu in which Ghanaian theatre workers effected the fusion of what was the popular Concert Party genre in Ghana with scripted theatre.

Recording political and social change as a context for the present struggles and successes of women as women and as theatre-makers is also the aim of Matzke's essay reconstructing early urban women's theatre in Eritrea (29-46) from oral testimony of participants in the Eritrea Community Based Theatre Project. The experiences of women as part of community-based theatre projects are used as material for analysis in the essays by Matzke and Dogbe and also critiqued by Kuria for their inability, in specific cases, to accommodate and facilitate women's activity to engineer and control social change through theatre. Fatima Dike's revised script, "Glass Houses" with a preface by Blumberg (132-153) is one of the major attractions of the book for "third world" scholars like myself, who are hard put to access current work by authors from other "third world" areas which provide contemporary examples of a theatre activist's direct engagement with the urgent realities of her country.

Apart from this playscript, I would look at the book as divided into three parts. Some essays record histories of, and analyze texts written by, women. The account of Algerian women dramatists in the diaspora by Chakravarty Box (3-14), Dunton on Oyedapo, Ajayi on Onwueme, and Kuria on Kenyan playwrights Mboya and Mwachofi may fit into this set. Another set of essays record histories of representations, like the analysis of the figure of Isis in Tawfik al Hakim and Nawal al Sadawi, in an effort to refigure the Egyptian goddess in feminist terms by Amin (15-28) and Ntangaare's analysis of Ugandan popular theatre's images of women. Kuria's essay however, may also be seen as analyzing both text and representation within a wider context of community participation.

My third category is the account and analysis of women's participation in the making of theatre in capacities other than (though not excluding) writers, where I would also place the essays by Matzke, Dogbe and Sutherland-Addy's interview with Buabeng. Thus the volume focuses on theatre in a multiplicity of aspects: text, history, practice and sociology. These thematic foci are connected by an active concern for hearing the voices and taking note of the efforts of theatre-women across Africa. As such the volume would be useful to scholars and practitioners involved in theatre and performance studies as well as feminist scholars with an interest in the sociology of text and performance.

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