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### **AFRICAN THEATRE IN PERFORMANCE: A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR OF MARTIN**

**BANHAM.** Edited by Dele Layiwola. Contemporary Theatre Studies Series , Vol. 35.  
Amsterdam m: Har wood Academic Publisher, 2000: pp. 134. 44 cloth.

*African, Theatre in Performance* is a festschrift in honor of Martin Banham , who helped develop the School of Drama at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria 's leading university. His retirement after a long and fruitful academic career is the occasion for the collection. Banham, a white Englishman from Yorkshire, went to colonial Nigeria in 1956 as a young man to teach literature. The Nigeria he encountered was struggling for independence, with the University of Ibadan in turmoil. In the "Introduction " former Banham student Dapo Adelugba, currently the Dean of Arts at the University of Ibadan, recalls his teacher: "His fluency of speech and felicity in phrasing, his wit and humor, his originality in literary appreciation, his warm humanity and his love of theatre became evident within the first few months" (1).

In 1960, with Nigeria newly independent Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy developed the School of Drama, instituting programming and curriculum reflecting the indigenous performance traditions of Nigeria. Banham invited traditional Nigerian artists to teach and work at the School of Drama where they developed a Nigerian style of theatre. The collaboration and interaction of indigenous artists with European traditions created an atmosphere in which traditions could intermingle symbiotically, creating a postcolonial, Nigerian performance aesthetic. Though such cross-cultural interaction would seem obvious today, it was not so to them.

African Theatre in Performance chooses to pay tribute to Banham, not by detailing his work, which is worthy of study, but rather by allowing others to speak about the theatre that followed. Although this approach is commendable, it never realizes its potential because of lack of editorial guidance and muddled organization. Despite these failings, however, each of the essays on its own offers an important window onto contemporary African theatre.

The first essay, "Broken Mirror: Art and Actuality in Zimbabwean Theatre" by Robert McLaren, deals with how Zimbabwean theatre emerged in the 1980s. The essay is insightful, and, while it does not address Banham's work directly, it suggests strong points of comparison between Zimbabwe of the 1980s and Nigeria of the 1960s, as Zimbabwean theatre similarly emerged from the shadow of British colonialism into a viable and progressive community based expression. The essay documents agit-prop work at the University of Zimbabwe, where a theatre group gave voice to the concerns of students protesting worsening housing, transportation, and increases in cost of living. When police clashes resulted in student deaths, the performance evolved, becoming a medium of mediation and ultimately resolving a volatile situation.

The book's next offering is *When Criminals Turn Judges*, a 1962 play by Ola Rotimi. The play, set in newly independent Nigeria, builds generally on the theme of how African theatre has both immediacy and proactive currency with social and cultural exchange. It shows how the theatre, as a platform on which newfound political freedoms are played out, gave voice to emerging conflicts and aspirations, in this instance women's rights.

Oga Steve Abah's essay, "The Role of Community Theatre in Health Education in Nigeria," honors Banham's influence on Nigerian theatre. Theatre for Abah was not only an aesthetic expression but also a medium of social and cultural change. The essay considers community

theatre, here defined as " the theatre of the people talking to them about their own problems, in their own language, on their own terms and using their own artistic forms" (72). Community theatre in Nigeria had its start under Banham's purview, and Abah's essay reiterates all of the major stains of Banham's work, albeit without directly referencing him.

"Epoch and Echo: Stage Lyrics of Martin Banham Days at Ibada" by Sonny Oti is the only essay dealing directly with the work of Banham in Nigeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The piece chronicles the improvisational process applied by Banham to create a Nigerian pidgin adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* that blended Shakespeare, Yoruba praise-singing, and calypso influences. Produced by Banham's Ibadan University Traveling Theatre in 1963, the play established a working methodology, influencing modern Nigerian theatre.

Oyin Ogunba's fascinating essay "Stage and Staging in Yoruba Ritual Drama" details the Yoruba worldview as expressed through staging, citing how performance location is as important as the action being staged if a man is to be transformed into a character or a god. Ogunba's essay prepares the reader for an appreciation of Wale Ogunyemi 's play *The Hand That Feeds the King*, a play exemplifying the integration of western and Yoruba n ritual performance styles. However, here, as elsewhere, the reader is left to fathom the connections and context of the play to Yoruba tradition; an editorial bridge would have been helpful.

Austin O. Asaba's essay, "Orality and the Text: Trends and Prognosis in Osofisan 's *Another Raft* and Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked* offers insights regarding the broader political implications of Nigerian theatre, detailing how two modern Nigerian playwrights synthesize traditional and Western expressions to "mirror the corruption, moral decay, deprivation, hierocracy of political leaders and the enveloping sense of despair in their society" (92).

In " Soyinka and Power: Language and Imagery in *Madmen and Specialist*, Frances Harding examines the Nobel Prize winning playwright's use of language and culturally charged images. Harding shows how Soyinka variously deconstructs some words while constructing others out of fragments of Latin and French. Soyinka thereby reveals the fragility of ideals associated with words as he claims authority over language and meaning. Harding explains how Soyinka's unique imagery serves to authenticate a mythopoetic Yoruba religious reality as it applies to Aristotelian dramaturgy.

The final essay in the book is Dele Layiwola's " Is Ritual Drama Humanistic Methodology?" By comparing and contrasting ritual from African and Western perspectives, Layiwola

presents a stimulating dialogue. The essay references the ideas of Turner, Schechner, Van Gennep, and Grotowski on the subject, offering a needed contrast to Western concepts of ritual and performance.

That Nigerian theatre—its writers, actors, and scholars—has become a vital part of world theatre is well expressed by this collection. Whether this is a tribute to Banham's work is not really clear. The book offers a wealth of insights, but as with Africa herself a better understanding of context and more organization *would* enable its potential.

**THOMAS RICCIO**

*University of Alaska, Fairbanks*



