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SIX PLAYS BY WALE OGUNYEMI

a brief insight by the Author

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PREAMBLE

It is not so easy for a Writer to analyse his works. Even the best of us finds it difficult at times. However, I shall give you a brief insight into some of my published works.

The making of a play is like the making of a pregnancy. When a couple cohabits, they never can know if it will or will not result in pregnancy. If it does result in pregnancy, will the child come or will it be a still-birth? Will the child be a boy or a girl? Neither would know until the baby is born. Then the christening before he or she becomes everybody's baby.

So it is with playwriting.

When a writer begins to put his ideas on paper, he cannot know if the story he has in mind would ever be completed. And if completed, will it be a success?

When I started writing in 1960, I had no idea I would ever be performed let alone received. I was only an innocent traditionalist who believes tradition should be preserved through drama.

In this brief insight, I am not drawing any parallel between my works and works by other writers. I leave that to scholars for indepth study.

My earlier plays were written in the Yoruba language and they derived their themes from oral tradition, traditional folktales and, from Ifa poetry. (Ifa or Orunmila, is the Yoruba god of divination) From there I graduated into plays of historical significance using the English medium in order to reach a wider audience.

Incidentally, my first full-length play in English, The Vow, (1962) was my last play to be published. It underwent series of writing and re-writing; what we call, unending alterations. (It was dealt with in a separate essay which I think you all have.)

I've always emphasized the importance of LOVE in my plays.

Love transcends every other thing. Love is the most powerful force in the world. It cannot be defeated if it is true love. So, if there is true love, there wouldn't be any need to carry arms against your fellow men to maintain a principle. If there is true love in the world, there wouldn't be suspicion to warrant a stock-pile of deadly nuclear weapons.

"Alas, we shall weep for you in our grave when you, with your own hands, carve out that which will destroy mankind."

(Act II Scene 2)

That was the Ghost in The Vow.

If there is true love, there will be peace on earth.

1. ESHU ELEGBARA My first step was to delve into mythology - the coming to the world of gods and goddesses. There are four hundred and one deities in Yoruba pantheon.

On the eve of their journey to the world, Olodumare (God in Yoruba belief) summoned the creator god, Obatala, to go with other gods to place the world down. But no sooner did they set foot on the expanse of this world than they started fighting for supremacy. They took on human frailties thereby leaving undone what should be done. They allowed the seed of hatred and disunity to germinate in their various gardens with fatal consequences. I believe if the foundation was well laid for us, this world would have been a better place to live in.

Esu, the trickster god of mischief, (not the equivalent of the Christian satan) was the perpetrators of all these evil that has now plagued the world. When he was discovered as the crooked firewood unseating their stew pots, they were united against him. Esu was branded an anti establishment and was accordingly rusticated.

2. OBALUAYE is a folk opera written in Yoruba but with parallel English translation.

The King of a Yoruba town has brought the curse of Obaluaye on his town through his refusal to worship the deities. The King is a Christian convert who would have nothing to do with the worship of deities. This result, is a decline of deity worship in the town. Obaluaye is angered and summons the help of his fellow gods to inflict punishment on the town. The punishment, of course, is a small-pox, Yellow Fever and a Cholera epidemic, which quickly spread round the town affecting both the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

The King himself is afflicted and he dies! The Ifa priest is summoned and after performing a ritual, he succeeds in bringing back the King from the land of the dead. The brief trip to the land of death plus the pressure from his people that he saves them from epidemic, seem to finally convince the King that a man in his position should not neglect his own traditional deities even if he embraces Christianity.

The King succumbs:

"God, do not be angry with me
Do not be angry with your favourite
It is not my wish to go against your will.
It was you who brought me to this throne
It was you who crowned me,
Thy will be done.
And the people's wish.
As you sent Jesus to the world
To redeem the world from their sins
In like manner, am I ready to ransom my people
From this epidemic.
Forgive me if it seems a sin.
I will do as they do
I will follow the way they lead.
Yet, Lord, I am thine own."

(Act III)

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It is clearly demonstrated in this drama that the will of the people is supreme.

3. IJAYE WAR of the nineteenth century was fought between people of the same blood. The Ibadan and Ijaye people (twentyfive kilometres apart) were kinsmen, but when love waned, they resorted to force of arms.

It was tradition among the Oyo Yoruba that when a King dies, his eldest son dies with him. That was why the Crown Prince was allowed to enjoy royal privileges more than the living King. He was allowed some laxities and can never go wrong. He can't be challenged.

Before Atiba died, he decreed that his son, Adulu succeeds him in order to avert a succession dispute which might be difficult to resolve among the ruling houses. This, Kurunmi, the Generalissimo of Ijaye, opposed. He wanted tradition preserved and respected. But when Atiba died, his son Adelu, unilaterally ascended the throne with the help of Ibadan war lords who were indifferent to Kurunmi's stand.

Kurunmi did not take kindly to this and threatened to force the young King off his father's throne.

"I cannot prostrate to the father and prostrate to the son. Never!"

He maintained his stand.

Ibadan people became hostile to Kurunmi by forcing towns under his control to stop paying annual tributes and taxes to him. This was too much an insult and an affront. His refusal to recognize Adelu's position and his threat to drive him off the throne marked the beginning of hostilities between Ijaye and Ibadan.

Ijaye was camped against. Kurunmi's army and that of his allies were defeated, all his five children killed in one day, in battle. He was devastated and had no option but to commit suicide.

I came across Kurunmi's name and his exploits while going through the weekly war reports in the 1862 Newspaper of the Egbas published by the Church Missionary Society in Lagos.

Kurunmi was said to be a good disciplinarian, witty, cynical and ruthless. A man of unpredictable character was also ^{an executioner and} an entertainer. Even though he is ruthless, it was reported that in the face of strong opposition, he had compassion on a young man captured in battle. The man was so dear to his mother that the mother risked her life by coming to Kurunmi herself to plead the boy's pardon and release. Kurunmi was so touched by the love this woman had for her son that not only did he spare the boy's life, but also gave him a pride of place in Ijaye. This prompted me to research the life of this interesting character.

I was faithful to history at the same time not forgetting I was not writing history, but drama. That time, I was fresh from the traditional school of thought and believed strongly that tradition should not be eroded.

Kurunmi was maintaining a principle and that, to me, was good at the time.

4. KIRIJI, an inter tribal war, was also fought in the nineteenth century shortly after the capture of Ijaye. It was between Ibadan and Ekiti Parapo Confederates.

The Ibadan people who were the lord of Ekiti, not by conquest or by force of arms, were becoming too powerful for Ekiti people who welcomed them to their country with open arms. Ibadan agents became inhuman. They confiscated the people's properties with impunity. What they did not need, they destroyed. They threw decency, discipline and morality to the dogs by seizing Ekiti women and rapping them in a way annoying Ekiti people. Yet Ekiti people remained complacent in the face of possible execution should they raise hell. But suddenly, so suddenly, it happened.

One day, young Fabunmi, who was never known to be a radical, stirred up an uprising against these agents when his young bride was raped in the market place. He picked up arms and other aggrieved men joined him in the massacre of all Ibadan citizens in Ekitiland.

This incident culminated in the nine year bloody war which ended, no victor no vanquished.

"The Ibadan people came here as friends, but after enjoying our hospitality, they turned against us and ruined our country."

(Act II)

Man's inhumanity to man, I must say.

That was an Ekiti chief.

Kiriji is significant in that it was the longest, the bloodiest and the last inter tribal war fought in Yorubaland.

I had some problems piecing the incident together because there were many sectors and only a few who saw the beginning of the war lived to see its end. What I did was to choose among the valiant ones from different camps and made them my characters to the end.

Before Ekiti people shook off Ibadan domination, I wonder why young Fabunmi (he was eighteen then) took the bull by the horn which more aggrieved and more powerful people stronger and older dared not do. So, I introduced the supernatural in the form of witches to also back up his anger.

A woman witch was assaulted by Ibadan agents. She in turn reported this barbaric action to her fellow witches where it was decided there and then that enough was enough.

I discovered that history is always repeating itself.

Even though they fought with crude weapons, the tactics used their diplomacy ^{and strategies} (are true) of modern warfare - people wanting the war to end, others prolonging it for their own selfish end.

These category of people need ready buyers for their stock of weapons. These are characteristics of today's modern wars.

The Europeans who mediated in the dispute and put an end to the war only wanted hostilities to end because it was adversely affecting their trade with the ~~beleaguared~~^{beleaguere} people.

I ended the play on a pessimistic note. One of the Spies retorted:

"We may bid arms goodbye today, but there will always be wars, my friend, until the oat and the mouse learn to live together as brothers, but I am afraid, that day will never come."

(The Epilogue, Scene 4)

Flip through the pages of our daily newspapers, tune your radio or turn to your tv sets, and what are you confronted with? terrorism, disasters and chaos everywhere which really is a sad reminder of our tragic past and a glimpse into a bleak future.

Unless there is love and respect for people's right of existence, I am afraid...

5. LANGBODO is an adaptation of Wole Soyinka's The Forest of a Thousand Daemons, an English translation of the late D.O.Fagunwa's classic Yoruba novel, Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole.

Akara Oogun and some brave hunters are sent on an expedition to secure a symbol of peace and plenty from the King of Mount Langbodo. During their journey, they encounter the sweet and the bitter. Many die on the way while a few arrive Mount Langbodo and succeed in taking a message of goodwill from this King. But unfortunately, only a few survive the journey back home: man's futile journey in search of the elusive.

The adaptation was done here in Leeds in '74, with the Second World Festival of Black Arts - FESTAC '77 in mind.

While conceiving an idea for a play to be presented at an international festival of such a magnitude, I thought I should write a single piece through which other races could see every aspect of our culture.

Instead of the hunters going from one forest to the other, as it were in Fagunwa's novel, I exposed them to the diverse cultures of Nigeria by making them travel from one State of the Federation to the other. Nigeria had twelve States in the seventies. Now the States are twentyone with the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

In addition to the selected Fagunwa characters, I created two anchor characters, First and Second Medium, through whom I extensively made my own political statements.

First Medium addresses the audience in the Second Movement;

"From the day I have been with the son of man, I have not known any peace of mind for a single day. Not that I don't want peace of mind for myself, mind you. I want to sit back and rest on an easy chair the way you are now sitting, my mind devoid of problems, but someone wouldn't let me - my masters! When I have just given birth, my Master takes not the slightest notice, but when I have endured much to raise my children to adulthood, he seizes them and sacrifices them to a fire-spitting devil in order to maintain his own position of affluence. (that is, he sends them to war) Food, he gives me not, he merely shows it to me. Can you condone that? No. Even if you say you could, it must be out of fear that he be not told lest he beats you in the end..... that is why peace will only come to your troubled world when ordinary people start to think for themselves and

stop following leaders sheepishly as if they are gods. They are no gods, they are animals!"

The Second Medium also compliments his statement:

"....The dupe of the world is the conceited man; he thinks that only when he struts and shows off does the world respect him, he little dreams that this is the very time that humiliation will reduce him. If a man overreaches himself, he crashes to the ground. If a house is overweening, it soon disintegrates. If a nation is self-satisfied it will soon enough become enslaved to another. If a powerful government preens itself, before a twinkle of an eye, its people will disperse before its very eyes..."

(Second Movement, Page 46)

I, infact, made some political statements which the then Government did not take kindly to and was almost landed in detention. The coup that came saved the day.

In my adaptation, I made the killing of a defenceless virtuous woman, the beginning of a difficult and fruitless quest for them. Fagunwa brushed over this and made the woman, Paminku, suffer in vain.

Fagunwa, in his novel, killed Agbako whose pre-occupation it is to cause accidents and mishap in the world. I spared him since we are still faced with the serious problems of accidents in our home, our industries and on our roads. So, Agbako is very much with us. May we never travel when the road will thirst for blood.

The hunters succeeded in taking a message in form of a letter from the mountain King, I turned it into a precious royal symbol - an ivory.

While the hunters succeeded in taking the message back home, I, instead, turned the whole expedition into a nightmare:

The Medium snatches the Ivory from them:

"Go your way weak hunters and tell your people that their world will soon crash like the tower of Babel; and no redeemer, none whatsoever will save her from total annihilation because the seeds of hatred, corruption and self-centredness which destroy a nation are already firmly rooted in the fertile soil of your world. You've come in quest of this symbol, but it's all in vain and a waste of your precious time. You think you've all suffered for your country and therefore deserve some praise, you are wrong. You are only a scapegoat, weakling! You think you've journeyed far and wide. No. It's all in your wild imagination - your journey. Mount Langbodo is in your home, your street, your town, your village, your country. Right here where you thought you had left but still remains - your home town."

Mount Langbodo symbolises series of problems we have that are yet to be surmounted. And, we don't need outsiders for a solution to these problems. They are there with us, so also are solutions to them.

6. THE DIVORCE is a departure from my earlier plays. Here I tried to examine some remote causes of broken marriages in middle-class homes and its effect on those the couple work with. These remote causes are, intollerance and suspicion.

The play also attacks half measures in prestigious social commitments.

The storm begins in this childless home when the husband returns from a party without his wife; his wife dancing with anybody at the party pricked his pride. When she returns, she faces his fire but she is equal to his attacks. She then walks out on him. The husband cannot take it that way and so, changes the bedroom key to show her, he is the master at home. The wife returns to find the lock changed and the door locked. She calls in the Police to help her but the Police comes to demonstrate nit-witticism. Other incidences co-mingle to neighten the crisis until absolute mistrust looms above everything. When the husband finally proves a young man is seeing his wife, he arranges for the man's arrest and sues for a divorce from his wife.

Barrenness is viewed with grave concern in most African ^{societies} homes that a marriage without an issue over a period of time is no marriage at all. And more often than not, the marriage hits the rocks. Even where the husband chooses to keep his wife, so much pressure from his family wouldn't allow him. He is soon forced either to take a second wife or seek a divorce from the infertile woman.

I did not make that as the main cause of the fire in this home. Rather I used it to give weight to the mistaken identity brought about by ugly suspicion on both sides; the husband accusing the wife of promiscuity and vice versa, but the accusations are unfounded. The suspected young man happens to be the wife's long lost brother.

Love is tolerance, tolerance is love. Show me a perfect home and I will show you its imperfection.

I set out to write a comedy, but ended up writing a tragedy - the tragedy of a home.

CONCLUSION

All the plays under discussion have had successful runs in theatres in Nigeria. Langbodo which represented Nigeria during FESTAC '77 in Lagos, was brought to the Commonwealth Institute, London in 1984 by the National Theatre of Nigeria.

Unfortunately, that pleasant feeling of a relaxed weekend in theatres in and around Ibadan, Nigeria, is no more. The theatre tradition which the University of Ibadan communities were known for in the 60s and 70s are no more there. The University of Ibadan Arts Theatre is only a shadow of its glorious self. Everybody now stays at home and watch television. They will not come out at night because it is no more safe to do so.

Inspite of the above, I kept on writing and will continue writing so long I am permitted to do so by that elusive thing - inspiration.

I am open to criticism. Thank you.

PLAYS UNDER REFERENCE

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