

(2ND APRIL, 1924 - 1ST NOVEMBER, 1978)

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1 - 25).

Joseph Coleman de Graft was born in Cape Coast, Ghana, on ~~21~~ April ²¹ 1924. He was educated at Mfantsipim School (1939-43), Achimota College (1944-46) and the University College of the Gold Coast (1950-53). In 1953, he married Leone Buckle, a Ghanaian Professional Accountant from Osu, Accra, who bore him a daughter and two sons. In the course of his career, he ^{ultimately} became an Associate Professor of Drama and Director of the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, in 1977. Earlier on, he had returned from the University to teach at Mfantsipim in 1955, where as Head of the English Department he initiated and developed drama as a subject ⁱⁿ the School's curriculum; ^{this} ~~and which~~, eventually led to the ^{founding} ~~institution~~ of the Mfantsipim Drama Laboratory. He was also instrumental in building up a program of annual staff productions in the School, which, in his own words, "became quite an exciting feature of the social life of Cape Coast".

~~MAZUNGUZU, (1980) : 15~~

A UNESCO fellowship in 1960 enabled him to travel to Britain and the United States to observe both the amateur and professional theatre and University work in drama. Nine years later, in 1969, a similar UNESCO grant took him to the University of Nairobi, Kenya, where he spent almost

eight years building up and teaching ~~Drama~~ drama courses at both the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. It was at the University of Nairobi, observed Professor Adzei Bekoe, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana in an eulogy in 1978, that "his talents as a playwright, actor and poet blossomed". He directed and produced several plays on stage, radio and television "half of which were from the works of Shakespeare". His ~~affinity with~~ ^{fondness for} Shakespeare was later to become a significant factor in his career, first, because it prevented him from a total allegiance to the African theatre, and second, ^{because} it represented his desire to "internationalise" the African theatre, as we shall see.

At the time of his death Joe de Graft - as he was popularly known all his life - was acclaimed an "elder statesman of Ghanaian letters", "a pillar in the theatre movement of Ghana" and "a creative genius of stature". He was also seen as "a man with a consuming passion for drama" who led "a life fully committed and devoted to the performing arts of music and drama". In the end, he established himself in

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(1979) . 2

the eyes of the younger generation of Ghanaian
 writers and lovers of theatre arts as a
 "monumental figure, teacher and practitioner
 in one".

WEST AFRICA (1979) : 16

When Joe de Graft left the University in
 1953, his world in Africa had become exciting
 and momentous. The First Congress of Negro
 Writers and Artists to be held in Paris was only
 three years away. In the meantime, there was a
 gathering momentum of two complementary forces
 in Africa - African nationalism and its attend-
 ant Cultural Revival. Inside Ghana, around, 1953,

By Kwame Nkrumah had broken away from the "gra-
 dualism" of the United Gold Coast Convention
 (U.G.C.C.) and formed the Convention People's
 Party (C.P.P.), whose agitations had put the
 country on a firm course towards Independence.
 The tradition of political journalism in the
 country, established by men such as Rev. S.R.B.
 Atto-Ahuma, J.E. Casely-Hayford, J.B. Danquah and
 Kobina Sekyi, was given a completely new twist in

popularity by the C.P.P., for the latter used its party newspapers to raise the consciousness of the people to support the nationalist cause. Through its agitations, the C.P.P. also created a mood of nationalism in the country which encouraged creative artists such as Ephraim Amu (the musician-nationalist), Michael Dei-Anang (poet), and J. Benibengor Blay (fiction writer) to provide, in their own individual ways, leadership in the early stages of the Cultural Revival. Later, they were to be joined by Kofi Antubam (artist), Mrs. Efua Sutherland (playwright), and J.H. Kwabena Nketia (traditional poet and musician) all of whom helped Nkrumah in diverse ways to set up the Cultural Institutions of post-Independent Ghana. In the meantime, the emergent theatre of the country in the mid-fifties, was dominated entirely by the performances and activities of ^{itinerant} ~~interant~~ concert party troupes whose existence dates back to the thirties. Thus, long before ^g ~~the~~ Kwame Nkrumah launched the nationalist struggle in 1949, these troupes had established a tradition of direct and widespread appeal to the masses, a factor which the nationalists exploited in their favour. Even Concert Party names such as "Ghana Trio" and Bob Cole's "Dynamic Ghana Trio" which were

current by 1954, had anticipated the new name of the Gold Coast, a fact which seemed to suggest ^a ~~the~~ firm link between the nationalists and the concert party theatre. The drive towards complete identification in the ~~Concert Party~~ theatre of the fifties, particularly in the context of the cultural nationalism of the time, later culminated in the National Theatre Movement of the sixties. In all these developments, the literary theatre of the fifties was by comparison still asleep, content only to project the occasional adaptation of a foreign text, musical, or cantata play. As a Graduate Teacher of English and the initiator of the Mfantsipim Drama Laboratory from 1955-60, Joe de Graft appeared completely unaffected by these strong nationalist aspirations of the popular theatre. He was also unmoved in his love for Shakespeare's plays, since he was still active in producing and acting in plays of "the English 'classics', and School Certificate set plays". It was much later, in the early sixties, that he started to develop a sympathy

for the aspirations of cultural nationalism in Africa. Nevertheless, he did so with the utmost caution and circumspection. In a review of Abruquah's novel, The Catechist in 1968, he decried ⁱⁿ ~~of~~ his colleague writers what he termed the "almost paranoic search for distinctively Ghanaian forms of expression". He also contended in African Literature Today ~~(1976)~~ ¹⁹⁷⁶ that "modern dramatists are fundamentally individualists with a fierce pride in their individual effort, their unique ideas, their artistic integrity, and their achievement". In his view, therefore, nothing should be done to reverse the trend. In an era of mass political parties, mass movements and the dominance of collective traditions, including obsolete family traditions, it was necessary, from Joe de Graft's point of view, to assert a freedom of choice and an individual claim to responsibility in the conduct of life. One must be able to come to terms with human life from one's own distinctive perception of it. This, in effect, is the theme of Joe de Graft's first published play, Sons and Daughters.

OKYEAME (1966): 64 C

James Ofoosu, the central character in the play, has a wealthy and aspiring middle-class household, which includes two sons who are already overseas, one a qualified medical officer, and the other, "a fully qualified chartered accountant". In addition, he has firm plans for two other children: Maanan, his daughter, to become "Ghana's first lady lawyer", and a son, Aaron, to be an engineer. Unfortunately for him, these two children have their own plans and ambitions in life, Maanan aspiring to be a dancer and Aaron wishing to be a painter; ^{these} artistic inclinations ^{upset} ~~that are greatly spurned~~ by their father. ~~Until~~ Sometime later, in the course of Maanan's apprenticeship, ~~Lawyer Bonu~~ Lawyer Bonu, an elderly friend to the family who had promised to secure her admission to a Law School in London, decides to make amorous advances towards Maanan. This incident shocks James Ofoosu out of his "folly" and in the end, he grants his children the right to a free choice of their own careers.

A reviewer in West Africa (1967) found the play "too much like the romantic stories of women's magazines". The Times Literary Supplement (1964) described it as "an illuminating failure", since its characters "display their

dramatic functions on their sleeves to such an extent that there is a total absence of surprise". Jo Cameron in Black Orpheus (1966) observed that the play is "irritating to read" because there is a "curious lack of ardour" as though its author "knew very little about the actual standpoint of either an embattled parent or a restless child". He himself says of the play that he "was trying to make young people aware that their lives were important (and) that they had a right to examine life as they saw it from their own perspective". It seems, therefore, that

MAZINGUMZC
(1980) : 17

H ^{appears to be little}
Sons and Daughters ~~is perhaps nothing~~ more than an

exploratory statement, ~~an assertion of the author's own~~

J ^{about}
~~individualism in a bewildering context~~ of rapid departures

from accepted traditions. ~~Joe de Graft seems to be~~

~~shouting out at the last post of parental resistance to~~

J ~~change in a situation where~~ Everything is either being

^{is}
knocked down or collapsing under its own weight. ^{Such} ~~Such~~

^{discussion}
~~a theme~~ of social change was ^{common} ~~very much current~~ in the

poetry and novels of the fifties. It ~~was~~ ^{became} also the theme

of Ene Henshaw's plays of the early sixties which,

~~Joe de Graft confessed in an interview with Bernth~~

J ~~Lindsay in 1976~~ ^{he} literally helped to introduce

into Ghanaian schools in an effort to build up a drama program. Moreover, as the Director of the

Ghana Drama Studio, a Research Fellow at the Institute

of African Studies, and Head of the Drama Division

of the School of Music and Drama from 1961-1969, ~~and~~

de Graft was ^{in a position} ~~better~~ placed to appreciate the effects

of social change on African institutions. He was

also well placed, as a poet and budding playwright,

to record it for the theatre in a much more authori-

tative way. The ~~noted failure of~~ Sons and

Daughters ~~was the only play in this regard was~~

~~probably due to the fact that it was his~~

first attempt to achieve a creative correspondence

between his personal convictions and the outer

realities of contemporary Africa. Unfortunately,

this attempt fail^{ed} because he ^{was} ~~is~~ unable to integrate the

two fundamental concerns in the play - individualism and

social change - within a common frame of reference. The

~~two~~ ^{stand} themes ~~hang~~ ^{stand} out as two separate convictions, which,

~~had not been given sufficient time to mature in his~~

~~artistic temperament.~~ While other African writers were

reasonably clear about the need to assert the collective

consciousness of the African past, Joe de Graft

remains undecided in this play, unable to define

clearly where his loyalty should lie. *This uncertainty undermines* ~~Indeed,~~

~~if the need for social change is merely to assert~~

~~one's individualism then there is nothing probably~~

~~to be said either for the play's integrity, originality, and~~

~~or ultimate moral vision.~~

The Ghana Drama Studio, opened in 1961, by ~~the~~

designed to resemble

Kwame Nkrumah, was ~~built on the design of a tradi-~~

tional Ghanaian household. *part of* ~~it formed part of Dr.~~

Nkrumah's ~~conscious and systematic~~ *nationalistic* ^{was} policy to create

relevant artistic and cultural institutions to meet

the demands of the new State of Ghana. Bodies such

as the Arts Council, the Institute of African Studies,

The Ghana Film Industry, G.B.C.-T.V. and ^{the} Bureau of

Ghana Languages were therefore either created for the

first time or given new orientations and emphasis.

All of them had complementary roles and objectives.)

~~In addition to other expectations,~~ The Institute of

African Studies, for example, was to develop the Arts

of Ghana and other parts of Africa in close relation

to Ghanaian traditions while expressing "the ideas and

aspirations of our people in our contemporary era". The School of Music and Drama was to build up knowledge through research in order to train students "to develop vital theatre traditions in our own image". The Arts Council of Ghana also had the mandate to create a National Theatre Movement, whose central objective was "to stimulate the growth of new artistic idioms, new forms or new styles of music, dance and drama that have their roots in African tradition, but which also express the contemporary Ghanaian experience".

FUNCTIONS OF THE INST. OF AFRICAN STUDIES
1970: 2

OKYEAME (1964) : 55

Q All these ^{policies} ~~functions~~ must have ~~clearly~~ influenced

NKETIA, "INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN THEATRE WORKSHOP (Accra, 20th February, 1978) : 3

the work of Joe de Graft when he served simultaneously with these institutions from 1961 - 1968.

As he later admitted in an interview, his "amorphous program" in all these institutions gave him "a lot

of scope" and ~~it~~ ushered in a period of intense

experimentation and an active flirtation with

~~current ideas on the continent.~~ ^{leading political ideas.} His first play at

MAZUNGUMZO (1980) : 1

the Drama Studio was produced in 1962. In Village

Investment, a one-act play, a young boy from the

village is purposely sent to the city with the hope that after he had become sufficiently enlightened in the ways of the city, he would return and help the villagers to improve and develop. Unfortunately, city life proves too attractive and too seductive, thus preventing him from going back to the village, a theme not unrelated ^{to what can be found in} ~~for example~~ to Cyprian Ekwensi's People of the City (1954) and Jagua Nana (1961).

~~Shortly after,~~ ^{then} de Graft ^{from} followed ^{this} ~~it~~ up with Ananse and the Gum Man, which he called

~~one of his smaller plays. In itself an~~

~~adaptation of a traditional folktale, Joe de~~

~~that he~~ ^{of} ~~de Graft~~ ^{de Graft} ~~rather~~ adapted ~~it~~ to the stage, film

and radio ~~in that respect~~. Kweku Ananse, the

Spider, a symbol of shrewdness and cunning in

Akan mythology, contrives death ^{so he will} ~~and is~~ ~~reborn~~

^{be} ~~to~~ buried on the huge family farm ^{where he} ~~with the sole~~

~~can consume~~ ~~aim of consuming~~ all the harvest alone. The

farm robbery ~~that is~~ discovered after Ananse's

funeral shocks his son, Kweku Tsin, who decides

CULTURAL EVENTS 46
(1968) : II

to erect a 'Gum Man' to trap the culprit. Ananse is trapped and the whole village comes face to face with Kweku Ananse's unbridled gluttony. ~~Although~~ ^{the} stage version makes use of folktale ~~material~~, ^{elements such as a} narrator, ~~and~~ mime, ~~including~~ ^{but} drumming and singing, ^{it} was the central drive of humour, fun and sheer entertainment coupled with a lesson for mankind which the Ghana Film Corporation's version of the play, No Tears For Ananse, effectively emphasised in its 1965 production. After his death, the play was once again returned to the stage in Kenya in 1979, where a reviewer, Nigel Slade, observed in The Standard of Nairobi that "in its vigour and broad humour" ~~the play is literally "a living tribute to its writer".~~

In the same year that No Tears For Ananse was released, Hamile (or Tongo Hamlet) came out as a Ghana Film product, directed by Terry Bishop. It was specifically produced for presentation at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival in London. The film was based on the original stage production performed earlier in the same year by students of the School of Music and Drama ^{at} ~~in~~ the University of Ghana. Although ~~de~~ ^{admired and} Graft ~~had a consistent admiration~~ ^{directed} ~~for and very often directed~~ Shakespeare's plays throughout

Hamlet

his drama career, ~~that play~~ was his first experiment ~~to~~ 14

adapt^{ing} a major Shakespeareⁿ play to ~~an entirely~~^a Ghanaian setting and

~~background~~ and audience. ~~It was evident that Joe de Graft was~~

~~attempting to~~ ^c playing his part in extend^{ing} the dimensions of the Ghanaian

theatre^l to accommodate a universal experience in a distinctively

Ghanaian setting, an experiment which was in line with the

aspirations of the National Theatre Movement. However, while ^{the}

costumes, props, decorations and ~~the~~^g sets were recognized as ^z

rooted in the Northern Ghanaian Culture of the Frafra people,

the text remained unaltered, except where it did not make

sense in a Frafra community or ^g where ^g archaic words obscured

the meaning^g. The relevance of Hamlet to a contemporary Ghanaian

audience is thus achieved through the skilful deployment of

cultural symbols, including ^g especially setting and costume.

~~It was in this sense that a reviewer of the film in West Africa~~

~~(1965) described it as 'a real Ghana achievement'. Later, Joe~~

~~de Graft was to compose a poem, 'Daemonic Love' which tells the~~

~~story of a wife who returns from the 'hills of Tongo' to reclaim~~

~~her husband, temporarily possessed by another. The wife restores~~

~~her confidence in her powers to do so after a spiritual consulta-~~

tion 'deep in the caves of Tongo', and it is the striking portrait of the wife's confidence which revitalises an otherwise familiar story.

BENEATH THE JAZZ AND
BRASS (1977) : 20

~~The conflict between Joe de Graft's personal convictions and the ultimate vision of his works emerges~~

Q ~~once again around 1968. While the convictions in his~~ But, while de Graft's works

~~works~~ seemed to support the aspirations of the National

Theatre Movement, his stated personal convictions and ideas were completely ~~opposed~~. In an interview with

Cosmo Pieterse ~~in Cultural Events in Africa (1968), he~~ ^{at odds with the ideology of the Movement,}
declared

he ~~stated~~ that he did not believe playwrights "must evolve any one form of popular theatre for everybody". He added,

"to me, the important thing is not coming in solidly on the side of any particular movement". His creative urge therefore was on the side which he ^{found} "finds" exciting for

the moment". ~~The truth about Joe de Graft was that he regarded himself as an incorrigible polyglot. As he~~

~~reveals in Messages: Poems from Ghana (1971), his~~

~~imaginative life was "like a fire that feeds on more than charcoal: butane gas, electricity, palm-oil, petrol as~~

~~well as dry cowdung and faggots have all kept it burning".~~

confused allegiance to both
This ~~mis~~ of African life and Western civilization, characteristic of
de Graft, can also be seen in the
~~is the uneasy image we get of John, the~~ central character

in his next play, Through a Film Darkly (1974). Two unfor-

tunate love affairs in the past - one with Rebecca, his

former Ghanaian girl-friend, and the other with Molly, an

English girl whom John meets in London in the course of

his studies - co-exist uneasily in him, as part of his

shelved, but vital memory, until two incidents rake

them up. First, is the appearance in his house of

Feyinka's white wife, and second, the re-surfacing of

Rebecca. These two incidents bring him emotional ruin

and totally destroy him. Although much has been made

of the theme of racial hatred in the play, John's mere

refusal to shake hands with Feyinka's white wife (the

only scene of racial hatred we witness in the play)

cannot be the centre of de Graft's intentions.

John banishes Rebecca's love from his memory when he

meets Molly in London. In turn, Molly betrays John's

total surrender of his love to her and, in bitterness,

John returns to Ghana and marries Serwah. It is at this

point that Rebecca suddenly reappears to remind him of

his perfidy. On learning that John is now married - not

to Molly whom she knows, but to Serwah, a fellow Ghanaian -

she walks off in utter frustration only to meet her death.

However, unable to contain Rebecca's memory and the perfidy

of Molly, John seeks refuge in suicide. From all this, it

would appear that the symbolism of John's love burdens and

faté is intended to be remarkably similar to the bewildering

experience of contemporary Africa: the Continent, suggests

Joe de Graft, cannot harbour ^r two irreconcilable historical

burdens - its cultural traditions and Western experience -

~~both~~ ^{This} at the same time. ~~It~~ ^g is bound to lead to ~~a~~ disaster,

particularly where these "burdens" are negative and full of

bitter memories.

For ~~Joe~~ ^g de Graft the poet, the result of Africa's record

at amalgamation, of reconciling her values with European values,

has been particularly unfortunate and negative. The total

environment of the Continent seems to abound with violence

and disintegration. Indeed, Beneath the Jazz and the Brass ^{SS},

~~(1975)~~, which has been described as ~~Joe~~ de Graft's "inner

autobiography" records an increasingly personal and intimate

disillusionment with the political ^{problems} ~~perfidies~~ of the continent.

~~The~~ ² De Graft's intense sensitivity and forthrightness shine

throughout the collection, compelling attention and obliging
the reader to make a choice on each subject ~~matter~~^{treated.} But it
is the total atmosphere of ~~often~~ unremitting pessimism and
disillusionment, powerfully rendered, which seems to dominate
the poems. ~~As he also clearly reveals in the poems,~~ Joe De
Graft's profound awareness of violence and disintegration in
the African environment starts in Ghana from the mid-sixties
where he records the betrayals, recklessness and violence of

the post-Nkrumah regime. However, it was in Kenya, at the
request of the World Council of Churches in 1975, that this
awareness matured into a full artistic statement^{or} an extended
creative metaphor. Muntu was that achievement, ~~for~~^{one} he consid-
ered it "a major breakthrough" in ~~this~~ creative writing. In

~~an interview with Benath Lindiers in MUMBAI shortly before~~

~~he returned to Ghana via Eastar 1977,~~ Joe de Graft pointed out

that Muntu "spans the whole of African man's existence, from the
beginning to the latest political murders and military coups in
Africa". The broad sweep of the history of the African continent

and the destabilising² effects of alien contact and influences
made it ambitious and thought-provoking theater,
~~are, in the words of a reviewer in the Nairobi Sunday Nation~~

(1975) "~~full of thought-provoking ideas~~". Its absolute

concentration on ideas, in the tradition of Brecht and Beckett,

offers a "very deep piece of theatre". Moreover, Muntu's

provided

eloquent testimony ^{on} of the contemporary African predicament is,

SUNDAY NATION
(1975): 6

~~in the view of Seth Adegala in the East African Standard of~~

~~December 1975, a reflection of the "true inner nature" of~~

~~Africans, "what we have been, what we are and may be - and~~

~~what the future may hold for us."~~

CH A significant development in this work is ~~de~~ ^{de} Graft's total affirmation of African culture in the play. Whereas in his earlier adaptations and original plays, ~~de~~ ^{de} Graft had experimented with forms and techniques of African expression, including settings and cultural symbols which seem extraneous to their themes and concerns, in contrast, Muntu's total framework is the Akan creation mythology which is effectively employed at the beginning and the end of the story. God's nearness to His creation and His subsequent withdrawal from human beings as a result of their greediness become symbolic parallels of the Muntu family's inner closeness to each other and their dispersal and disintegration when greed sets in in their contacts with the ("water people") and the "desert people". Moreover, the delightful African costumes and background, the songs and mimes, as observed at the premier production in Nairobi, "were so naturally incorporated into the play that they were a part of it, and not

as usually happens, a mere interlude. The total integration of African culture and expression into the thematic design of the play marks a significant shift in ~~Joe~~ de Graft's perception of African culture in his plays. He comes to terms with his roots in African culture in a reconciliation which strengthens his contribution to the mainstream of the New Theatre Movement in Africa. It is also significant that

soon after Muntu, his last work should be an adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth. Mambo, as his version was called, finally consolidates for the reader ~~the~~ de Graft's vision of contemporary African politics as the ^{locus} ~~heart~~ of the "latest

political murders and military coups". Professor J.R. Northan MABONGUZO
(1980): 14
De Graft's dramatic work was
of Bristol University has observed that Joe de Graft's "recent
production of Mambo is an indication of the new life that he

brought to the Ghanaian Drama scene", a new life which was
becoming increasingly political ^{just before} ~~is perspective but which was~~
unfortunately terminated ^{eventually} ~~by~~ his sudden death on ~~15~~ November ^{1,}
1978.

It has been said that Joe de Graft "fought doggedly to resist any tendency towards insularity in African literature, which he wished to integrate into a lively and varied world tradition." While this was true of his critical essays and ~~WEST AFRICA (1979)~~
adaptations of Shakespearean plays, ~~the~~ de Graft increasingly

came to realize^z in the end that it was by helping

to create a distinct national literature that one could

talk meaningfully about integrating it into a world litera-

ture. For^g the world tradition of literature is made up of

collective national literatures of the stature of Muntu. It

is in this sense that Muntu may be regarded as a ^{Culmination} ~~consolidation~~

of ~~de~~ de Graft's consistent admiration for his roots in

Africa culture and his desire to mould it effectively for ar-

tistic purposes. However, it should also be added that

his works embody a profound ambivalence, which in effect,

reveals a certain unwillingness to be wholly loyal to the

cultural assumptions of either Africa or Europe. His

ability to distance himself from any commitment to a culture

system reflects a weakness which probably goes beyond his

works. Certainly, in recording similar turbulent tran-

sitions in their societies, ^{great} artists ^{all over the world} such as ~~Sir Walter Scott,~~

~~Thomas Hardy, Achebe and Soyinka~~ reflected deep-seated ambi-

guities and ambivalences in their attitudes and in their

presentations. Yet, there was always a "moral centre" to

their works. There was always a firm impression of an inner

resilience, an inner coherence and strength of artistic

integrity which is hard to find in the works of ~~de~~ de Graft

outside Muntu. Since he carefully divorced his personal

convictions from the convictions embodied in his works, one is unable to understand the whole man either through his works alone or through his critical utterances. - On the whole, however, Joe de Graft's contribution as a poet, playwright, actor, Teacher and Administrator of the Arts in Ghana and elsewhere will always remain an inspiring legacy, for his works ~~in effect~~^g have become very much a part of the mainstream struggle of contemporary African theatre^h to attain full identity, maturity and worldwide acceptance.

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