



WOLE SOYINKA AND DETAILS FROM TAJ AHMED'S COVER FOR 'A DANCE OF THE FORESTS'

Five Soyinka Plays

A review

The Lion and the Jewel OXFORD (UK) 4/6

A Dance of the Forests OXFORD (UK) 4/6

TIMOTHY HOLMES

READING PLAYS without seeing them first is rather like looking at the view with one eye—everything goes flat. This is perhaps doubly noticeable with plays like these where essential parts of the action are danced, where music is necessary and where the drama calls for the participation of all the senses. And these are not plays like the ones auntie used to see at the old Tivoli: they are a throwing together of materials and methods so that the product, rich and delicious, cannot help being a little messy.

The plays tell the stories of Nigerian villagers, faced, in one way or another, with a dilemma, which, it soon becomes clear, can only be resolved in the context of a continuous historical process: in terms of the relation between the present and the past: between the new crude "civilisation" which has sprung up as a permanent result of foreign rule; and the soul-binding "culture" which is the predominant legacy from the magical, tribal past. As if to emphasize this Push Me Pull You situation, the action of the plays takes place on the fringes of the two worlds—a beach outside Lagos, a town which the motor road passes by, the forest outside a town—and equally the characters belong to one world or the other.

The Lion and the Jewel, for example, is ostensibly a story about the wooing of a pretty girl by two very different men, with a dramatic interest created by the choice that Sidi, the girl, has to make. The play gathers depth with the nature of the men she must choose between: a pompous school teacher, Lakunle, and a well-oiled, many-wived, wealthy, but elderly

Three Plays—The Swamp Dwellers

The Trials of Brother Jero

The Strong Breed MBARI, IBADAN 60c/6/-

village headman, Baroka. The girl herself, a foolish daydreamer entranced by having her photograph in a Lagos glamour magazine, seems incapable of understanding the basic difference between the two men. As she says:

*"... words are like beetles
Boring at my ears, and my head
Becomes a jumping bean. Perhaps after all,
As the school teacher tells me often,
I have a simple mind."*

Not until the rivalry between the two men is ended by her decision does she understand fully what either the headman or the school teacher offer her.

Baroka, who at one stage boasts that he prevented a road being built to the village, wishes to preserve as much of possible of the way of life that gives him his position in society:

*"And the wish of one old man is
That here and there
Among the bridges and the murderous roads,
Below the humming birds which
Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of
The snake-tongued lightning: between this moment
And the reckless broom that will be wielded
In these years to come, we must leave
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost..."*

Lakunle looks forward to a rather different future:

"When we are wed, you shall not walk or sit
 Together we shall sit at table
 —Not on the floor—and eat,
 Not with fingers, but with knives
 And forks, and breakfast plates
 Like civilised beings

.....
 . . . I will teach you:
 The waltz and we'll both learn the foxtrot
 And we'll spend the weekend in night-clubs at Ibadan."

With these alternatives before her Sidi chooses Baroka and tells the school teacher:
 "Why, did you think that after him
 I could endure the touch of another man?
 I who have felt the strength,
 The perpetual youthful zest
 Of the panther of the trees?"

.....
 Out of my way, book-nourished shrimp."

But what the audience knows, and Sidi does not, is that she has been tricked; that her choice was made after a cruel deceit had been played upon her.

WHERE THE CHOOSER IS a fool, as Sidi is, the play can be a comedy, but when he is a person who understands the alternatives, the pain of choice is reflected in the sombreness of the outcome. In *The Strong Breed* another school teacher, Eman, chooses, to save an innocent life, to play the scapegoat in the village purification ceremony. He is hounded down by enthusiastic atavists, trapped, and killed in a cowardly manner. The central character in *The Swamp Dwellers* decides to defy the corrupt priest of the Serpent of the Swamp, is defeated by social pressure and compelled to return to debt and misery in Lagos, abandoning his farm.

Brother Jero is not a tragedy like the other plays in the Mbari volume. The situation is comical, dominated by a fraudulent self-seeking "Prophet", Jeroboam; but Soyinka again demonstrates the power of falsehood and superstition. A simple minded Court Messenger escapes the influence of the Prophet by discovering the fraud that has held him in his grip: but just as he breaks loose he sees that no less a person than a Federal Member of Parliament has come under Jeroboam's spell.

The play with the broadest scope is perhaps *Dance of the Forests*, a phantasmogoria of living and dead, of people, risen corpses, spirits, in which a group of townspeople are shown the part which they, in a previous life, played in the condemnation of an honourable soldier and the killing of his pregnant wife. The confrontation between past (the soldier and his wife rise from the dead) and the present, has a direct bearing on the living, in a way that suggests that they and the dead are tied together in an inextricable knot. Indeed all five plays the two worlds (of motor buses, cities, clinics, schools; of risen-dead, goblins, elves, forest spirits, manhunters, corrupt priests) dovetail, both seeking but unable, to free itself from the other.

While Soyinka's characters are not intrinsically interesting, the "argument" to which they lend their voices and faces is so compelling that it becomes itself the character and action of the play; becomes the re-assessment and the spiritual leap which any person

or nation emerging from the double domination of dead Empire and social stagnation must face.

If this "argument" were to take place at an academic distance the plays would hardly bear performing, but Soyinka throws us close enough to the raw life of his people to sense and know their background: *The Swamp Dwellers* opens with this sombre stage-direction: "A village in the swamps.

Frogs, rain and other swamp noises.
 The scene is a hut on stilts, built on one of the scattered semi-firm islands in the swamps . . . It is near dusk and there is a gentle wash of rain outside."

And as the story of Sidi nears its climax, there is a scene in which Lakunle finds himself in the village market. He paces up and down anxiously while "The traders are beginning to assemble one by one . . . Hawkers pass through with oil lamps beside their wares. Food sellers enter with cooking pots and food-stuffs, set up their stone hearth and build a fire." The drama becomes part of the village, all the people involved. In all the plays this extraordinary quality of "identification" clothes and vitalises the argument, giving Soyinka's world a comprehensible life.

The publishers are to be commended both on their initiative in issuing the plays and on offering them to us in such well printed and attractive editions (in paper backs). The O.U.P. has given theirs bright jackets designed by Taj Ahmed, and *Three Plays* has a "Nigerian" pen and ink drawing by Denis Williams on the cover.

TRANSITION

The new 1963 East-West series, published in Kampala and Ibadan bi-monthly.

Rajat Neogy Editor
 Christopher Okigbo Editor for West Africa

In No. 8.
 Richard Rive, Christopher Okigbo, Janheinz Jahn, Tom Mboya, Rebecca Njau, Wole Soyinka and others

In No. 9
 Chinua Achebe, Aig Higo, Tomas Tranströmer, Gerald Tchaiya, U Tam'si, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Naomi Mitchison, Denis Williams and others.

THE LEADING LITERARY AND CULTURAL MAGAZINE OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING AFRICA Art/Fiction/Poetry/Polemics/Reviews/Criticism/Sociology/Philosophy/Reportage

Subscriptions in Africa: £1 3s. US: \$6.00.
 from Transition, P.O. Box 20026, Kampala, Uganda

Distributed in South Africa by
 INSIGHT PUBLICATIONS
