

African Theatre 14: contemporary women

eds. by Jane Plastow and Yvette Hutchison, with Christine Matzke

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(Review)

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Volume editors Jane Plastow and Yvette Hutchison, along with guest editor Christine Matzke, are to be applauded for facilitating a long overdue twenty-first-century update on African theatre and performance that focuses on women. The collection consists of an invigorating and provocative array of essays and interviews, a play script and book reviews from across the African continent. The editors have selected work from young and established practitioners, introducing the reader to a diversity of concerns and voices heretofore neglected by scholarship. It is a slim volume but a vital step in recognizing the influences of contemporary women theatre artists. Each contribution offers a front-line view of a regional personality, their context, work, methods and life. The articles lay bare the passion, commitment and generosity of spirit that is reshaping African theatre and performance.

One wonders why it took so long for such a collection and why African theatre scholarship has been so focused on a small number of male African theatre artists. Like the continent itself, the nature of African theatre is evolving, and education and access to the wider currents shaping the world have empowered the participation of women. Many of the authors – and, indeed, the subjects – of the chapters in this book are putting themselves at risk professionally if not personally to express, explore and experiment with the form and content of theatre. Issues range from gender roles and inequality to issues of political and national import.

Egyptian artist Dalia Basiouny gives a candid personal account of her life and the vagaries of making theatre over the past twenty-eight years in a nation with so many dangerous and crossing political currents. Her maturation as an artist is inextricably intertwined with her work, her nation, revolution, and the social and cultural evolution of women. The documentation of her work as both theatre maker and foreign-trained scholar offers keen and knowing insights into being both a theatre participant and an observer.

The article 'Performativities as activism' articulates the brutality of

gender-based violence against women. Authors Sara Matchett and Nicola Cloete link local, national and international contexts, outlining how female performance activism in South Africa reflects and is part of multinational campaigns, such as One Billion Rising and Bring Back Our Girls, that call for active strategies to end violence against women throughout the world.

The article details the context and performance of *Walk: South Africa*, a work created in reaction to the violence and rape cultures of India and South Africa. Inspired by Indian artist Maya Krishna Rao's work *Walk*, which was a response to the gang rape and murder of a twenty-three-year-old woman in Delhi, the Cape Town group created the *Walk: South Africa* work. *Walk: South Africa* called for moving beyond cyber activism and for an embodied response to support South African women.

The Ugandan Women's Intergenerational Theatre Project, which took place in 2010, explored the Ugandan oral song and poetic tradition that is a central source for the practice of Ugandan theatre. A workshop conducted by the Namukozi Theatre Group with students from Makerere University examined and experimented with traditional idioms as a vibrant source to model and inspire the creation of their own contemporary poetry. The intergenerational workshop united participants of diverse backgrounds and ages for a collective exploration of Luganda performance inheritances. A process of co-creating revealed many issues and concerns 'usually kept buried deep' that were shared among the different women.

Two performance works examined by South African choreographer Mamela Nyamza use physical theatre to convey the devastating 'after-image' legacies of apartheid. Her work *19-Born-76-Rebels* and *Isingqala* were powerful and uniquely staged to convey the raw emotion of a country still in pain. The work expresses deep corporeal pain, which is internalized and experienced by the current generation in their mothers' wombs. For Nyamza, the protests of the past were for naught and dreams of equality have not been realized because the body carries and must release many historical wrongs or be doomed to repeat the past.

In other articles, Marvin Carlson profiles Tunisian artist Jalila Baccar and Familia, her theatre company. Lebogang Disele explores the shifting social perceptions of women in Botswana. The diversity of advancement of women in the arts in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia are detailed in the remaining articles and interviews. *The Sentence*, a play by Sefi Atta, is featured at the end of the volume. Hers is a short and powerful drama about the stoning of a Muslim woman unjustly sentenced to death for adultery. A book review section rounds out a noteworthy volume whose only shortcoming is that it leaves the reader wanting more.

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