In Hope of the Living Dead (his last published play), Rotimi returns to his preoccupation with history for issues of human/societal concern and the concept of leadership and responsibility. This time, he seems to have realized that history is more than a record of past events. It has a core of reality which provides its own distinct perspectives whether projecting a point of view or relating to an ideology.

The "Lepers' Rebellion" in Nigeria in the years 1928-32 provided the background for the play, but Rotimi weaves a parable on the theme of "collective struggle" forged through the legislation of group solidarity and communicated through waves of petitions, delegations and protests by the lepers (the living-dead) to the government (His Majesty's Government) to demand and claim their legitimate right to existence.

The theme of leadership and responsibility manifests in the role of Ikoli Harcourt Whyte described by the author as "one of the forty lepers" hospitalized in the Port Harcourt General Hospital in 1927 after an experimental cure for leprosy being undertaken by a Scottish medical practitioner, Dr. Forsman. Harcourt Whyte as the "leader-voice" organizes the leprosy patients brought to the General Hospital from various parts of the country (each speaking their own languages) to resist evacuation to their different villages after the abandonment of the experiment by the Colonial Administration. When faced by the bait in form of a "package deal" which isolates him for special treatment by the agents of government in order to break the solidarity and power-source of the group, Harcourt Whyte brushes the attraction aside and ritually acts to a new level of consciousness, acts purposefully binding the group into movement. Thus providing the backbone for a new struggle bringing about a new spirit and purpose.

In the end, the way forward to Uzuakoli, the lepers' land of Canaan, was guaranteed by the government, but not without its own motive-force=self-reliance and building a new self-image. Rotimi ends the play in a characteristic forward march and with glee=raising the hopes of the "living-dead", paradoxically, through action by the "dead-awaken."
Additions to Essay on Ola Rotimi

Add to list of Rotimi’s works:


Add to p. 9, inserting before the last paragraph:

In his latest play, _Hopes of the Living Dead_, Rotimi returns to his preoccupation with the concept of leadership and responsibility. This time, however, he seems to realize that history is more than a record of past events. The “Lepers’ Rebellion” in Nigeria in the years 1928-32 provides the background for the play, but Rotimi weaves a parable on the theme of “collective struggle” forged through group solidarity and communicated through waves of petitions, delegations and protests by the lepers (the living-dead) to the government in an effort to assert their legitimate right to existence.

The hero of the play is Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, one of forty lepers at Port Harcourt General Hospital who in 1924 underwent an experimental treatment for leprosy devised by a Scottish medical practitioner. Harcourt Whyte organizes the leprosy patients to resist evacuation to their different villages after the abandonment of the experiment by the colonial administration. When offered special inducements to break with his fellows, Harcourt Whyte refuses the temptation and purposefully binds his ethnically diverse group into an effective political force. In the end
the lepers prevail and march forward to a new settlement offered them by
an image-conscious government. The "living-dead" thus compel the
"dead-awaken" to recognize the humanity of the sick and downtrodden.
In Hope of the Living Dead (his last published play), Rotimi returns to his preoccupation with history for issues of human/societal concerns and the concept of leadership and responsibility. This time, he seems to have realized that history is more than a record of past events. It has a core of reality which provides its own distinct perspectives whether projecting a point of view or relating to an ideology.

The "Lepers' Rebellion" in Nigeria in the years 1928-32 provided the background for the play but Rotimi weaves a parable on the theme of "collective struggle" forged through the logistics of group solidarity and communicated through waves of petitions, delegations and protests by the lepers (the living-dead) to the government (His Majesty's Government) to demand and claim their legitimate right to existence.

The theme of leadership and responsibility manifests in the role of Ikoli Harcourt Whyte described by the author as "one of the forty lepers" hospitalized in the Port Harcourt General Hospital in 1924 for an experiment on a cure for leprosy being undertaken by a Scottish medical practitioner, Dr. Fergusson. Harcourt Whyte as the play’s hero organizes the leprosy patients brought to the General Hospital from various parts of the country (each speaking their own languages) to resist evacuation to their different villages after the abandonment of the experiment by the Colonial Administration. When faced by the bait in form of a "package deal" which isolate him for special treatment by the agents of government in order to break the solidarity and power-source of the group, Harcourt Whyte brushes the attraction aside and rising to a new level of consciousness, acts purposefully binding the group into a movement. Thus providing the backbone for a new struggle—being one in spirit and purpose.

In the end, the way forward to Uzuakoli, the lepers' land of Canaan, was guaranteed by the government, but not without its own motive—force=self-reliance and building a new self-image. Rotimi ends the play in a characteristic forward march and with glee raisin the hopes of the "living-dead", paradoxically, through action by the "dead-awaken."
votes as tools for their own freedom," but the entrenched capitalist system has cruelly dehumanized the oppressed and ultimately crushes their idealistic, enlightened leaders who had advocated solidarity with the masses.

In If, Rotimi breaks new ground. His commitment to nation-building enforces a new dramatic technique, resulting in adjustments to structure and technique. His superb skill in manipulating characters to arouse sympathy is still evident, but contradictions in their portrayal are obvious and distracting. The message is clear, but the medium at times is too blunt.

Rotimi's genius and significance as a dramatist lie in his successful modification of traditional dramatic form and content and his creation of a language appropriate to the mass audience he wishes to address. For him, theater is a celebrative event, allegorical in essence and capable of capturing the spirit of communal participation. His importance will emerge with time, for it appears likely that he will continue to develop new ways of articulating political ideas through the medium of popular theater.

Interviews

Ola Rotimi, Interview with Margaret Polarin, New Theatre Magazine (Bristol 12, 2, 1972).

Ola Rotimi, Interview with Bernt Lindfors, Dem Say (Texas: The University of Texas at Austin, 1974).

Ola Rotimi, Interview with John Agetua, "Six Nigerian Writers"
Emmanuel Gladstone Olawole Rotimi, popularly known as Ola Rotimi, is a playwright, director, producer, actor, critic, scholar and teacher. As one of the first three Nigerians (the others being Joel Adedeji and Yemi Lijadu) to receive a Nigerian Government Scholarship to study drama in 1959, he eventually specialized in playwriting and directing at the Yale School of Drama and developed skills that have made him one of Africa's most popular dramatists and theater directors. His popularity derives from his employment of a language capable of reaching a large audience of theatergoers and his ability to sustain dramatic interest through sheer mastery of stagecraft.

Born to parents who did not speak the same language (a Yoruba father, Samuel Enitan, and an Ijaw mother, Dorcas Orhame), Ola Rotimi grew up in circumstances that made the problem of language and communication a real issue in interpersonal relationships. His early interest in theater and particularly in play-directing was stimulated by his father who, although a steam-launch engineer by profession, directed and produced amateur theatricals. Between 1963 and 1966, while on a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship, Rotimi received professional training as a dramatist at Yale's School of Drama under the late John Gassner, one of America's distinguished dramatic critics,
and the late Jack Landau, a professional New York director. Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again which was premiered at Yale in 1966 gives greater evidence of Yale's influence on him than do his later plays, beginning with The Gods Are Not To Blame, which was a reworking in terms of Yoruba culture of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex.

Published in 1971, The Gods Are Not To Blame established Ola Rotimi as both a significant African playwright and a play director. The play reflects the extent of his commitment to oral tradition and to the deployment of an appropriate theatrical language to render an interpretation of Nigerian history that relates that history to recent happenings. It is this avowed double purpose that propels his plays. Clearly, his efforts to domesticate the English language by striving to temper its phraseology to the ear of both the dominant semi-literate masses and the literate classes so that the dialogue in his plays reaches out to both groups, initially claimed most of his attention. But in confronting the language question, Rotimi came to realize that his real concern as an artist was to transcend the province of aesthetics and communicate a relevant message, one that explored the past in order to comment on the present.

Rotimi appreciates the value of research and the importance of history to an understanding of present socio-political problems. He feels that "every writer--whether a dramatist, novelist or poet--should have some commitment to his society. It's not enough to entertain; the writer must try to excite people into thinking or reacting to the situations he is striving
to hold up to them in his drama or narrative." This search for "social relevance" has become a major concern in Rotimi's recent plays, especially If and Hopes of the Living Dead.

Rotimi's first play, Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, published ten years after its premiere at Yale, paints a picture of Nigeria as a country ready for political exploitation. It is a hilarious politico-domestic comedy in which the typical Nigerian politician is portrayed as a charlatan rather than a patriot. The published play appears to have been extensively revised, for it reflects more of Nigeria of the "oil boom" period than it does of the country during the period of Rotimi's studies in the United States (1959-66). The aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) and the military government's promise of a return to civilian political rule loom largely in the play, which satirizes an ex-soldier's acquisition of excessive influence and wealth.

Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again focuses on a former military major who leaves a lucrative cocoa business for party politics. Major Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown saw military service in the Congo, and during his absence his father married him to Mama Rashida, his deceased elder brother's oldest wife, without his consent. While in the Congo he himself had married Liza, a Catholic Kenyan nurse whom he had encouraged to go to the United States of America to study medicine. Lejoka-Brown returns home to enter big-time politics and gets married to a third wife, Sikira, the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of
Market Women. He works out a plan that ensures his political future after the election, a future into which each of the three wives will fit. The situational comedy turns on Lejoka-Brown's cunning manipulation of domestic circumstances to achieve political goals. The three wives represent three kinds of women: Mama Rashida is an illiterate traditionalist who accepts the situation with calm and mature decorum. Sikira is a radical young woman whose background and disposition tend towards aggression and overconfidence. Liza is "Miss World," an educated, Westernized and sophisticated young woman whose Catholic upbringing and acquired cultural habits are opposed to polygamy and chicanery. The high-water mark of the comedy is reached in the explosive interplay of the three women within the network of deceit set up by the exuberant Lejoka Brown, who is always facetiously recalling the common ground between the tactics in military warfare and those in politics: the "surprise-and-attack" strategy.

The socio-political commentary in the play is submerged beneath forced comic situations and far-fetched knockabouts, but these extraordinary events are the play's primary source of humor and reveal Rotimi's robust approach to comedy. He is more interested in exploiting language to sustain the light mood than in attempting to treat the problems that have erupted in Nigeria in the wake of party and tribal politics and the interventions of the military. The skillful combination of a variety of languages and registers, from pidgin to a broken English that incorporates
vocabulary items from familiar local languages, contributes a great deal to the play's comic energy and enables Rotimi to achieve his ambition to reach a large and varied audience.

When Ola Rotimi returned to Nigeria in 1966, he was appointed as a Research Fellow in Drama at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife. Research matters very much to Rotimi, informing his concept of playwriting and play directing. He once stated that "historical resources offer possibilities for matching the human concerns of the past with issues that preoccupy us today." Rotimi uses his plays to draw such parallels and show his audience that previous generations, despite their "obvious debilitating handicaps," were able to "grapple with certain sociopolitical problems that threatened their survival." This may help to inspire the present generation to deal with contemporary political problems.

*The Gods Are Not To Blame* is not a historical play that recreates Nigeria's distant past. It is concerned with more recent events. Rotimi, inspired by the Oedipus myth, wanted to criticize ethnic strife and affirm models of heroism and patriotism, so he transferred the Greek story to Nigeria, adapting it to conform to aspects of local culture. The gods referred to are not mystic deities of an African pantheon but rather political powers outside the African continent. These "gods are not to blame" for the fall of any man who brings disaster upon himself through his own machinations. The tragedy of Rotimi's hero was self-inflicted, as was the tragedy of
Nigeria’s civil war, an ethnic conflict which Nigerians can only blame on themselves. The modified Oedipus myth thus illuminates contemporary Nigerian political history.

In the play King Odewale, a stranger, becomes the ruler of Kutuje. He prepares for a peaceful and prosperous tenure. In spite of his birth into a world of predetermined conditions which are beyond his control, King Odewale convinces his people of his strong determination to seek and maintain their welfare. He is by nature an extremist who is also given to inquisitiveness, rash decisions and errors in judgment. These affect his appraisal of the situation in his society and imperil his reign. He gouges out his own eyes when he discovers that he is the cause of the disaster that has engulfed his people and endangered the society. He takes his children away and abandons the society for an unknown destination. King Odewale’s leadership and style of governance, however, point to the social relevance of collective leadership as an assurance for societal stability.

Kurunmi, his next play, concentrates on the fortune of a hero who tries to uphold the dignity of tradition in the face of threats to the continued existence of his society. There is a general atmosphere of unrest and war threatening the Oyo Yoruba kingdom. Any more abuse of the age-old customs of the people will provoke the gods. It is the sanctity of honored traditions that makes a people honorable. Must a leader therefore bow to the forces of change even when such change is harmful and ill-motivated? Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (Generalissimo) of the
Oyo Yoruba empire believes that he must defy the pressures that undermine tradition. What is the relevance of tradition when the society demands change and the collective will of the people becomes the enabling force? These are the searching questions in Rotimi's Kurunmi, and his treatment of the hero exposes his sympathy for inevitable change. Kurunmi plunges the state into war and ultimately becomes a victim of his own free will and action. With Kurunmi's loss and death the forces of change win, but in the end the society suffers. The search for a patriotic leader and true nationalism continue.

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi continues Rotimi's exploration of the theme of leadership and responsibility in a period of crisis. Oba Ovonramwen of the Benin Empire is under pressure. His authority is threatened both internally and externally. Ovonramwen attempts to reassert the authority of Benin over the subject areas in rebellion, but he is confronted by a devastating attack from British imperialism. Rotimi sees the British punitive expedition of 1897 as an unwarranted aggression by an imperialist force intent on subjugating the might of Benin with a view to exercising British jurisdiction over the people's wealth and resources. Ovonramwen takes a number of steps which show that he lacks the quality of will-power necessary to reassert his diminishing authority and influence over his chiefs. The odds against him are overwhelming, and after he had been mischievously abandoned by his warlords, the British move in. Ovonramwen's
strength of character in his final hour of surrender reveals that he is a heroic leader.

Holding Talks, Rotimi's next play, has been described as an absurdist allegory. It depicts how man at critical points dissipates his energies in interminable discussions instead of taking immediate action that results in straightforward solutions to pressing human problems. A man dies, and those investigating the cause focus not on vital issues but turn their attention to different organs of the corpse. In this way Rotimi exposes to ridicule the ineffectiveness of certain social institutions such as the church, the school, the press, and the diplomatic service. Although Holding Talks does not entirely succeed as a political statement, it does succeed as an entertaining comedy. It pokes fun at the inept behavior of some African political leaders and heads of government in the mid-seventies, and exposes the rigmarole of international politics to ridicule.

After this farce, Rotimi wrote a more serious political play. It clearly expresses the wish for a new kind of leadership, one with a rugged sense of responsibility and a commitment to "tearing everything apart and starting the entire nation-building process all over again, this time with no tolerance whatsoever for the selfish, nor for the expedient of double standards." The play captures the mood of the nation after the demise of Nigeria's Second Republic. Capitalism has been enthroned with its brutal machinery for exploiting the masses. A chance for change exists if the masses will use their
votes as tools for their own freedom," but the entrenched capitalist system has cruelly dehumanized the oppressed and ultimately crushes their idealistic, enlightened leaders who had advocated solidarity with the masses.

In *If*, Rotimi breaks new ground. His commitment to nation-building enforces a new dramatic technique, resulting in adjustments to structure and technique. His superb skill in manipulating characters to arouse sympathy is still evident, but contradictions in their portrayal are obvious and distracting. The message is clear, but the medium at times is too blunt.

Rotimi's genius and significance as a dramatist lie in his successful modification of traditional dramatic form and content and his creation of a language appropriate to the mass audience he wishes to address. For him, theater is a celebrative event, allegorical in essence and capable of capturing the spirit of communal participation. His importance will emerge with time, for it appears likely that he will continue to develop new ways of articulating political ideas through the medium of popular theater.

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Ola Rotimi, *Interview with Bernt Lindfors*, *Dem Say* (Texas: The University of Texas at Austin, 1974).

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* Dates of first production only.

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Kurunmi (London: Oxford University Press, 1972);
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The Gods Are Not To Blame, Ife, Ori Olokun Theatre, 1968;
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Joel Adecoji

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SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS —
Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, popularly known as Ola Rotimi, is a playwright, director, producer, actor, critic, scholar, and teacher. In 1959, as one of the first three Nigerians (the other being Joel Adedeji and Yemi Lijadu) to receive a Nigerian Government Scholarship to study drama, he attended Boston University, earning his B.F.A. in 1963. Then he specialized in playwriting and directing at the Yale School of Drama and developed skills that have him one of Africa's most popular dramatists and theater directors. His popularity derives from his use of a language capable of reaching a large audience of theatergoers and his ability to sustain dramatic interest through sheer mastery of stagecraft.

Born to parents who did not speak the same language (a Yoruba father, Samuel Enitan Rotimi, and an Ijaw mother, Dorcas Oruene Addo Rotimi), Ola Rotimi grew up in circumstances that made the problem of language and communication a real issue in interpersonal relationships. His early interest in theater and particularly in play directing was stimulated by his father who, although a steam-launch engineer by profession, directed and produced amateur theatricals. Beginning in 1963, while on a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship, Ola Rotimi received professional training as a dramatist at Yale's School of Drama under John Gassner, one of America's distinguished dramatic critics, and Jack Landau, a professional New York director; Rotimi earned his M.F.A. in 1966. Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again premiered at Yale that year, was published in 1977, and gives greater evidence of Yale's influence on Rotimi than do his later plays, beginning with The Gods Are Not to Blame (performed, 1968; published, 1971), which is a reworking, in terms of Yoruba culture, of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex.

The Gods Are Not to Blame established Rotimi as a significant African playwright and director. The play reflects the extent of his commitment to oral tradition and to the deployment of an appropriate theatrical language to render an interpretation of Nigerian history and relate that history to recent happening. This avowed double purpose propels his plays. His efforts to domesticate the English language, by striving to temper its phrasology to the ear of both the dominant, semiliterate masses and the literate classes so that the dialogue in his plays...
reaches out to both groups, initially claimed most of his attention. But in confronting the language question, Rotimi came to realize that his real concern as an artist was to transcend aesthetics and communicate a relevant message, one that explored the past in order to comment on the present.

Rotimi appreciates the value of history for an understanding of present sociopolitical problems. He feels that “every writer — whether a dramatist, novelist or poet — should have some commitment to his society. It’s not enough to entertain; the writer must try to excite people into thinking or reacting to the situations he is striving to hold up to them in his drama or narrative.” This search for social relevance is a major concern in his recent plays, *If* (performed, 1979; published, 1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (performed, 1985; published, 1988).

Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* paints a picture of Nigeria as a country ready for political exploitation. It is a hilarious political domestic comedy in which the typical Nigerian politician is portrayed as a charlatan rather than a patriot. The published play appears to have been extensively revised, for it reflects more of the Nigeria of the “oil boom” period than it does of the country during the period of Rotimi’s studies in the United States (1959-1966). The aftermath of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) and the military government’s promise of a return to civilian political rule loom large in the play, which satirizes the protagonist’s acquisition of excessive influence and wealth.

*Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* focuses on a former military major who leaves a lucrative cocoa business for party politics. Maj. Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown has seen military service in the Congo, and during his absence his father has married him to Mama Rashida, his deceased elder brother’s oldest wife, without his consent. While in the Congo, Lejoka-Brown married Liza, a Catholic Kenyan nurse whom he encouraged to go to the United States to study medicine. Lejoka-Brown returns home to enter big-time politics and gets married to a third wife, Sikira, the daughter of the president of the Nigerian Union of Market Women. Lejoka-Brown then works out a plan that ensures his political future after the election, a future into which each of the three wives will fit. The situational comedy turns on his cunning manipulation of domestic circumstances to achieve political goals. The three wives represent three kinds of women: Mama Rashida is an illiterate traditionalist who accepts the situation with calm and mature decorum. Sikira is a radical young woman whose back-
ground and disposition tend toward aggression and overconfidence. Liza is an educated, Westernized, sophisticated young woman whose Catholic upbringing and acquired cultural habits are opposed to polygamy and chicanery. The high-water mark of the comedy is reached in the explosive interplay of the three women within the network of deceit set up by the exuberant Lejoka-Brown, who is always facetiously noting the common ground between tactics in military warfare and those in politics, especially the "surprise-and-attack" strategy.

The sociopolitical commentary in the play is submerged beneath forced comic situations and far-fetched knockabouts, but these extraordinary events are the primary source of humor and reveal Rotimi's robust approach to comedy. He is more interested in exploiting language to sustain the light mood than in attempting to treat the problems that have erupted in Nigeria in the wake of party and tribal politics and the interventions of the military. The skillful combination of a variety of languages from pidgin to a broken English that incorporates words from familiar local languages, contributes a great deal to the comic energy and enables Rotimi to achieve his ambition to reach a large and varied audience.

When Rotimi returned to Nigeria he had been married for a year to the former Hazel Mae Gaudreau (with whom he later had four children), He soon became a research fellow in drama at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife, where from 1975 to 1977 he headed the Department of Dramatic Arts. Research MATTERS very much to Rotimi, informing his concept of playwriting and directing. He once stated that "historical resources offer possibilities for matching the human concerns of the past with issues that preoccupy us today." Rotimi uses his plays to draw such parallels and to show his audience that previous generations, despite their "obvious debilitating handicaps," were able to "grapple with certain sociopolitical problems that threatened their survival." This fact may help inspire present generations to deal with contemporary political problems.

The Gods Are Not to Blame is not a historical play that re-creates Nigeria's distant past. It is concerned with more recent events. Rotimi, inspired by the Oedipus myth, wanted to criticize ethnic strife and affirm models of heroism and patriotism, so he transferred the Greek story to Nigeria, adapting it to conform to local culture. The gods are not mystic deities of an African pantheon but rather political powers outside the African continent. These "gods are not to blame" for the fall of any man who brings
disaster upon himself through his own machinations. The tragedy of Rotimi’s hero is self-inflicted, as was the tragedy of Nigeria’s civil war, an ethnic conflict Nigerians can only blame on themselves. The modified Oedipus myth thus illuminates contemporary Nigerian political history.

In the play King Odewale, a stranger, becomes the ruler of Kutuje. He prepares for a peaceful and prosperous tenure. In spite of his birth into a world of predetermined conditions beyond his control, King Odewale convinces his people of his strong determination to seek and maintain their welfare. He is by nature an extremist who is also given to inquisitiveness, rash decisions, and errors in judgments. These affect his appraisal of the situation in his society and imperil his reign. He gouges out his own eyes when he discovers that he is the cause of the disaster that has engulfed his people and endangered the society. He takes his children away and abandons the society for an unknown destination. King Odewale’s leadership and style of governance, however, point to the social relevance of collective leadership as an assurance for societal stability.

Kurunmi, Rotimi’s next play (performed, 1969; published, 1971), concentrates on a hero who tries to uphold the dignity of tradition in the face of threats to the continued existence of his society. There is a general atmosphere of unrest and war threatening the Oyo Yoruba kingdom. Any more abuse of the age-old customs of the people will provoke the gods. The sanctity of honored traditions makes a people honorable. Must a leader therefore bow to the forces of change, even when such a change is harmful and ill motivated? Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo leader of the empire, believes he must defy the pressure that undermine tradition. What is the relevance of tradition when the society demands change and the collective will of the people becomes the enabling force? Rotimi’s play exposes his sympathy for inevitable change. Kurunmi plunges the state into war and ultimately becomes a victim of his own free will and action. With Kurunmi’s loss and death, the forces of change win, but in the end the society suffers. The search for a patriotic leader and true nationalism continue.

Holding Talks (performed, 1970; published, 1979) has been described as an absurdist allegory. It depicts how people at critical points can dissipate their energies in interminable discussions instead of taking immediate action that results in straightforward solutions to pressing human problems. A man dies, and those investigating the cause focus not on vital issues but turn their attention to different or-
gan of the corpse. In this way Rotimi exposes to ridicule the ineffectiveness of certain social institutions, such as the church, the school, the press, and the diplomatic service. Although *Holding Talks* does not entirely succeed as a political statement, it does succeed as an entertaining comedy. It pokes fun at the inept behavior of some African political leaders and heads of government in the mid 1970s and satirizes international politics.

*Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (performed, 1971; published, 1974) continues Rotimi's exploration of a theme of leadership and responsibility in a period of crisis. Oba Ovonramwen of the Benin Empire is under pressure. His authority is threatened both internally and externally. Ovonramwen attempts to reassert the authority of Benin over the subject areas in rebellion, but he is confronted by a devastating attack by British imperialistic forces. Rotimi sees the British punitive expedition of 1897 as unwarranted aggression by a group intent on subjugating the might of Benin with a view to exercising British jurisdiction over the people's wealth and resources. Ovonramwen takes steps that show he lacks the quality of willpower necessary to reassert his diminishing authority and influence over his chiefs. The odds against him are overwhelming, and after he has been mischievously abandoned by his warlords, the British move in. Ovonramwen's strength of character in his final hour of surrender reveals that he is a heroic leader.

If clearly expresses the wish for strong leadership, one with a rugged sense of responsibility and a commitment to "tearing everything apart and starting the entire nation-building process all over again, this time with no tolerance whatsoever for the selfish, nor for the expedient of double standards." The play captures the mood of the nation after the demise of Nigeria's Second Republic. Capitalism has been enthroned with its brutal machinery for exploiting the masses. A chance for change exists "if the masses will use their votes as tools for their own freedom," but the entrenched capitalist system has cruelly dehumanized the oppressed and ultimately crushes their idealistic, enlightened leaders who have advocated solidarity with the masses.

In his latest play, *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Rotimi returns again to his preoccupation with the concept of leadership and responsibility. This time, however, he seems to realize that history is more than a record of past events. The "Lepers' Rebellion" in Nigeria from 1928 to 1932 provides the background for the play, but Rotimi weaves a parable on the theme of "collective struggle" forged through group solidarity and communicated
through waves of petitions, delegations, and protests by the lepers (the living dead) to the government in an effort to assert their legitimate right to exist.

The hero is a character based on Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, one of forty lepers at Port Harcourt General Hospital who in 1924 underwent an experimental treatment for leprosy devised by a Scottish medical practitioner. In the play Harcourt Whyte organizes the leprosy patients to resist evacuation to their different villages after the abandonment of the experiment by the colonial administration. When offered special inducements to break with his fellows, Harcourt Whyte refuses the temptation and purposefully binds his ethnically diverse group into an effective political force. In the end the lepers prevail and march forward to a new settlement offered them by an image-conscious government. The “living-dead” thus compel the “dead-awaken” to recognize the humanity of the sick and downtrodden.

Rotimi’s genius and significance as a dramatist lie in his successful modification of traditional dramatic form and content and his creation of a language appropriate to the mass audience he wishes to address. For him, theater is a celebrative event, allegorical in essence and capable of capturing the spirit of communal participation. His importance will emerge with time, for he will continue to develop new ways of articulating political ideas through the medium of popular theater. Since 1977 he has headed the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Port Harcourt.

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votes as tools for their own freedom," but the entrenched capitalist system has cruelly dehumanized the oppressed and ultimately crushes their idealistic, enlightened leaders who had advocated solidarity with the masses.

In If, Rotimi breaks new ground. His commitment to nation-building enforces a new dramatic technique, resulting in adjustments to structure and technique. His superb skill in manipulating characters to arouse sympathy is still evident, but contradictions in their portrayal are obvious and distracting. The message is clear, but the medium at times is too blunt.

Rotimi's genius and significance as a dramatist lie in his successful modification of traditional dramatic form and content and his creation of a language appropriate to the mass audience he wishes to address. For him, theater is a celebrative event, allegorical in essence and capable of capturing the spirit of communal participation. His importance will emerge with time, for it appears likely that he will continue to develop new ways of articulating political ideas through the medium of popular theater.

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Ola Rotimi
(13 April, 1938 - )
Joel Adedeji
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Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, popularly known as Ola Rotimi, is a playwright, director, producer, actor, critic, scholar and teacher. As one of the first three Nigerians (the others being Joel Adedeji and Yemi Lijadu) to receive a Nigerian Government Scholarship to study drama in 1959, he eventually specialized in playwriting and directing at the Yale School of Drama, which have claimed more attention in regard to his significance and have made him one of Africa's most popular dramatists and theatre directors. Ola Rotimi's contribution to and considerable influence on African theatre can be found in his persistent search for a literary and dramatic technique that can forge a significant relationship between a targeted audience and their consciousness for theatre. His popularity is therefore predicated on the one hand, on the success of his experiment with language aimed at reaching a large audience of theatre goers and on the other, on his acuteness for sustaining their dramatic interest through his sheer mastery of stagecraft and the skill of producing mass appeal.

Born to parents who did not speak the same language (a Yoruba father, Samuel Emita, and a Hausa mother, Dorcas Orueng), Ola Rotimi grew up in circumstances that made the problem of language and communication a real issue in interpersonal relationships and cordiality of intercourse. His early interest in the theatre and particularly in play directing was developed by his father who, although a steam-launch engineer by profession, directed and produced amateur...
Between 1963 and 1966, while on a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship, Rotimi received professional training as a dramatist. His actual development and growth as a dramatist was due to his study at Yale's School of Drama under the late John Gassner, one of America's distinguished dramatic critics, and the late Jack Landau, a professional New York director. This happened between 1963 and 1966 when Rotimi held a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship.

Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, which was premiered at Yale in 1966 is more evident of his Yale's influence on him than his later plays beginning with The Gods Are Not To Blame, a reworking in terms of Yoruba culture of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Published in 1971, The Gods Are Not To Blame established Ola Rotimi both as a significant African playwright and as a play director. The play makes out his the extent of Rotimi's commitment to oral tradition and to the deployment of an appropriate theatrical language to readers what he advocates as the place of language in the theatre. Interpretation of Nigerian history that relates to history where the mother tongue is in conflict with English as a second language and the extent to which sociopolitical consideration and personal choice could by implication, be dramatically used to delineate the personality and lives of some great names of Nigerian history in view of recent happenings. It is this avowed purpose that propels his plays. Clearly, his efforts to handle the English language question by striving to temper its phraseology to the ear of both the dominant semi-literate masses as well as the literate classes, has obviously ensured that the dialogue reaches out to both groups with ease in assimilation and clarity in identification, have claimed most of his more attention. But in confronting the language question, Rotimi had come to realize that his real concern as an artist is to transcend the province of the aesthetics of his creation as a work of art and unravel the enduring essence of an artistic and communicate a relevant message, one that explored the past in order to comment on the present.
product, [which is] the soul of creativity". He asserts that an artist must aim at moving the past to confront the excrecence of the present.

In pursuing the goals of creativity Rotimi appreciates the value of research and the relevance of history to an understanding of our present socio-political problems. The "inscrutability of the nature of man" is a fundamental problem which exists for all time but it is important that even though man is open to a number of options in his decision making process, his commitment to a particular course of action can affect the lives of others. It is for this reason— that every writer—whether a dramatist, novelist or poet—should have some commitment to his society. It is not enough to entertain; the writer must try to excite people into thinking or reacting to the situations he is striving to hold up to them in his drama or narrative. The need for "social relevance" in the drama of a people has become increasingly recent plays, especially If and Hopes of the Living Dead, the concern of Ola Rotimi in his more recent plays beginning with If (1983), a socio-political tragedy that results from failure to apprehend and, therefore, confront the issues of poverty and deprivation and including "Hopes of the Living Dead", an historical drama on the message of committed leadership, national solidarity and self-reliance.

Rotimi's first play, Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, published ten years after its premiere at Yale, paints the picture of Nigeria as a country ready for the political exploitation of politicians of whom the Nigerian electorate should be warned. It is a hilarious politico-domestic comedy in which the author characterizes the typical Nigerian politician as "a charlatan rather than a patriot".
In all consideration, the published play appears to have been extensively revised, since it reflects more of Nigeria of the "oil boom" period than the country of which the author was remotely conscious during the period of his studies in the United States (1959-1966). The period after the Nigerian Civil War and the military government's promise of return to politics looks largely and the election in this play, which satirizes an ex-soldier's acquisition of excessive influence and wealth, even for a former army major. The play captures the period when "You want to chop a big slice of the national cake? You have to be in politics and make sure you got elected by hook or crook.

Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again focuses on a former military major who leaves an assured and lucrative cocoa business for party politics. Major Rahmin Taslim Lejoka-Brown saw military service in the Congo and during his absence his father married him to Mama Rashida, his deceased elder brother's oldest wife, without his consent. While in the Congo he himself had married Liza, a Catholic Kenyan nurse whom he encouraged to go to the United States of America to study medicine. Lejoka-Brown returns home into big-time politics and gets married to a third wife, Sikira, the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of Market Women. He works out a plan that ensures his political future after the election and into which each of the three wives will fit. The situational comedy turns attention on Lejoka-Brown's cunning behavior to manipulation of a carefully designed domestic circumstances to achieve political goals. The three wives represent three kinds of women: Mama Rashida is a illiterate traditionalist who accepts the situation with calm and mature a sense of maturity by attempting to maintain decorum.
local languages contributes a great deal to the play's energy and most effectively reinforce Rotimi's ambition to reach a very wide and varied audience.

When Ola Rotimi returned to Nigeria in 1966, he was appointed Research Fellow in Drama at the Institute of African Studies, as evident in his first success and award-winning play, The Gods Are Not To Blame (1971) and subsequent plays, the context and reliance of research to the concept of playwriting and play directing matters very much to Rotimi, his concept of playwriting and play directing. He once stated, 'I was able to express upon the stage the obvious debilitating handicaps our forebears, despite their obvious debilitatirg handicaps, were able to grapple with certain socio-political problems that threatened their survival. There was no justification in the present generation to deal with the context of why we as their offspring should not put to good use such resources because of the advantages of our 'learning and technology' and our access to the implements of progress'.

The Gods Are Not To Blame is not a historical play that recreates Nigeria's past. Rotimi, however, seemed to have inspired by the Oedipus myth, wanted to criticize and affirm the ethnic strife and association that supports his concern for and sympathy with models of heroism and patriotism. Rotimi's intention for writing the play and the play's unspoken conflicts which critics have taken issues with. Significantly, the play's title has more to it than meets the eye.
The gods referred to are not mystic deities of an African pantheon but rather political powers outside the African continent.

and having wrapped both the theme and context in such a mythological substance, Rotimi's readers and audiences are quick to note that the gods are the mystic deities of the African pantheon (Yoruba cosmology) and still have powers which are ominiscent to the consciousness of a large majority of contemporary Africans. Therefore:

These gods are not to blame for the fall of any man who brings disaster upon himself through his own machinations, resists the forces that encapsulate him and suffers the consequences of his action. The tragedy of Rotimi's hero was self-inflicted, as was the tragedy of Nigeria's civil war, as clear from the play's consuming plot and the transcendent elements that sustain and move it. The Oedipus myth thus illuminates the contemporary Nigerian political history.

Rotimi's more enduring historical plays are Kurumi (1972) and vonramwen Mogbasi (1972). They are the products of research and reinforce the playwright's quest for "the grassroots laboratory he has aimed at as a creative artist and writer in the University. Rotimi's research clearly provided him with insights into his treatment of African heroism and the context of patriotism and nationalism, particularly in a traditional landscape which has been traversed by colonialism and the contradictions that are now peculiar to leadership roles in contemporary Africa. He therefore uses his historical plays to explore themes which are relevant to contemporary political and social developments and treats his heroes as individuals whose fortunes are tied with the vicissitudes of their societies. He sees nationalism beyond the context of struggle for independence. It is nationalism as a force of change and resistance, to threats that affect national interest and social cohesion.

The Gods Are Not To Blame deals with the question of a society's stability and the role of its leader. In the play, King Odewale becomes the ruler of Kutuje in the role of a stranger. He prepares to ensure a peaceful and prosperous
tenure. In spite of his birth into a world of
determined conditions which are beyond his control,
King Odewale convinces his people of his strong deter-
mination to seek and maintain their welfare. He is by
nature an extremist who is also given to inquisitiveness,
rash decisions and rashness, These affects his judg-
ment of the situation in his society
and imperil his reign. He gouges out his own eyes
when he discovers that he is the cause of the disaster
that has engulfed his people and endangered the society.
He takes his children away and abandons the society for an
unknown destination. King Odewale's leadership and
style of governance, however, point to the social
relevance of collective leadership as an assurance for
societal stability.

Kurummi (Kurumi) concentrates on the fortune of a
hero who, in the face of threats to the continued existence of
the society.

There is a general atmosphere of unrest and war
threatening the Oyo/Yoruba kingdom. Any more abuse
of the age old customs of the people would provoke the gods.
It is the sanctity of honored traditions that makes a people hirable. Must a
leader therefore how do the forces of change even
be harmful and ill-motivated?
when such changes are evidence of vested interests
and irrationality? Kurummi, the Are-Ora-Kakanfo
(Generalissimo) of the Oyo Yoruba empire, believes that
he must defuse pressures that undermine tradition,
leadership and responsibility defy rationalism when
individual interests determines the course of action.
What is the relevance of tradition when the emergent
needs of society demand change and the collective will
of the people becomes the enabling force? These are
the searching questions in Rotimi's Kurummi and his
treatment of the hero exposes his sympathy for inevitable change. Kurunmi plunges the state into war. His personal judgment and will do not however claim legitimacy in spite of his defence of tradition. So he ultimately becomes a victim of his own free will and action. With Kurunmi's loss and death the forces of change win the encounter but in the end society suffers, is left in the end society is left in the lurch. The search for a patriotic leader and true nationalism continue.

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (Rotimi's exploration of) continues the theme of leadership and responsibility in the period of crisis. Oba Ovonramwen of the Benin Empire is under pressure. His authority is threatened both internally and externally ominously on the eve of the Igbe festival which demands unalloyed loyalty from all citizens and ensures untramelled peace. It is a complex situation to face a two-pronged attack. On the one hand Ovonramwen attempts to reassert the authority of Benin over the subject areas in rebellion and on the other, he is confronted by a devastating attack from British imperialism. Rotimi sees the British punitive expedition of 1897 as an unwarranted aggression by an imperialist force intent on subjugating the might of Benin with a view to exercising British jurisdiction over the people's wealth and resources. He therefore uses the strategy of the confrontation to highlight the dimension of political leadership as that between effectiveness and forthrightness on the one hand and prevarication and tactlessness on the other.

Nationalism is better reinforced by loyalty and rugged determination. Ovonramwen takes a number of steps which show that he lacks the quality of will-power necessary to reassert his diminishing authority and influence over his chiefs.
The odds against him are overwhelming, and having been mischievously abandoned by his warlords, the inevitable gate way to his captivity by the British is hopelessly flung open. Ovormwen's excess strength of character in his final hour of surrender which suddenly reveals his personal prowess, as "the big pot of corn" also brings home the message of a heroic leader even to Queen Victoria, the British monarch, for whom the deed mattered very much.

Rotimi's next play, Holding Talks (1977), as described by the author, is described as an absurdist allegory. It depicts how men at critical points dissipates his energies in interminable talks, discussions and debates instead of taking immediate action that results in straight forward solutions to pressing human problems.

A man (Barber) dies, and instead of those investigating the cause of death, the focus now turns to the findings of the different organs of the corpse. In this way, Rotimi exposes to ridicule the ineffectiveness of certain social institutions like the church, the school, and the press and extends this tendency of interminable and inconsequential fratlilings to such other institutions as the diplomatic ones—foreign affairs and international relations.

Although Holding talks does not succeed with its claims to the absurdist mode of thought and orientation because it fails flat on its face of hollow anguish and weak strands of nihilism, it however succeeds as an entertaining comedy. In its crucial admixture, Holding Talks takes issues with the importance of dialogue as an essential aspect of civilized existence and calls for valiant leadership roles and promptitude as a signal mark of responsibility.
While the play pokes fun at the rigmarole of international politics and the inept behaviour of some African political leaders and heads of government of the mid-seventies, there is no doubt that Holding Talking serves as a curious index of the prevailing circumstances which surround Rotimi's unexpected departure from his citadel at Ile-Ife to a new sujourn at the University of Port Harcourt. The sharp change in outlook and perception is like an ebb flowing from the fountains of an enduring godhead to the stream of an unsettling river balancing the framework of a rickety foostool.

After this pause, Rotimi wrote a more serious political play. If (1983) confirms the unease that surrounds Rotimi's thrust into a new terrain. The author has seized upon "personal activism" with a sharper seriousness and has begun to feel "rather hypersensitive to certain moral contradictions in our society". In If Rotimi clearly expresses the wish for a new kind of leadership, one with a rugged sense of responsibility, "tearing everything apart and starting the entire nation-building process all over again, this time with no tolerance whatsoever for the selfish, nor for the expedient of double standards". The play captures the mood of the nation after the demise of Nigeria's Second Republic of Nigeria has been brought into being a calculated but enforced hands of the military in 1979. Capitalism has been enthroned with its brutal machinery of exploitation of the teeming resources of the masses. The chance for change exists "if the masses will use their votes as tools for their own freedom, but the desired change "has to do with the way Papa (the Schoolmaster) handled the issue. Solidarity".

In a series of "happenings" on the eve of the polls to elect a new government, Rotimi unfolds the extent to which the entrenched "capitalist system" has cruelly dehumanized the oppressed masses in full view of the enlightened leaders who had advocated solidarity with the masses.
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