

FEMI OSOFISAN

(16 June 1946-)

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BOOKS:

- Kolera Kolej (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1975); [African Literature Series, 2]
A Restless Run of Locusts (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1975);
The Chattering and the Song (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1977);
Who's Afraid of Tai Solarin? (Calabar: Scholar's Press, 1978);
Once Upon Four Robbers (Ibadan: BIO Educational Publishers, 1980);
Morountodun and Other Plays (Includes Morountodun, No More the Wasted Breed, and Red Is the Freedom Road), (Lagos: Longman Publishers, 1983); [Africa 1982];
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage (Ibadan: Evans Publishers, 1986);
Midnight Hotel (Ibadan: Evans Publishers, 1986);
Two One-Act Plays (Includes The Oriki of a Grasshopper and Altine's Wrath), (Ibadan: New Horn Press Limited, 1986);
Birthdays Are Not for Dying (Ibadan: New Horn Press Limited, forthcoming);
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels (Ibadan: New Horn Press, Limited, forthcoming).

SELECTED PRODUCTIONS:

- Oduduwa, Don't Go!, Ibadan, 1967;
You Have Lost Your Fine Face, University of Ibadan, 1969;
A Restless Run of Locusts, Akure, 1969;
The Chattering and the Song, Unibadan Masques, University of Ibadan 1976;
Who's Afraid of Solarin?, University of Ibadan, 1977;
Once Upon Four Robbers, University of Ibadan, 1978;
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage, University of Ibadan, 1978; revised, University of Benin, 1984;
Morountodun, Kakaun Sela Kompany, University of Ibadan, 1979; revised, 1980;
Birthdays Are Not For Dying, University of Ibadan, 1980;
The Oriki of a Grasshopper, University of Ibadan, 1981; revised University of Benin, 1985;
Altine's Wrath, University of Benin, 1984;
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, University of Benin 1984; revised, University of Ife, 1986.

United Colours, under pseudonym of Chibba Launko
(Ibadan: Bio-Educational Books, 1987)

Femi Osofisan is a man who wears many hats. Playwright, poet, theatre director, university professor, literary theorist, and newspaper critic, he is part of a generation who have experienced Nigerian independence as an empty slogan. Thus, he fashions a committed literature designed to shatter the enduring shackles of religion, custom, and colonialism and to stimulate a confident, imaginatively self-critical sensibility capable of charting a course towards a more humane, egalitarian society. Writing in English, he targets his dramas at those whose education enables them to manage the nation's destiny, but his manipulation of the theatre's rich non-verbal resources, coupled with an exploitation of indigenous, African performance aesthetics, means that his work has the potential to reach an even wider audience. Within Nigeria he is often viewed as a radical intent upon completely destroying the past, but his radicalism actually builds upon the best of tradition while seeking to encourage pervasive change.

Born Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan in Erunwon, a Yoruba farming village located in what was then known as the Western Region, the playwright was three ~~years~~ months old when his father died. Early experiences of poverty were ~~to~~ to affect him profoundly, ^{causing him to} ~~for not only did he~~ lack a sense of stability, ^{and to be} dependent upon a variety of relatives who could house him and later assist in paying his school fees at Government College, Ibadan. ^{As a consequence,} ~~But equally importantly,~~ ^{later} he disavow^{ed} the privileged position of the educated elite ^{and} ~~stands~~ in favor of an ideological identification with the impoverished, Nigerian masses.

Ibadan

While at Government College ^{Ibadan} he wrote short stories and poems and edited the school journal. Graduating in 1965, Osofisan won a scholarship to the University of Ibadan, where he wrote scripts for various student events and eventually became president of the Dramatic Society. As part of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in French, he spent 1967-68 at Senegal's Université de Dakar, where he trained with the Daniel Sorano Theatre Company while earning a Diplome d'Etudes Superieures. Over the next two years the fledgling playwright gained additional experience in acting and directing for both theatre and television through his affiliation with the Orisun Theatre, a professional company established at the University of Ibadan by drama pioneer Wole Soyinka and managed by Dapo Adelugba during Soyinka's incarceration.

A Restless Run of Locusts, one of Osofisan's earliest published plays, was written in 1969 while he was senior at ^{the} ^{University of} Ibadan. At the time Nigeria was engulfed in a civil war, which had erupted less than a decade after independence from Britain. Like several other African nations, the country had already experienced military coups. To young, university men like Osofisan, it seemed apparent that the generation which had negotiated freedom was bankrupt, and the stirring rhetoric of the Negritude movement of the 1930's and '40's had no counterpart in the socio-political realm. To them, so it seemed, would fall the task of building a nation and forging an art directly confronting the crises challenging the African continent. They rejected the style and vision of the earlier generation of poets and

— e.g.,
playwrights ~~like~~ Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, ~~and~~ J.P. Clark —
in favor of an art largely devoid of a metaphysical orientation
and reflective of a contemporary, urban idiom.

Thus, in this early play protest against the devastating effects of political greed, as evidenced in the Western Region elections of 1965 and 1966, was strident, and the manipulation of plot, transparent. Chief Michael Kuti, representative of an old guard intent upon consolidating privilege inherited from the British, and Sanda Adeniyi, the young reformer eager to avenge the political thuggery suffered by his brother, both resort to campaign violence. Left to mourn their deaths are the women who recognize their failings, love them nonetheless, but can fashion no effective action against their husbands' excesses.

A similarly desolate landscape, in which the oppressed assume the violent characteristics of their oppressors and leave the women to mourn their deaths, obtains in You Have Lost Your Fine Face, originally produced in 1969 at the University of Ibadan and later retitled and published as Red Is the Freedom Road. A disguised commentary on the regime of Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon who had come to power in 1966, the play is set within the context of nineteenth century, intra-Yoruba warfare. It traces the meteoric rise of a warrior who must brutally renounce all allegiance to his own people as part of a strategy to regain their freedom. Though Akanji mounts a successful counterattack, he also unleashes a new round of violence in which the soldiers' promises of liberation and dignity soon degenerate into looting and death.

Graduating from the University of Ibadan in 1969, Osofisan

initially rejected a scholarship for postgraduate work, preferring instead to teach in a secondary school and launch a writing career from there. Within three months he was back on campus, disillusioned by what he describes as the teachers' intellectual mediocrity and preoccupation with superficial values. Graduate work in Drama took him to the Université de Paris III, where a quarrel with a faculty supervisor who refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of African drama led to his withdrawal in 1973 and return to Ibadan, from which he obtained the Ph.D. the following year.

While in Paris, however, Osofisan completed his only novel to date, Kolera Kolej. A surrealistic treatment of current events, the novel concerns a college granted its independence from the state after an outbreak of cholera quarantines faculty, students, and staff. Among its predictably corrupt faculty members and female students wanders a mysterious poet with his dog; an equally elusive Muse figure seduces and yet accuses him of being a "dead conscience," unwilling to translate his beautiful words into some tangible reality. Inspired by this woman, the poet attempts to warn his society about the new messiah which it so eagerly embraces, but he is killed in a coup. At the novel's conclusion an illusionary hope is rekindled, and the people can "begin to die again with renewed fervor."

In 1975, when New Horn Press was about to publish the book, Osofisan decided to add a postscript, largely in response to audience reactions to the dramatization of this novel as well as to productions of Kole Omotoso's The Curse, and Dejo Okediji's

Rere Run. Because all three plays concluded pessimistically with the rebel destroyed by reactionary forces, spectators seemed to interpret these works as demonstrating the futility of struggling for positive, social change. Thus, Osofisan appended a second ending in which a scheme to silence all opposition by selling them off as cheap labor to "the mother country" is defeated, and the Muse's voice is heard welcoming the imprisoned back to freedom.

With Farewell to a Cannibal Rage and The Chattering and the Song, which were first written in the period of 1970-1973, Osofisan ~~begins~~^{began} to abandon realism with its tidy categorizations, wherein minor themes or voices are subordinated to major ones, conflict is resolved, and given the Nigerian socio-political reality mirrored in the plays, the general populace's powerlessness is reinforced. In its place he offered what may be described as a contemporary, African total theatre: The traditional, philosophical understanding of experience as a dynamic interlock of potentially competing energies is preserved through such devices as the articulation of multiple, conflicting narratives of equal value; the exploitation of music, dance, and spectacle to create moments of potentially shared transcendence; the conflation into one experiential reality of ontological and cognitive distinctions between human and supernatural, past and present; and the passage of artistic hegemony from author to audience through the conscious solicitation of its involvement in the production of meaning. What marks^{ed} this stylistic approach as contemporary ^{was} ~~is~~ Osofisan's sustained interrogation of history: the connection between received wisdom and the material forces

shaping its articulation is insisted upon, and the audience is offered both images of and challenges to reformulation^{ion of} that tradition in a manner which affirms its empowerment.

Thus, in Farewell to a Cannibal Rage Osofisan relies^d heavily on the structural strategies of storytelling to project a tale about the triumph of young lovers^s over social divisions maintained by their elders. A narrator announces at the outset that he will tell a story of reconciliation and drafts his fellow actors into the various roles. Since there are more performers than ~~than~~ there are character parts, some people must be cajoled into playing hills, door frames, and other scenic elements. As the drama progresses, these elements are dismantled and reconstituted in accordance with the demands of the plot; Yoruba songs, adapted for the most part from popular rhythms and proverbs, and dance provide the mechanism by which these changes are accomplished. Predictably, some actors tire of playing verandahs or watching from the sidelines; they seize parts from their colleagues and replay segments to accustom audiences to the change. Having stated at the beginning the outcome of the story, the playwright continually focuses attention on the means by which illusion is created and thwarts tendencies towards emotional involvement with the young lovers' dilemma.

Dedicated to the survivors^r of the Biafran war, the play nonetheless ends on an ambiguous note in which the vision of unity is affirmed, and the difficulties of burying historic, ethnic animosities are acknowledged. Interestingly, Osofisan reports that one of the play's chief stylistic features occurred

almost by accident, for in selecting the script as an examination piece for Ibadan students in the late 70's, he found it necessary to institute frequent role changes as a means of assessing their acting skills. This anecdote highlights an important element of his creative process, for he always directs the first productions of his plays, scrutinizing closely actor problems and audience responses, tasks which he regards as a necessary extension of the act of writing.

The Chattering and the Song, which premiered first in 1976 at the University of Ibadan, likewise utilizes^d a traditional performance mode, that of a riddling competition related to success in love. It also marks^{ed} his interest in the Agbekoya Farmers' Rebellion of 1968-69 as a moment in Nigerian history when a genuinely populist uprising seemed possible. In the play a group of middle-class supporters of the Farmers' Movement gather to celebrate an impending wedding. They drink, exchange riddles, and finally enact an historical play as a way of cementing their sometimes tense relationships. But the jubilant atmosphere is disrupted when a jilted lover reveals his identity as a secret service agent and arrests the wedding couple for ~~the~~^{their} political activities; the remaining friends must decide how to translate their^{own} rhetoric of vague opposition to the government into some concrete plan of action.

A play-within-the-play is an instance of Osofisan's interrogation of history. Whereas the eighteenth century Alafin Abiodun, whose drama is re-enacted, is usually regarded as a hero who restored peace to his kingdom, the playwright ~~chooses~~^{chose} to depict him as a previously benign ruler who now invokes the

sanctions of custom and religion to perpetuate political exploitation. The change allows ^{ed Osofisan} ~~him~~ to question the relationship between tradition and hierarchy and to dramatize the fact that individuals can disrupt a pre-established order; by inviting the audience at the play's end to join the actors in singing the farmers' anthem, he challenged them to decide their position vis-à-vis the struggle for social justice.

The next year saw the playwright adapt Nicolay Gogol's comedy The Inspector General. Re-titled Who's Afraid of Tai Solarin?, the play closely follows the Russian drama of a sacked civil servant who manages to fleece a group of rural government officials, fearful of having their corruption uncovered. Its title refers to Dr. Tai Solarin, a tireless social critic who served as a public complaints commissioner for several western states during the Obasanjo military regime of the mid 1970's.

The following year Osofisan turned his attention to yet another controversial issue confronting the nation. Once Upon Four Robbers questions the morality of public executions. Stylistically inspired by Efua Sutherland's ingenious use of traditional Ghanaian folklore, the play concerns a band of thieves given a trick formula by which they can successfully rob, provided they kill no one, steal from the rich, and commit their crimes in public places. Each member is given a portion of a song, unknown to his colleagues; when they work together, their victims are entranced and leave their property untended. Bickering among the group enables the soldiers to capture them and start the public executions, but at the last moment, the old

man who has narrated the entire drama freezes the action and demands that spectators decide the fate of these petty criminals. Stage directions indicate that should the audience choose death, the executions are to be mimed in such a way that each one becomes progressively more intolerable to watch; should it choose freedom, the actors are to proceed to rob the audience. Osofisan reports that at most performances spectators agree to spare the criminals' lives. More important, perhaps, than the specific consensus which they finally reach is the process of debate, for it approximates a level of responsibility the public must assume in charting a course of national development.

In 1979 Osofisan returned to the subject of the Agbekoya Farmer's Movement with his production of Morountodun, mounted first at the Arts Theatre on the Ibadan campus and then toured off campus by his theatre group, the Kakaun Sela Kompany. Its subsequent publication in 1983 garnered for the playwright the first Association of Nigerian Authors prize for literature. Produced at a time of transition from military to civilian rule, the drama exploits archives housed overseas in London and local newspaper accounts concerning the government's use of a female agent to infiltrate the agrarian movement of some ten years earlier. This historical detail allows Osofisan to draw parallels with a much earlier history or myth of the Yoruba queen Moremi who also infiltrated enemy ranks to save her city from destruction. Whereas the actual Agbekoya operative was successful in fundamentally compromising the protestors, in Osofisan's account the agent Titubi eventually re-examines the Moremi model and opts against the status quo and for the farmers

instead.

But the actors abandon their fictive roles before the narrative of the farmers' protest is concluded. The audience must decide which is more important: the factual detail of the farmers' eventual defeat, offhandedly mentioned as a concession to its desire to know "what happens next," or the images it has witnessed of a people collectively moving to assert their interests. In making that decision, the audience, of course, ultimately determines the meaning of the artistic enterprise; it begins the process of its own empowerment.

Parallels between Beckett's tramps in Waiting for Godot and a marginalized, Third World intelligentsia led Osofisan to write The Oriki of a Grasshopper. Produced first in 1981 for the annual African Literature conference sponsored by Ibadan's English Department, the text concerns a radical professor who continues to rehearse the Beckett play while waiting for secret service agents to arrest him for allegedly fomenting campus unrest. Alienated from the university, business, and working-class communities which find his ^{ivory tower} ~~ivoried towered~~ protests against injustice unprofitable and therefore incomprehensible, Imaro loses even his leftist friends when it is revealed that one of his actors, who is also a wealthy business^{man}, has intervened with the police on his behalf. Though Imaro argues for a principled, ideological flexibility, his chief collaborator sees only duplicity. Neither the Pozzo of the state nor the Godot of socialism will arrive for Imaro. Like Beckett's tramps, he is left alone, psychologically immobilized and chanting "Let freedom

come."

The next year Osofisan wrote and directed thirteen episodes for the television program "The Visitors." A murder mystery series, the assignment allowed the playwright to combine popular forms with social commentary. To date, several of those episodes have been transferred to the stage, and ^{most, especially} ~~one of them,~~ Altine's Wrath has been published. During that same year his Kakaun Sela Kompany premiered Midnight Hotel which freely acknowledges the playwright's debt to both Feydeau and Brecht. A hilarious farce concerning rampant materialism, the play is set in a seedy Lagos hotel where politicians, business men and women meet to transact commerce and sex. Interviews with Osofisan reveal again the crucial connection for him between writing and rehearsal: a casual decision to include one song led to the conscious crafting of several songs designed to contradict the slapstick quality of the spoken text; time constraints necessitated the creation of a Brecht-like Songmaster who periodically brings out an oversized songbook from which cast members sing lyrics.

Speaking in more serious tones, Osofisan wrote No More the Wasted Breed which was filmed for television in 1981-82 with a cast composed of members of the Unibadan Performing Company. A refutation of Wole Soyinka's The Strong Breed, it renders in dramatic form Osofisan's long-standing objections, expressed in various essays like "Ritual and the Revolutionary Theatre," "Literacy as Suicide," and "The Alternative Tradition." In the play a fisherman, desperate to find a cure for his dying son, is preparing to renounce his materialist views and honor the gods. At the same time two gods, disguised as an old couple, arrive

onshore to determine whether the inhabitants, who have for a long time ignored their divinity, should be spared ultimate destruction. A debate ensues concerning the principles of obedience and self-sacrifice, demanded of the poor by a priesthood indebted to the rich. Won over by Biokun's arguments, the old man/god banishes his wife and the religious observance surrounding her to death. Ushered in is a new age when men will learn to master their own destinies. Thus, in place of the elder playwright's allegedly elliptic style and ahistorical metaphysical vision, Osofisan posits a more pedestrian poetics and a secular humanism.

In 1982 the playwright took a sabbatical from university teaching to serve as a founding member of the editorial board of The Guardian newspaper (Lagos), which had been formed during the second Shagari presidential election campaign to function as an independent voice. The position not only afforded him a forum from which to comment on important issues before a more diverse audience than might ordinarily view his plays, but it also provided a mechanism by which to feel the national pulse. The next year, having helped to establish the paper on a firm footing, he resumed teaching, this time as chairman of the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Benin. Through his moves to Benin, the University of Ife, and back to Ibadan, where he currently teaches, the peripatetic Osofisan has maintained his connection to The Guardian, effectively merging the roles of intellectual, artist, and activist.

The most recent play to achieve significant circulation is Esu

and the Vagabond Minstrels, produced first in 1984 at the University of Benin. Structurally, it is another example of contemporary, African total theatre. Posing as a priest, the god Esu promises wealth to a group of starving musicians if they each bestow a gift upon a truly needy recipient. Predictably, all but one of the musicians choose those who can clearly reward them handsomely, while the loner selects a poor, pregnant woman and a leprous couple from whom he contracts the disease. The priest/god returns to evaluate the artists' choices, claims an inability to decide the leprous musician's case, and demands that the audience make known its opinions. Though some may argue that in a context of pervasive greed, selfishness is appropriate, spectators can be expected to vote that the generous musician be restored to health, and the greedy ones, punished. But the fairy tale ending in which this man is hailed as "humanity's last remaining hero," is punctured by scripted objections from actors sitting incognito in the auditorium. They question Osofisan's alleged radicalism and argue that songs and magic have no relevance to the severe crises plaguing the nation. Again, the audience must voice its opinion. The play's production history at the University of Ife, where it had an extensive run in 1986, attests to various reactions: some religious conservatives objected to the god's desacralization; some experts in Yoruba culture deplored the Christianizing influences evident in the portrayal of the god and chief protagonist; some leftists denounced the piece as a shift to the very mystification Osofisan found offensive in Soyinka; and some sympathizers applauded the author's attempts to render the traditional cosmology applicable to contemporary realities.

As the responses to his latest play suggest, Femi Osofisan is an artist who generates controversy. Thoroughly grounded in a Nigerian social and cosmological reality, his plays also speak to those outsiders who cherish the potential of men and women to both dream and struggle. It is likely that he will continue to exploit popular forms and mine traditional thought in order to create a provocative theatre which challenges audiences to re-think basic values and reclaim the power to alter their worlds.


Sandra L. Richards

TELEVISION SCRIPTS: "The Visitors" Series, BCOS TV, Ibadan, 1983

Altine's Wrath
A Debt to the Dead
A Date With Danger
Fires Burn But They Die Not
The New Cathedral
At the Petrol Station
Mission Abandoned
A Hero Comes Home
Operation Rat-Trap
To Kill a Dream

POETRY: (also ^{under pseudonym of} ~~aka~~ Okinba Launko)

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FEMI OSOFISAN: ADDITIONS TO DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

ENTRY

TEXTUAL REVISIONS/ADDITIONS

page twelve, paragraph 1, lines 4-5:

To date, several of those episodes have been transferred to the stage and subsequently published.

page thirteen, paragraph 2, line 12:

Throughout his moves to Benin, the University of Ife, and back to Ibadan, where he currently teaches, the peripatetic Osafisan maintained connections with the Guardian. Not only did he continue a regular column of cultural and sociopolitical commentary, but from about 1987 to 1990 he also authored, under the pen name Okinba Launko, a fictional column entitled "Iales the Country Told Me." Many of them were later published as the novella Cordelia, and a subsequent collection of journalistic fiction, "Ma'lami," awaits publication.

Using that pen name again, the playwright published hinted Coins which was awarded the association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) poetry prize in 1987. Osafisan is the first author to have won this prestigious award twice in two different categories. As a subsequent president of ANA (1989-1990), Osafisan resumed the practice, which he and others had begun more than a decade earlier in the pages of the poetry journal Opun Ife, of encouraging younger writers. This time he focused on playwrights, persuading the British Council to publish the 1989 ANA Drama Prize winners in a collection entitled Five Plays.

page thirteen, paragraph 3, line 1:

The most recent play to achieve significant exposure is Izu and the Vagabond Minstrels, produced...

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TO BOOK SECTION, AT TOP:

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Another Raft (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1988)

Revision:

"Birthdays Are Not for Dying" and Other Plays (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1990). Includes Fires Burn and Die Hard and The Inspector and the Hero.

Esu and the Vagabond minstrels... Spelling was changed from English to (approximate) Yoruba

TO SELECTED PRODUCTIONS, AT TOP:

Another Raft, University of Ibadan, 1987;

Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen, University of Ibadan, 1988;

Yeeps Solarin Nbo, University of Ibadan, 1988, (a translation of Who's Afraid of Solarin? in collaboration with Dotun Oyedepo).

TO TELEVISION SCRIPTS, AT END:

TELEVISION SCRIPTS: "The Visitors" Series, BOOK IV, Ibadan, 1982.

Alaine's Wrath
A Debt to the Dead
A Date with Danger
Fires Burn But They Die Not
The New Cathedral
At the Petrol Station
Operation Abandoned
A Hero Comes Home
Operation Rat-Trap
To Kill a Dream
A Success Story
The Audience Also Dances
And Fear Comes Calling

TO REFERENCE SECTION AT END:

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Ezenwa Ohaeto, Rev. of Morountodun and Other Plays, World Literature Written in English 35.1 (1985): 50-52.

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Tess Akaeke Onwueme, "Osofisan's New Hero: Women as Agents of Social Reconstruction," SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women 5,1 (1988): 25-28;

Sandra L. Richards, "Wasn't Brecht an African Writer?: Parallels with Contemporary Nigerian Drama," The Brecht Yearbook, 1989: 163-183.

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F. Odun Balogun, "Kolera Kolej: A Surrealistic Political Satire,"
Africana Journal, ~~1981~~ 4 (1981): 329-332; rpt. Nsukka Studies in
African Literature 4 (1986): 17-27.

Add under INTERVIEWS:

Jean-Pascal Daloz, "Briser les barrières:
Entretien avec Femi Osofisan," Notre
Librairie, 98 (1989): 94-97

FEMI OSOFISAN

(16 June 1946-)

BOOKS:

Kolera Kolej (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1975);
A Restless Run of Locusts (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1975);
The Chattering and the Song (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1977);
Who's Afraid of Tai Solarin? (Calabar: Scholar's Press, 1978);
Once Upon Four Robbers (Ibadan: BIO Educational Publishers, 1980);
Morountodun and Other Plays (Includes Morountodun, No More the Wasted Breed, and Red Is the Freedom Road), (Lagos: Longman Publishers, 1983);
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage (Ibadan: Evans Publishers, 1986);
Midnight Hotel (Ibadan: Evans Publishers, 1986);
Two One-Act Plays (Includes The Oriki of a Grasshopper and Altine's Wrath), (Ibadan: New Horn Press Limited, 1986);
Birthdays Are Not for Dying (Ibadan: New Horn Press Limited, forthcoming);
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels (Ibadan: New Horn Press, Limited, forthcoming). Spelling should be checked throughout

SELECTED PRODUCTIONS:

Oduduwa, Don't Go!, Ibadan, 1967;
You Have Lost Your Fine Face, University of Ibadan, 1969;
A Restless Run of Locusts, Akure, 1969;
The Chattering and the Song, Unibadan Masques, University of Ibadan 1976;
Who's Afraid of Solarin?, University of Ibadan, 1977;
Once Upon Four Robbers, University of Ibadan, 1978;
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage, University of Ibadan, 1978; revised, University of Benin, 1984;
Morountodun, University of Ibadan, 1979; revised, Kakaun Sela Kompany, 1980;
Birthdays Are Not For Dying, University of Ibadan, 1980;
The Oriki of a Grasshopper, University of Ibadan, 1981; revised University of Benin, 1985;
Altine's Wrath, University of Benin, 1984;
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, University of Benin 1984; revised, University of Ife, 1986.

come."

The next year Osofisan wrote and directed thirteen episodes for the television program "The Visitors." A murder mystery series, the assignment allowed the playwright to combine popular forms with social commentary. To date, several of those episodes have been transferred to the stage, ^{and subsequently} ~~and one of them, Altine's~~ Wrath, has been published. During that same year his Kakaun Sela Kompany premiered Midnight Hotel which freely acknowledges the playwright's debt to both Feydeau and Brecht. A hilarious farce concerning rampant materialism, the play is set in a seedy Lagos hotel where politicians, business men and women meet to transact commerce and sex. Interviews with Osofisan reveal again the crucial connection for him between writing and rehearsal: a casual decision to include one song led to the conscious crafting of several songs designed to contradict the slapstick quality of the spoken text; time constraints necessitated the creation of a Brecht-like Songmaster who periodically brings out an oversized songbook from which cast members sing lyrics.

Speaking in more serious tones, Osofisan wrote No More the Wasted Breed in 1982. A refutation of Wole Soyinka's The Strong Breed, it renders in dramatic form Osofisan's long-standing objections, expressed in various essays like "Ritual and the Revolutionary Theatre," "Literacy as Suicide," and "The Alternative Tradition." In the play a fisherman, desperate to find a cure for his dying son, is preparing to renounce his materialist views and honor the gods. At the same time two gods, disguised as an old couple, arrive onshore to determine whether the inhabitants, who have for a long time ignored their divinity,

should be spared ultimate destruction. A debate ensues concerning the principles of obedience and self-sacrifice, demanded of the poor by a priesthood indebted to the rich. Won over by Biokun's arguments, the old man/god banishes his wife and the religious observance surrounding her to death. Ushered in is a new age when men will learn to master their own destinies. Thus, in place of the elder playwright's allegedly elliptic style and ahistoric, metaphysical vision, Osofisan posits a more pedestrian poetics and a secular humanism.

In 1983 the playwright took a sabbatical from university teaching to serve as a founding member of the editorial board of The Guardian newspaper (Lagos), which had been formed during the second Shagari presidential election campaign to function as an independent voice. The position not only afforded him a forum from which to comment on important issues before a more diverse audience than might ordinarily view his plays, but it also provided a mechanism by which to feel the national pulse. The next year, having helped to establish the paper on a firm footing, he resumed teaching, this time as chairman of the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Benin. Through his moves to Benin, the University of Ife, and back to Ibadan, where he currently teaches, the peripatetic Osofisan has ~~maintained his~~ ^e ~~connection to The Guardian, effectively merging the roles of~~ ~~intellectual, artist, and activist.~~ see revision

The most recent play to achieve significant ^{exposure} circulation is Eshu and the Vagabond Minstrels, produced first in 1984 at the University of Benin. Structurally, it is another example of

Nigerian social and cosmological reality, his plays also speak to those outsiders who cherish the potential of men and women to both dream and struggle. It is likely that he will continue to exploit popular forms and mine traditional thought in order to create a provocative theatre which challenges audiences to re-think basic values and reclaim the power to alter their worlds.

----Sandra L. Richards

TELEVISION SCRIPTS: "The Visitors" Series, BCOS TV, Ibadan, 1983²

Altine's Wrath
A Debt to the Dead
A Date With Danger
Fires Burn But They Die Not
The New Cathedral
At the Petrol Station
Mission Abandoned
A Hero Comes Home
Operation Rat-Trap
To Kill a Dream → note additions

POETRY: (also aka Okinba Launko)

"From Upon Ifa...Prose Poems," Opon Ifa I 1 (March 1976):1; I 2 (May 1976):35; II 1 (October 1976):1-2; Special Issue II 3 (February 1977); New Edition I 1 (1982): 1-2; New Edition I 2 (Special Issue 1982).

"War's Aftermath," Opon Ifa I 1 (March 1976):13.

"Two Variations, A Theme," Opon Ifa I 2 (May 1976):13

"I Remember Okigbo," Opon Ifa New Edition I 1 (1982):14-16.

"Like a Dead Clock Now" in Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor, eds., Don't Let Him Die! (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978), p.28.

Minted Coins (Ibadan: Heinemann Publishers, 1988).

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Femi Osofisan

(16 June 1946 -)

Sandra L. Richards

~~Standard University~~

Stanford

- BOOKS: *Kolera Kolej* (Ibadan: New Horn, 1975);
A Restless Run of Locusts (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1975);
The Chattering and the Song (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1977);
Who's Afraid of Solarin? (Ibadan: Scholars, 1978);
Once Upon Four Robbers (Ibadan: BIO Educational Services, 1980);
Morountodun and Other Plays (Ikeja: Longman Nigeria, 1982) (comprises *Morountodun*, *No More the Wasted Breed*, and *Red Is the Freedom Road*);
Littérature et société (Paris: Karthala, 1984);
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage (Ibadan: Evans, 1986);
Midnight Hotel (Ibadan: Evans, 1986);
Two One-Act Plays (Ibadan: New Horn, 1986) (comprises *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* and *Altine's Wrath*);
Minted Coins, as Okinba Launko (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1987);
Beyond Translation: Tragic Paradigms and the Dramaturgy of Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka (Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife, 1986);
Wonderland and Orality of Prose: A Comparatist Look at the Works of Rabelais, Joyce and Tutuola (Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife, 1986);
Another Raft (Lagos: Malthouse, 1988);
Cordelia, as Launko (Lagos: Malthouse, 1989);
"Birthdays Are Not for Dying" and *Other Plays* (Lagos: Malthouse, 1990) (comprises *Birthdays Are Not for Dying*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard*, and *The Inspector and the Hero*);
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels (Ibadan: New Horn, 1992).

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- PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Oduduwa, Don't Go!*, Ibadan, 1967;
You Have Lost Your Fine Face, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1969;
A Restless Run of Locusts, Akure, Nigeria, 1969;
The Chattering and the Song, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1976;
Who's Afraid of Solarin?, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1977; translated (into

Yoruba) as *Yeepa Solarin Nbo*, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1988;
Once Upon Four Robbers, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1978;
Farewell to a Cannibal Rage, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1978; revised version, Benin City, Nigeria, University of Benin Theatre, 1984;
Morountodun, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1979; revised version, Ibadan, Kakaun Sela Kompany [sic], 1980;
Birthdays Are Not for Dying, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1980;
The Oriki of a Grasshopper, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1981; revised version, Benin City, Nigeria, University of Benin Theatre, 1985;
Midnight Hotel, Ibadan, Kakaun Sela Kompany, 1982;
Altine's Wrath, Benin City, Nigeria, University of Benin Theatre, 1984;
Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, Benin City, Nigeria, University of Benin Theatre, 1984; revised version, Ife, Nigeria, University of Ife Theatre, 1986;
Another Raft, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1987;
Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen, Ibadan, University of Ibadan Theatre, 1988.

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TELEVISION: *The Visitors* [series], BCOS-TV, Ibadan, 1982; *No More the Wasted Breed*, BCOS-TV, Ibadan, 1982.

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OTHER: "The Origins of Drama in West Africa," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1974;

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"Festac and the Heritage of Ambiguity," in *Survey of Nigerian Affairs, 1976 & 1977*, edited by O. Oyediran (Ibadan & London: Longman, 1981);

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UNCOLLECTED: "The Quality of Hurt, (1): A Survey of Recent Nigerian Poetry," *Afriscope*, 4, no. 7 (1974): 45-48, 51-53;

"The Quality of Hurt, (2): The New Voices," *Afriscope*, 4, no. 9 (1974): 46-55;

"The Environment as Hero: A Note on *The Interpreters*," *Ibadan Literary Review*, 1, no. 1 (1975);

"From ~~Upon~~ Ifa...Prose Poems," *Opon Ifa*, 1 (March 1976): 1; (May 1976): 35; 2 (October 1976): 1-2; special issue (February 1977); new series, 1, no. 1 (1982): 1-2; special issue, no. 2 (1982);

"War's Aftermath" [poem], *Opon Ifa*, 1 (March 1976): 13;

"Two Variations, a Theme" [poem], *Opon Ifa*, 1 (May 1976): 13;

"Criticism and the Sixteen Palmnuts: The Role of Critics in an Age of Illiteracy," *Chindaba*, 3 (October 1977);

"Literacy as Suicide: Artist and Audience in Contemporary Nigerian Society," *Afriscope*, 7 (February 1977): 21-23;

"Domestication of an Opiate: Western Paraesthetics and the Growth of the Ekwensi Tradition," *Positive Review*, 4 (1982): 1-12;

"I Remember Okigbo" [poem], *Opon Ifa*, new series, 1, no. 1 (1982): 14-16;

"Enter the Carthaginian Critic?," *Okike*, 21 (July 1982): 38-44;

"Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos: The Humanist Dilemma in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre," *Okike*, 22 (September 1982): 72-81;

"Drama and the New Exotic: The Paradox of Form in Contemporary Theatre," *African Theatre Review*, 1 (April 1983): 76-85;

"Do the Humanities Humanize? A Dramatist's Encounter with Anarchy and the Nigerian Intellectual Culture," *Politique Africaine*, 13 (March 1984): 65-78;

"The Author as Sociologist," *West Africa* (27 August 1984): 1731-1732.

Femi Osofisan is a playwright, poet, theater director, university professor, literary theorist, and newspaper critic, and he is part of a generation who feel they have experienced Nigerian independence as an empty slogan. Thus he fashions a committed literature designed to shatter the enduring shackles

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of religion, custom, and colonialism and to stimulate a confident, imaginatively self-critical sensibility capable of charting a course toward a more humane, egalitarian society. Writing in English, he aims his dramas at those whose education enables them to manage the nation's destiny, but his manipulation of the theater's rich nonverbal resources, coupled with an exploitation of indigenous, African performance aesthetics, means that his work has the potential to reach a wider audience. Within Nigeria he is often viewed as a radical intent upon completely destroying the past, but his radicalism actually builds on the best of tradition while seeking to encourage pervasive change.

Born Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan in Erunwon, a Yoruba farming village located in what was then known as the Western Region, the playwright was three months old when his father died. Early experiences of poverty affected him profoundly, causing him to lack a sense of stability and to be dependent on a variety of relatives who could house him and later assist in paying his school fees at Government College, Ibadan. As a consequence, he later disavowed the privileged position of the educated elite in favor of an ideological identification with the impoverished, Nigerian masses.

While at Government College he wrote short stories and poems and edited the school journal. Graduating in 1965, Osofisan won a scholarship to the University of Ibadan, where he wrote scripts for various students events and eventually became president of the Dramatic Society. As part of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in French, he spent 1967 and 1968 at the Université de Dakar in Senegal, where he trained with the Daniel Sorano Theatre Company while earning a Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures. Over the next two years the fledgling playwright gained additional experience in acting and directing for both theater and television through his affiliation with the Orisun Theatre, a professional company established at the University of Ibadan by drama pioneer Wole Soyinka and managed by Dapo Adelugba during Soyinka's incarceration.

A Restless Run of Locusts (performed, 1969; published, 1975), Osofisan's earliest published play, was written in 1969 while he was a senior at the University of Ibadan. Nigeria was engulfed in a civil war, which had erupted less than a decade after independence from Britain. Like several other African nations, the country had already experienced military coups. To young university men such as Osofisan, it seemed apparent that the generation who had negotiated freedom was bankrupt, and the

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stirring rhetoric of the negritude movement of the 1930s and 1940s had no counterpart in the sociopolitical realm. To the youths, so it seemed, would fall the task of building a nation and forging an art directly confronting the crises challenging the African continent. They rejected the style and vision of the earlier generation of poets and playwrights including Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and J. P. Clark in favor of an art largely devoid of a metaphysical orientation and reflective of a contemporary, urban idiom.

Thus in *A Restless Run* the protest against the devastating effects of 1965 and 1966 was strident, and the manipulation of plot was transparent. In the play Chief Michael Kuti, a representative of an old guard intent on consolidating privilege inherited from the British, and Sanda Adeniyi, the young reformer eager to avenge the political thuggery suffered by his brother, both resort to campaign violence. Left to mourn their deaths are their wives, who recognize their failings, love them nonetheless, but can fashion no effective action against their husbands' excesses.

A similarly desolate situation, in which the oppressed assume the violent characteristics of their oppressors and leave the women to mourn their deaths, is found in Osofisan's *You Have Lost Your Fine Face*, originally produced in 1969 at the University of Ibadan and later retitled and published as *Red Is the Freedom Road in Morountodun and Other Plays* (1982). A disguised commentary on the regime of Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, who had come to power in Nigeria in 1966, the play is set within the context of nineteenth-century, intra-Yoruba warfare. It traces the meteoric rise of a warrior, Akanji, who must brutally renounce all allegiance to his own people as part of a strategy to regain their freedom. Though he mounts a successful counterattack, he also unleashes a new round of violence in which promises of liberation and dignity soon degenerate into looting and death.

Graduating from the University of Ibadan in 1969, Osofisan initially rejected a scholarship for postgraduate work, preferring instead to teach in a secondary school and launch a writing career from there. Within three months he was back on a college campus, after being disillusioned by what he describes as the other teachers' intellectual mediocrity and preoccupation with superficial values. Graduate work in drama took him to the Université de Paris III, where a quarrel with a faculty supervisor who refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of African drama led to Osofisan's withdrawal in 1973

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and his return to the University of Ibadan, from which he obtained his Ph.D. the following year.

While in Paris, however, Osofisan completed his only novel to date, *Kolera Kolej* (1975). A surrealistic treatment of current events, the novel concerns a college granted its independence from the state after an outbreak of cholera quarantines faculty, students, and staff. Among predictably corrupt faculty members and female students wanders a mysterious poet with his dog; an equally elusive Muse figure seduces and yet accuses him of being a "dead conscience," unwilling to translate his beautiful words into some tangible reality. Inspired by this woman, the poet attempts to warn his society about the new messiah, whom it so eagerly embraces, but the poet is killed in a coup. At the conclusion an illusionary hope is rekindled, and the people can "begin to die again with renewed fervor."

In 1975, when New Horn Press was about to publish the book, Osofisan decided to add a postscript, largely in response to audience reactions to the dramatization of this novel as well as to productions of Kole Omotoso's *The Curse* (published in 1976), and Dejo Okediji's *Rere Run*. Because all three works concluded pessimistically with the rebel destroyed by reactionary forces, spectators seemed to interpret these plots as demonstrating the futility of struggling for positive, social change. Thus Osofisan appended a second ending, in which a scheme to silence all opposition by selling them off as cheap labor to "the mother country" is defeated, and the Muse's voice is heard welcoming the imprisoned back to freedom.

With *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (performed, 1978; published, 1986) and *The Chattering and the Song* (performed, 1976; published, 1977), both written between 1970 and 1973, Osofisan began to abandon realism with its tidy categorizations, wherein minor themes or voices are subordinated to major ones, conflict is resolved, and (—) given the Nigerian sociopolitical reality mirrored in the plays (—) the general populace's powerlessness is reinforced. In its place he offered what may be described as a contemporary, African total theater: the traditional, philosophical understanding of experience as a dynamic interlock of potentially competing energies is preserved through such devices as the articulation of multiple, conflicting narratives of equal value; the exploitation of music, dance, and spectacle to create moments of potentially shared transcendence; the conflation into one experiential reality of ontological and cognitive distinctions between human, supernatural, past, and present; and the passage of artistic hegemony from author to

audience through the conscious solicitation of involvement in the production of meaning. What marked this stylistic approach as contemporary was Osofisan's sustained interrogation of history—the connection between received wisdom and the material forces shaping its articulation is insisted on, and the audience is offered images of and challenges to reformulation of that tradition in a manner that affirms its power.

Thus in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* Osofisan relies heavily on the structural strategies of storytelling to project a tale about the triumph of young lovers over social divisions maintained by their elders. A narrator announces at the outset that he will tell a story of reconciliation, and he drafts his fellow actors into various roles. Since there are more performers than there are character parts, some people must be cajoled into playing hills, door frames, and other scenic elements. As the drama progresses, these elements are dismantled and reconstituted in accordance with the demands of the plot; Yoruba songs—adapted for the most part from popular rhythms and proverbs—and dance provide the mechanisms by which these changes are accomplished. Predictably some actors tire of playing verandas or watching from the sidelines; they seize parts from their colleagues and replay segments to accustom the audience to changes. Having stated at the beginning the outcome of the story, Osofisan continually focuses attention on the means by which illusion is created, and he thwarts tendencies toward emotional involvement with the young lovers' dilemma.

Dedicated to the survivors of the Biafran war, the play nonetheless ends on an ambiguous note, in which a vision of unity is affirmed while the difficulties of burying historic, ethnic animosities are acknowledged. Interestingly Osofisan reports that one of the play's chief stylistic features occurred almost by accident, for in selecting the script as an acting-examination piece for Ibadan students, he found it necessary to institute frequent role changes as a means of assessing their acting skills. This anecdote highlights an important element of his creative process, for he always directs the first productions of his plays, closely scrutinizing acting problems and audience responses, a task he regards as a necessary extension of the act of writing.

The Chattering and the Song likewise utilizes a traditional performance mode, that of a riddling competition related to success in love. It also marks his interest in the Agbekoya Farmers' Rebellion of 1968-1969 as a moment in Nigerian history when a genuinely populist uprising seemed possible. In the

play a group of middle-class supporters of the Farmers' Movement gather to celebrate an impending wedding. They drink, exchange riddles, and finally enact a historical play as a way of cementing their sometimes tense relationships. But the jubilant atmosphere is disrupted when a jilted lover reveals his identity as a secret-service agent and arrests the wedding couple for their political activities; the remaining friends must decide how to translate their own rhetoric of vague opposition to the government into some concrete plan of action.

The play-within-the-play is an example of Osofisan's interrogation of history. Whereas the eighteenth-century Nigerian leader Alafin Abiodun, whose story is reenacted in Osofisan's play is usually regarded as a hero who restored peace to his kingdom, Osofisan chose to depict him as a previously benign ruler who invokes the sanctions of custom and religion to perpetuate political exploitation. The change allowed Osofisan to question the relationship between tradition and hierarchy and to dramatize the fact that individuals can disrupt a preestablished order; by inviting the audience, at the play's end, to join the actors in singing ~~in~~ farmers' anthem, he challenged them to decide their position vis-à-vis the struggle for social justice.

In 1977 Osofisan used the Russian Nicolay Gogol's 1836 comedy *The Inspector General* as the basis for *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (performed, 1977; published, 1978). It closely follows the Russian drama of an unemployed former civil servant who manages to fleece a group of rural government officials who are fearful of having their corruption uncovered. Its title refers to the Nigerian Dr. Tai Solarin, a tireless social critic who served as a public-complaints commissioner for several western states during the Obasanjo military regime of the mid 1970s.

Osofisan soon turned his attention to another controversial issue confronting the nation. *Once Upon Four Robbers* (performed, 1978; published, 1980) questions the morality of public executions. Stylistically inspired by Efua Sutherland's ingenious use of traditional Ghanaian folklore in writing, the play concerns a band of thieves given a trick formula by which they can successfully rob people provided they kill no one, steal from the rich, and commit their crimes in public places. Each member is given a portion of a song, unknown to his colleagues; when they work together, their victims are entranced and leave their property untended. Bickering among the group enables government soldiers to capture them and start their public executions, but, at the last moment, the old man who has

radical professor, Imaro, who continues to rehearse the Beckett play while waiting for secret-service agents to arrest him for allegedly fomenting campus unrest. Alienated from the university, business, and working-class communities, who find his ivory-tower protests against injustice unprofitable and therefore incomprehensible, Imaro loses even his leftist friends when it is revealed that one of his actors, who is also a wealthy businessman, has intervened with the police on his behalf. Though Imaro argues for principled, ideological flexibility, his chief collaborator sees only duplicity. Neither the Pozzo of the state nor the Godot of socialism will ever arrive for Imaro. Like Beckett's tramps, he is left alone, psychologically immobilized and chanting "Let freedom come."

In 1982 Osofisan wrote and directed thirteen episodes for the television series *The Visitors*. A murder-mystery series, it allowed the playwright to combine popular forms with social commentary. Several of those episodes have been transferred to the stage and subsequently published. During that same year, his *Kakuan* Sela Kompany premiered *Midnight Hotel* (published in 1986), the text of which freely acknowledges Osofisan's debt to both Ernest-Aimé Feydeau and Bertolt Brecht. A hilarious farce concerning rampant materialism, the play is set in a seedy Lagos hotel where politicians, businessmen, and various women meet to transact commerce and sex. Interviews with Osofisan reveal again the crucial connection for him between writing and rehearsal: a casual decision to include one song led to the conscious crafting of several songs, designed to contradict the slapstick quality of the spoken text, and the creation of a Brecht-like "Songmaster," who periodically brings out an oversized songbook from which cast members sing lyrics.

In more serious tones Osofisan wrote *No More the Wasted Breed*, which was filmed for television and shown in 1982 with a cast composed of members of the Unibadan Performing Company. A refutation of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (performed, 1966; published, 1969), it renders in dramatic form Osofisan's long-standing objections to metaphysical solutions, an objection expressed in various essays of his, such as "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos," "Literacy as Suicide," and "The Alternative Tradition." In Osofisan's play *fisherman*, Biokun, desperate to cure his dying son, is preparing to renounce his materialist views and honor the gods. Two gods, disguised as an old couple, arrive to determine whether the local inhabitants, who have for a long time ignored their divinity, should be spared ultimate destruction. A debate ensues concerning

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the principles of obedience and self-sacrifice, demanded of the poor by a priesthood indebted to the rich. Won over by Biokun's arguments, the old man/god banishes his wife, and the religious observance surrounding her, to death. Ushered in is a new age when people will learn to master their own destinies. Thus, in place of Soyinka's allegedly elliptical style and ahistorical metaphysical vision, Osofisan posits a more pedestrian poetics and a secular humanism.

In 1983 Osofisan took a sabbatical from university teaching to serve as a founding member of the editorial board of the *Guardian* newspaper (Lagos), which had been formed during the second Shagari presidential election campaign to function as an independent voice. The position not only afforded Osofisan a forum from which to comment on important issues before a more diverse audience than might ordinarily view his plays but it also provided a mechanism by which to feel the national pulse. The next year, having helped to establish the paper on a firm footing, he resumed teaching, this time as chairman of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Benin. Throughout his moves to Benin City, the University of Ife, and back to Ibadan, where he currently teaches, the peripatetic Osofisan maintained connections with the *Guardian*. Not only did he continue to write a regular column of cultural and sociopolitical commentary but from about 1987 to 1990 he also authored, under the pen name Okinba Launko, a column titled "Tales the Country Told Me." Many of them were later published as the 1989 novella *Cordelia*, and a subsequent collection of his journalistic fiction, "Ma'ami," awaits publication.

Using the Launko name again, Osofisan published *Minted Coins* which was awarded the ANA poetry prize in 1987. Osofisan is the first author to have won this prestigious award in two different categories. As a subsequent president of ANA (1989-1990), Osofisan resumed the practice, which he and others had begun in the poetry journal *Opon Ifa*, of encouraging younger writers. This time he focused on playwrights, persuading the British Council to publish the 1989 ANA drama prize winners' plays in a collection entitled *Five Plays*.

The most recent Osofisan play to achieve significant circulation is *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, first produced in 1984 at the University of Benin and published in 1992. Structurally it is another example of contemporary, African total theatre. Posing as a priest, the god Esu promises wealth to a group of starving musicians if they each bestow a gift on a truly needy recipient. Predictably all but

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one of the musicians choose those who can clearly reward them handsomely, while the longer selects a poor, pregnant woman and a leprous couple from whom he contracts the disease. The priest/god returns to evaluate the artists' choices, claims an inability to decide the leprous musician's case, and demands that the audience make known its opinions. Though some may argue that in a context of pervasive greed, selfishness is appropriate, spectators can be expected to vote that the generous musician be restored to health and the greedy ones punished. But the fairy-tale ending, in which the kindest man is hailed as "humanity's last remaining hero," is punctured by scripted objections from actors sitting incognito in the auditorium. They question Osofisan's alleged radicalism and argue that songs and magic have no relevance to the severe crises plaguing the nation. Again the audience must voice an opinion. The play's production history at the University of Ife, where it had an extensive run (as revised) in 1986, attests to various reactions: some religious conservatives objected to the god's desacralization; some experts in Yoruba culture deplored the Christianizing influences evident in the portrayal of the god and chief protagonist; some leftists denounced the piece as a shift to the same mystification Osofisan found offensive in Soyinka's work; and some sympathizers applauded Osofisan's attempts to render traditional cosmology applicable to contemporary realities.

As the responses to his latest play suggest, Femi Osofisan is an artist who generates controversy. Thoroughly grounded in a Nigerian social and cosmological reality, his plays also speak to those outsiders who cherish the potential of men and women to both dream and struggle. He will likely continue to exploit popular forms and traditional thought in order to create a provocative style of theater that challenges audiences to rethink basic values and reclaim the power to alter their worlds.

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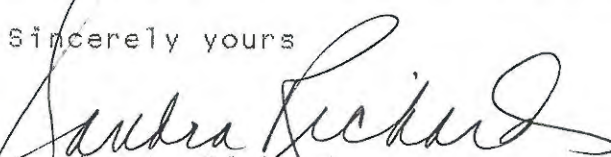
Dear Professor Lindfors

Please find enclosed additions/revisions to my entry on Femi Osofisan, accepted for inclusion in the Dictionary of Literary Biography volume on African and Caribbean writers. Thank you for the opportunity to make some revisions: not only has Osofisan continued to write at a prolific pace!--a mixed blessing for those of us researching living authors--but as you will notice, I have been able to include many more bibliographic citations.

Hoping to make your editing task somewhat easier, I have also enclosed edited copies of the pages on which the revisions are to be made.

Good luck with your research on Ira Aldridge. I look forward to seeing you again at the next ALA meeting.

Sincerely yours


Sandra L. Richards
Associate Professor
African American Studies and Theatre