

University Report

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PETER OTAI: Hello, this is Peter Otai with another edition of "University Report". A drama production in Nigeria, and improving study techniques in Ghana make up today's programme.

The traditional subject heading, 'English Language and Literature', that's thrown like a blanket over a wide range of subjects would be a difficult one to cover all the work we're to hear about. And to break with convention I'm coming to turn the expression back to front and begin with the literature.

Nowadays there are enough Drama Departments and Theatre Workshops to make the point that literature is what you read and drama is what you do. Traditional drama is certainly action-packed but the foreign drama that students find on their syllabus is often packed in book form. There's a growing opportunity to inject life into the pages and just such an opportunity was taken at the University of Ibadan recently, when Shakespeare's play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was performed in the Department of Theatre Arts.

I know I'm stating the obvious when I say that drama is about people, but it is the interest drama takes in portraying characters that makes it a subject worthy of study. Human behaviour is an interest drama shares with the social sciences, psychology, education - and even politics!

Michael Gregory has been a visiting professor at the University of Ibadan. During his visit he was persuaded by members of the Department of Theatre Arts to give some seminars on theatre production. The seminars made him realise that a better way of teaching production would be to direct a production himself.

Dapo Adelugba was in the audience and afterwards he asked Michael Gregory what his aims and purpose had been.

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DAPO ADELUGBA: What was your slant in this production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"? Were you aiming, for instance, at an Africanised version?

MICHAEL GREGORY: No, not in the normal sense in which people use the term an Africanised version. Not in the sense, for example, in which Rotimi took Oedipus the King and made a play of it, based upon African cultural strands.

Now, I think the play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" itself is culture-free. It's comedy is a comedy which is in common, with all cultures - a comedy of young love; a comedy of the arrogance of the uneducated occasionally, a comedy of sexual possessiveness and jealousy - and this doesn't need particularly Africanising. It's there already in Africa, as it is in America or Britain.

ADELUGBA: Were there any African element then in your production?

GREGORY: Oh yes, that's a different matter, because the last thing I wanted to produce was a production that would look as though it had been done in Toronto or in London. I wanted a production that had been done in Ibadan by Nigerian actors.

The Nigerian actors from the Department gave it a particular quality of their own, a quality which I greatly admired, of pace and enthusiasm and concentration. I also had an excellent musical score, done by Tunji Oyelana, the band leader and musical director of the Theatre Arts Department, which combined itself elements of African pop - which is rapidly becoming universal - and of Western popular music. We also used materials for the costumes which were local materials - locally obtainable - and colours which people are familiar with.

OTAI: Now, if you know the play you'll remember that as well as the human characters there are supernatural fairies - and they're just as important as the other characters. It seems that Michael Gregory didn't try and import English fairies but took another look at what Shakespeare had written, and had a fresh idea.

GREGORY: Well, the idea behind the dancers was to establish the fairies not as ethereal beings - a spirit - but for what they are really in Shakespeare's play, an element of humanity, an essential physical element, dominated by immediate desires.

GREGORY: And the dancers. The lullaby dance, a warding-off of the devil was done as a dance such as people might do to, as a charm, to keep off the evil. The dance when Titania is about to make love to Bottom is a dance in celebration of physical love.

ADELUGBA: What has been your experience with Nigerian actors, especially student actors, during the preparation period?

GREGORY: Oh, it has been a very rewarding experience, and an enriching one, by the end result.

OTAI: And I'm going to interrupt here because I think we learn more from the difficulties than from anything else. And there were difficulties.

GREGORY: One, that they were not used to speaking English lines and also involving themselves in what they were doing. They wanted to an extent to elocute the production of the text. And secondly, they were not acquainted with the type of work habits, which I wanted them to have to produce a polished production. So we had problems initially about punctuality at rehearsals; concentration during rehearsals; homework done between rehearsals. But they were very good at realising what I wanted - what was needed for the production. And their energy and enthusiasm produced qualities which, I think, are very much their qualities - the concentration of the actors with what they were doing during the performance, the pace with which they did it, the enthusiasm with which they did it, made it an experience I'd like to repeat.

ADELUGBA: Would you then say that there were problems of intelligibility during the actual nights of performance?

GREGORY: There probably were for members of the audience, because the members of the audience, at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, is a diverse audience. On the other hand, I think people lay far too much stress in Shakespeare, on the language. Now this may seem heretical, coming from a linguist, but Shakespeare exists as a playwright, because he writes good plays as theatrical action, and the most important thing to get right are the relationships between the people on the stage: who they are; what they are; what they are doing; and words are part of the vehicle which does this. I don't think anybody in the audience - expatriot or Nigerian or East African, wherever they came from - would not have known the relationship of one person to another.

ADELUGBA: Yes. Can we talk briefly then, about possible trends or directions in the African university theatres of the future?

GREGORY: Yes, I certainly would like to speak about that. I think the university theatres have got to be very clear about what their main function is to be. I think that is to produce actors, directors, designers and writers for the theatre, the great theatre that is possible here. Until that theatre is here, the role of producing historians and critics of the theatre is a minor one. When the theatre is here, when Nigeria has a theatre, which both in indigenous languages and in English is an alive and active theatre involving all members of the community, then the important role might well be to produce the commentators, historians of that theatre, as well as the people who have created it.

ADELUGBA: Well thank you very much, Professor Gregory.

OTAI: And talking to Michael Gregory of the Department of Theatre Arts in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, was Dapo Adelugba.

What I haven't mentioned is that Michael Gregory is first of all a linguist and that it was to study linguistics that he came as visiting professor. Our second guest in "University Report" is also a linguist. Dr. Florence Dolphyne is a member of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Ghana and she also teaches in the University's Language Centre. Christine Oppong asked her to talk about the special study programme at the Centre. It's aimed to help students read more quickly and study more efficiently; and it's the effective study techniques that Florence Dolphyne has been teaching.

DR. FLORENCE

DOLPHYNE: This involves giving them short lectures, for them to practice note-taking. Now we give them these model lectures, and after they have taken down notes, we show them the form in which the notes should have been taken, and then after discussions with them, we let them write out the lecture again from the notes that they have taken. So that it is a sort of two-way programme, to help them as an exercise in note-taking as well as an exercise in essay writing. And then we discuss with them the questions of expression and organising of material for their essays and for their lectures, lectures generally.

CHRISTINE

OPPONG: What particular problems do you find that the students encounter with the English language?

DOLPHYNE: The problems may be put in two ways. You have the reading problem which is because they haven't really had much practise in reading generally, but this we hope to correct with the reading programme, this speed reading programme.

The other side of it, you know, related to the written language, is mainly a difficulty in expression, which is basically due to the fact that English is not their first language and they therefore get a lot of interference from their own Ghanaian languages.

OPPONG: Are there as yet any textbooks attempting to deal with this problem?

DOLPHYNE: As far as Ghana is concerned, there is a textbook that is coming out written by Mr. Sey of the English Department in Legon and he deals mainly with written English, vocabulary and expression, mainly. There are a few books written in English for second language speakers, but these are not particularly geared to Ghanaian speakers and one must select material which is relevant for Ghanaians and which is not.

OTAI: That's a problem that a great many members of university teaching staff have to face, whatever their subject. There's still a shortage of text books and other teaching material that caters for the precise needs of students in a particular country. It's this inefficiency of using irrelevant material that Florence Dolphyne is trying to overcome.

DOLPHYNE: I myself have two books in mind. There is one which after the manuscript is ready which is for teaching spoken English to Ghanaian speakers; and it deals partly with the problem of interference of the first language into English, so that the exercise, the drills that are provided in this text will include things that proved particularly difficult for Ghanaian speakers.

The other one is grammar and expression; and these are also problems that are mainly due to interference from the first language, and the material for this was based on the English of secondary school students.

OPPONG: Has anything been done to examine the different kinds of problems which different Ghanaian language speakers have?

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DOLPHYNE: I think individuals in the Linguistics Department and in the Linguistics Section of the Institute of African Studies have been handling this from the particular language that they have been studying. But there haven't been any sort of combined efforts towards this goal.

OTAI: Florence Dolphyne also teaches one of the major Ghanaian languages, Twi, and this gives her added perception and sympathy with students trying to improve their second language, English.

DOLPHYNE: I teach the structure of Akan. I say Akan now because these days we tend to combine both Fante and Twi in the teaching programme, and we just use the general term Akan. So I teach the structure of Akan at the undergraduate level, and in the Language Centre too we have a programme for training teachers of Teacher Training Colleges - you know, tutors who teach the teacher students, that is. We train them to become better teachers of the Ghanaian languages, the individual Ghanaian languages. So I have been doing both types of teaching in the Linguistics Department and in the Language Centre. And as far as research is concerned I've been doing some work on dialect study. Now this, I think, is important, because there has been a move in Ghana towards unifying the orthography of the Akan language, which now has three different orthographies for three major dialects; and I think the more one knows about the differences between the dialects the more likely it is to have this unified form more easily acceptable to everybody.

OTAI: Dr. Florence Dolphyne, a Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Ghana, describing some of the range of subjects belonging to her department and also to the University's Language Centre where she also teaches. And she was talking to Christine Oppong in Accra.

Earlier in the programme I mentioned that another activity at the Language Centre was teaching students to read at speed. This is a skill that could benefit students just as much as improved note-taking and the others we've heard about, so we're hoping to include news of it in a future programme. But for now this is Peter Otai hoping you'll join me next week for another edition of "University Report". Goodbye.

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