

Books & the Arts

THEATRE NOTES

Clark and Soyinka at the Commonwealth Arts Festival

I CAN ONLY MAKE a guess at Nigeria's reasons for preferring John Pepper Clark's dramatic work to that of Wole Soyinka as an official entry for the Commonwealth Arts Festival. My guess — excluding possibilities of regional politics — is that the officials considered Clark's work to be more representative of indigenous culture than Soyinka's. Fortunately Stage Sixty gave us the chance to see Soyinka's play *The Road*, as an unofficial forerunner of the festival. *The Road* is in my opinion as indigenous as Clark's two playlets, *Song of a Goat* and *The Masquerade*; the difference being that while Soyinka is a modern playwright, Clark can only be said to be traditional. Clark has also taken this traditionalism too far: picturesque speech, endless metaphors, Greek choruses and cumbersome conventions.

THE ROAD, like some other modern plays — especially Pinter's — left me undecided about its meaning. Is the road of Nigeria's lorry and mammy-wagon drivers actual or symbolic? Is Kotonu simply afraid of going out on the road again in the passenger truck he drives — as his tout and childhood friend Samson vainly urges him to do — or is it life he is afraid of? Is Kotonu's "morbid" decision to deal in spare parts stolen from crashed lorries in his retirement — caused by his own accident — in fact symbolic of a death wish? And Professor: is he simply a forger of driving licences and the master-mind of the denizens who hang around the shack that is the play's set; or is he a god of the underworld following his expulsion from the Christian church across the street where he was an admired lay-reader?

Whatever level *The Road* is appreciated on, it is an engrossing and enjoyable play well acted by a cast of West Africans, West Indians and a South African. It is peopled by fully drawn characters who range from

the farcical and lyrical to the brash and mysterious. My only criticism is that the play is too long and the time sequences make it even more difficult to follow its development. Soyinka, who is also a poet among other talents, has written beautiful prose and blank verse; but even this can become superficial. Soyinka tells his story partly in flash-backs which come across with dramatic force but at times made their point a bit late in the story

ON THE OTHER HAND *Song of a Goat* might have been better if its action had been compressed, perhaps with verbal flash-backs replacing some of the scenes. Clark's story is simple and very Greek in its incest-adultery relationships. It is also not convincing, but perhaps this is largely a fault of the director's. There is not enough apparent development of the characters' attitudes. In the first scene — which could have been mentioned in a few lines in a compressed version — Clark goes to great lengths to establish that the fisherman Zifa is impotent and his wife Ebiere sexually frustrated; but they both react violently to the medicineman's suggestion that Zifa's younger brother should assume conjugal responsibilities. It comes as a surprise then when Ebiere seduces the younger brother in a scene which by its direction looks more like rape. And that Zifa should only find out towards the end of his wife's pregnancy that he has been cuckolded is unconvincing when all the family lives so closely together. Perhaps Clark wrote this as a radio play, which it reminds me of with its many short scenes. The conclusion of the play, as *The Masquerade*, is evocative of Greek tragedy with the protagonists committing suicide or presumably dying by the hand of God.

The element of Greek drama is apparent even earlier, with the family's neighbours, supplying a chorus by way of gossip which fills in the background. This Greek chorus is even more formalised in the sequel, *The Masquerade*: three fishermen — one of them delightfully acted — three elders and three white-clad women. Tufa is the son of the adulterous relationship in *Song of a Goat* — but he does not know this until he hears it from the village of the girl he is betrothed to. Her father breaks off the engagement when he learns these facts, but his spoilt and headstrong daughter runs off with her beloved. And is shot dead by her father.

I am not very clear about the development after this point because the diction of the Eastern Nigerian actors created difficulties; but after the shooting the father goes into a trance, and his wife insane. And while in this trance the father also shoots Tufa in what seemed to me like an accident — again possibly the fault of the direction or acting. Tufa falls down and makes a lengthy death-floor speech during which he is gradually weakening; but then he staggers to his feet holding on to what seems like an ordinary flesh-wound to, presumably, expire off-stage . . . ●

J. A. M.

A message for Afrikaners

Collingwood August

The Afrikaner's Interpretation of South African History by F. A. van Jaarsveld (Simondium Publishers, Cape Town)

THE IMMEDIATE REACTION to a white South African who is trying to gain some measure of political sanity, however minute, is one of encouragement, albeit condescending encouragement. This is the attitude that the blurb with its "The material presented will lead to a clearer understanding of the Afrikaner people and explain why they have pursued a course that has made them the cynosure of world attention" induced in me.

On reading the book, I found that this is a collection of essays that need not have been translated into English; the message is for Afrikaners in whose language they were originally written. For who, apart from Verwoerd's Nationalists, does not know that (a) Afrikaners have falsified South African history for their own ends (in early 1960, for instance, a Nationalist M.P. was reported as having said some false nonsense to this effect: "The whites settled only in those areas of South Africa that were not already occupied by non-whites."); (b) oppression breeds demagogues; and (c) South African history will one day have to be "scientifically" rewritten? Professor van Jaarsveld does not positively make these statements, but they are implicit in his writing and one only need be an opponent of white domination, and not a professional historian, to know this. Hence the contention that the translation is superfluous.

Physically the book is not attractive. A publisher ought to know that the chief purpose of a dust jacket (apart from the utilitarian) is to convey a visual message on the contents of the book; I kept wondering whether the empty large brown area of the jacket was meant to symbolise the barren and opaque political thinking of the Afrikaner mind. But worst of all, there is no index.

Also, the book seems to be a literal translation instead of the ideal combination of a literal and free style. At one notable point the translator's mind came to a standstill and he forgot to translate *standpunt*.

This, being a collection of essays from the same pen, has quite a number of repetitions which could have easily been substituted with cross references. But that would have made the book smaller than it already is.

THE BOOK CAN BE divided into three parts. First is the Afrikaner's interpretation of history — which this article has already dealt with.

Then follows an essay on "Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Relativity in the Writing of History". Here I felt Professor van Jaarsveld had something really new to tell me, especially as I am no historian. I particularly liked him where he said, "... the true historian has to set aside his national prejudices, and conceal his personal inclinations as far as possible", and again where he says, "any historian who becomes the exponent of party tenets [*sic*] usually lapses into a tendentious or nationalistic narration which is not the same as a national-historical approach.

A message of love

Jacob Bam

He looks for glory and inspiration and idolises great figures from the past, it being his intention to add strength to the present position of his people, to gain comforting assurances for the future and material with which to castigate opponents. He looks back with feelings of piety and affection but without the necessary critical faculty. Professor van Jaarsveld has a perfect example of this to hand from the Afrikaner historian Gustav Preller who did so much to deify the Voortrekker leaders: "It is not the unsavoury, the bad, the criminal or the vile in people's acts of commission and omission that makes others happier." (Preller wrote) "I have simply left aside those things that ought not be published... to my mind we are under no obligation to give such unpleasant details as would be detrimental to our own people... No... I am attached to historical truth but may the hand that types these words rather wither than that I should go out of my way to abuse a fellow Afrikaner in history... we are too much of a family; we know one another too well."

IN THE ESSAY ON "Interpretation and Trends in South African Historical Writing" the author acknowledges De Kiewiet as, "Perhaps the brightest star to glow in the firmament of South African historiography... [who]... finds that the relationship between black and white is the most important aspect of South African history"... He quotes De Kiewiet's words: "The greatest social and economic fact in the history of the country is not gold nor diamond mining nor even agriculture, but the universal dependence upon black labour".

Unfortunately, Van Jaarsveld fails to follow De Kiewiet's precept all the way; for in the last section, which deals with the teaching of history in schools, he says, "Under the Nazi regime the Germans misused the history of their country for propaganda purposes. After the war the old textbooks were discarded and had to be replaced by new ones... In 1950, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher Lehrerverbände*, in collaboration with the *Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands*, established contacts with similar bodies in France with a view to an investigation of certain points of difference in approach... Incidentally, if these ideas were applied in South Africa, it would mean that Afrikaans history books would be subjected to a prior 'vetting' by English-speaking South Africans and vice-versa... Perhaps this idea merits our attention". What then is the point of asking us a few pages later to "... begin by considering the fact that South Africa is a *multiracial* [my emphasis] community, with several different language or cultural groups... all members of the same homeland"?

But what I found impossible to forgive is the fact that Van Jaarsveld is so magnanimously forgiving. "The Zulus of today", he writes, "are guiltless of the evil perpetrated by their forbears on English- and Afrikaans-speaking Europeans". But he does not say what this "evil" is.

However, carry on Professor van Jaarsveld; we may yet turn you into an African. ●

Turbott Wolfe by William Plomer, with an introduction by Laurens van der Post (Hogarth Press 21s.).

A PUBLISHER I WORKED for used to compel me to dine with him expensively in his hotel. His company was compensated for by the anecdotes he would tell about politicians he had known on his way up the ladder. These had a common theme, the baseness of the Afrikaner, and often ended with his quoting Roy Cambell's praise of Plomer "who dared alone to thrash a craven race And hold a mirror to its dirty face". "A craven race," he would sneer, loudly enough for the black waiter to hear, but not of course, so as to be heard by any Afrikaners at near-by tables.

Though reprehensible, he was an improvement on the sheepfaced Soper, in *Turbott Wolfe*, who said, in the presence of an Afrikaner at his own table, "Man... I always say when you look at a Dutchman you look at a liar and a thief." But only an improvement in his new respect for the Afrikaners he formerly despised, though it does not go much further than insulting "the Dutchman" behind his back rather than to his face.

Both were equally unaware that their taunts were really against themselves. Plomer showed English-speaking South Africa to itself in *Turbott Wolfe* forty years ago. The Afrikaners are never more than background figures, a foil to the English. Soper's hideous story of the castration of Jacop, African lover of an Afrikaner girl, shows his kind to be not only liars and thieves but murderers as well. The corruption and spiritual mutilation that Africa has inflicted on its invaders is shown with brutal clarity in Soper's account of the affair: not only does he come to the aid of the Afrikaner, Romaine, when Jacop is to be dealt with, he actually boasts of it to Turbott Wolfe.

TO PLOMER AT NINETEEN the situation was an intolerable one but not insoluble. An "obscene civilisation" had invaded "the old wonderful unknown African life, outside history, outside time, outside science". It was too late for the invaders to be pushed back: they must be absorbed. The Young Africa movement proclaims miscegenation as the salvation of South Africa, and two of its members, Mabel van der Horst and Zachary Msomi, themselves marry. Mabel van der Horst is in love with Zachary. Noble and beautiful, she suddenly seems to Turbott Wolfe to be "the goddess of the future, going out to suffer... Her name... Eurafrika". Even the Afrikaner girl tells Jacop's murderers that she loved him—provoking Soper's comment "these Dutch girls you know—colour's nothing to them".

Old Frank D'Elvadere, one of the central characters in the book, balancing the extremes of good and evil in Mabel van der Horst on the one hand, and Soper, Bloodfield, Flesher and their kind on the other, puts it crudely:

"I wouldn't give two straws for all this rubbish about 'uplift'. It is very easy for a white man to lower himself to the level of the native. And for that reason do not allow yourself to believe that South Africa is a white man's country. It is nothing of the sort. It can never be anything but a black or at least a coloured man's country".

In their different ways all these white characters exist in relation to their attitude to the Africans' present and future. Even the apparent exceptions, the Fotheringhays, who have mentally never left England, are financially dependent on Alfredson, a coloured tradesman of Aucampstroom. In the comparison of their attitudes the message of the book is to be found.

IN A NOVEL of *Turbott Wolfe's* complex beauty it may sound narrow to pluck out a message. White South Africa looked for one when the book came out, as Mr. van der Post's introduction recalls, and was infuriated by its "dirty face" reflected in it. Did they understand the message? Almost certainly not, since though he says some valuable things in his introduction, Mr. van der Post does not seem to have understood it himself.

His comment on the Eurafrika theme is simply that the Mixed Marriages Act has ruled it out. The lesson he sees in Mabel's love for Zachary is about "an ambivalence in the (Afrikaner) national character", this capacity for love in a people who practise hate. Like so many who write, with goodwill even, about South Africa, he can see the actions of the Africans only as consequent upon the actions of the whites. He quotes, as others have done, Mabel van der Horst's words, "There is no native question. It isn't a question. It's an answer", but only to congratulate Plomer on allowing the black people to "take their place as individual human beings beside the white persons in the story". With insight, he points out that forty years ago, this was "a pioneering achievement of courage and originality as great as any in our history".

But this insight is limited. Plomer's achievement was not in placing his African characters beside the whites, for he never did so. Caleb, Zachary, Nhliziyombi are, in fact, all seen at a distance through Wolfe's detached, superior gaze. Wisely Plomer did not attempt either an African or an Afrikaner character (Mabel van der Horst can hardly count as one). It is through the "craven race" of English South Africans that the action progresses and the message is conveyed.

It is they who make plain the important truth that *Turbott Wolfe* contains: that in the unfolding story of South Africa the real protagonists are the Africans. They are ruled by the invaders, but somehow even in submission it is they who call the tune, affecting the ways of their rulers, shaping the destiny of both black and white. *Turbott Wolfe* is about the "answer" to white rule, not that "native question" which the whites customarily saw themselves as trying to solve.

So great was Plomer's achievement that even today Mr. van der Post and the bulk of white people have not consciously taken its full measure. Subconsciously, perhaps, they seem to have learned that Africa controls them, not they Africa. Today white-supremacist South Africans exult in the fifty years' they claim their power will last. They threaten too that if they fall they will bring their African adversary down with them. *Turbott Wolfe* fortold the end of white rule at a time when this was unthinkable. The book showed that such an end was inevitable and right. It also brought with it a message of love, which is the sort of force needed to save South Africa when its time comes. For this reason, frail though its power is, in addition to its recognition as a novel of rare quality and a seminal one in South African English writing, its reissue is greatly to be welcomed. ●

Unmasking Perversion

Leonard Bloom

Racial and Cultural Minorities: An analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination, by G. E. Simpson, and J. M. Yinger (Harper and Row, New York and London £3 6s.)

THE PERVERSION OF RACIALISM is on the way out. In a generation from now the squalid immorality of Apartheid and similar nonsense will be as extinct as the Brontosaurus.

There are many reasons for the growing shabbiness of Racism. A main one is the determined struggle of those discriminated against. Africans, American Negroes, Jews and a multitude of minority-groups are fighting back. It is becoming clear, even to thick-headed politicians, that this increasingly-crowded world cannot afford the waste and disruption of racialism and discrimination. Yet another reason is the steady flow of calm and dispassionate studies of Racism that unmask it for the fraud that it is behind the often-impressive pseudo-scientific mask that it sometimes adopts. It is a pity that this magazine did not offer this book to Dr. Verwoerd to review. He was once a professional social scientist. Even he might be compelled to question his world of myth and mischief, fear and fantasy that is the world of those living in a racist society.

The book is divided into three parts: PART ONE considers the causes and consequences of

prejudice and discrimination. PART TWO analyses the various patterns of discrimination in societies, the economic position of minority groups, the legal and political system and minorities, family patterns, intermarriage, religion, education and culture, and minorities and art. PART THREE discusses how prejudice and discrimination can be reduced, both by changing individuals and their societies, and by shifting values towards a more democratic way of life.

THE AUTHORS MAKE IT CLEAR that "goodwill and a high interest are no longer sufficient to understand the complicated problems of 'race relations,'" and that "the vocabulary of praise and blame is inappropriate." The authors use the methods of psychology, anthropology and sociology to demonstrate what is accepted as valid in the notion of "race," and what is myth. They conclude that there is no scientific foundation to believe in superior 'races,' even if we could be certain what this grading implies, and they show that all human groups share the same basic talents and temperaments, needs and desires. No 'race' has any monopoly of wisdom or folly, energy or sloth, imagination or dullness. Dr. Verwoerd's and Dr. Eiselen's belief that Africans are "a different type" of person from Non-Africans, is as much rubbish scientifically as Hitler's statement that mankind can be divided into "Founders, Maintainers, and Destroyers of culture."

The book studies at length the personality functions of prejudice and discrimination, and supports the view that some people are emotionally disturbed and are ready to escape their frustration, fears and uncertainties by aggression and prejudice. But perhaps more often prejudice and discrimination is the result of group fears and anxieties, group conflict and the accidents of history. In a country like South Africa it may paradoxically be the odd-man-out who is not prejudiced, and the man who tamely conforms to a country's prejudiced values is 'normal'!

The book demonstrates how the personalities of both minority and majority groups are affected by prejudice and discrimination. James Baldwin writes to the American Negro:

"You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity . . . that you were a worthless human being." Groups come to see the other in terms of a caricature: the oppressor and the oppressed live in worlds in which personality is distorted: avoidance, aggression or supine acceptance; fear, frustration and anger. And the dominant group may devote much of its emotional energies to combating its unconscious collective guilt.

"MINORITIES AND ART" is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book, and its exhaustive analysis of the artistic achievement of Negroes in the U.S.A. and of the Jewish theme in Art produced by Jews shows how minorities in their struggle to protest their disabilities usually are drawn-in to protesting wider social disabilities. Poverty, unemployment, slums, prejudice, injustice . . . affect all members of a society, and it may one day be recognised that the struggle of the American Negro as of the African is the spearhead of a renewed war against authoritarianism and for democracy.

Can a prejudiced person or a prejudiced society be changed? The answer is yes. It is possible to change goals, to reduce tensions, to increase contact, to improve education, to change the social atmosphere. Prejudice is learned, and what is learned can be unlearned. There is no reason to suppose that the energy and skill that man devotes to destruction cannot be devoted to solving his social problems in a reasonable and peaceful manner. Simpson and Yinger's excellent book, comprehensive, insightful and well-organised, is a considerable contribution to making solutions possible. ●

The Common Heritage

Mutumba Mainga

Oral Tradition: A study in Historical Methodology by Jan Vansina (Routledge, Kegan Paul)

The African Past: Chronicles from antiquity to modern times by Basil Davidson (Longmans)

HERE IS A TECHNICAL book which should be recommended as a textbook to all scholars doing research into the past of non-literary societies, particularly in Africa, for it is on African Oral Tradition that the work is mainly based. With a great mastery of his subject and experience based on years of research Vansina acquaints the scholar with the specific characteristics of Oral Tradition, and at length examines the reliability and trustworthiness of Oral Tradition for reconstructing the historical past of a people.

Vansina works out rules which he considers to be of general validity in determining how

much worth to attach to Oral Tradition. These rules are not imposed but come out as a result of a careful study of what is involved. He draws the scholar's attention for example, to the importance of the informant in determining the nature of testimony; the nature of transmission of traditions in determining how much of the original testimony is preserved; and also the importance of watching out for the characteristic features of every testimony.

Vansina devotes a section of his work to summing up and examining rules laid down and followed by his predecessors as well as contemporaries in the field. This is done mainly with a view to justifying his own stand, but at the same time enriches the scholar with the historical knowledge of the use and study of Oral Tradition. He points out that despite studies no attempt has been made before him to apply the methods of historical criticism to the oral sources in a manner that would enable a more rational assessment to be made both of the actual nature of these sources, and of their comparative reliability.

The book is simply written without them impairing its scholarly quantities.

IN HIS NEW BOOK, Basil Davidson opens new fields for research work, and especially for the research worker who wants to be a pioneer in his own special field, be it the African scholar who wants to explore his own past so far unknown to the world, or the western scholar who

is fed up with merely producing "a new interpretation" on subjects well explored already. By offering an outline guide to the mainly unused material of Africa, Basil Davidson assists and urges the scholar into the study of the African past.

In its approach the book is not very different from Basil Davidson's other major works on Africa, be it when he is writing on the historical past as in *Old Africa Rediscovered*, or *Black Mother*, or when he writes on contemporary Africa as in *Which Way Africa?* Basil Davidson looks on Africa as one unit whose people have a common heritage. The result of this is a series of general works covering the whole continent and trying to tell its story as coherently and as continuously as possible. This inevitably leads to generalisations of different types whereby the better-known regions are dealt with at the expense of the lesser known regions. The introduction to *The African Past* as well as the selection of documents which follow after it illustrate this point. However it might be too early to talk of specialisation in Africa just yet! And before we begin to specialise we have to acquaint ourselves with the general picture against which the regional developments take place. Here lies Basil Davidson's great contribution!

The records collected in this book by different authors in different walks of life with varied experiences, combine to make *The African Past* a very interesting book. ●