
BOOK REVIEW

THE CAMBRIDGE GUIDE TO AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN THEATRE.

*Edited by Martin Banham, Errol Hill and George Woodyard.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp.24.
35 Pounds, \$39.95*

Six years after the Guide to World Theatre, which was "particularly designed to offer to scholars, students and general readers a comprehensive view of the history and present practice of theatre in all parts of the world," comes a lighter volume from Cambridge. In the wake of The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre, we now have The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre. A handsome book, illustrated, generously laid out, it has over a hundred and thirty pages on a country by country, treatment of Africa, and just over a hundred pages on the Caribbean. It looks good, and feels good. A question immediately presents itself: is this a ploy to divide up and profit from World Theatre, or is it a serious extension of an unfinished project?

Briefly, apart from the contributions of Errol Hill and a handful of contributors to the African section - this volume does not take us far beyond the Guide that spawned it. There are errors and omissions, and much of the text has been taken unaltered from the parent volume. I suspect the publishers failed to appreciate what an underfunded discipline theatre history is in Africa and I fear that the money they made available was inadequate.

Despite prefatory comments indicating a desire to redress the tendency to adopt a Eurocentric view the volume tolerates dated and slipshod work of a kind that

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would be ridiculed in a reference book about Europe. As a result, it actually manages to reinforce the imbalance it set out to correct.

Potential purchasers should note that "Africa" as understood by the editors is sub-Saharan Africa plus Ethiopia; it is Black Africa without the marginal states of the Sudan and Somalia, and misses out some other countries. For reasons which do not have a "culture area" backing, the following countries are among those omitted: Burundi, Chad, Gambia, Rwanda, and Namibia. In the Caribbean section, Hill leaves out Martinique and Guadeloupe and slips Haiti into his introduction - that is to say he does not cover it in the country by country survey.

Banham, who, with "Advisory Editor for Africa" Olu Obafemi, I take to have been responsible for the African entries, has relied on Daniel Pires for coverage of the Lusophone nations and John Conteh-Morgan for documentation of Francophone Africa. So thin are the contributions they sent that even the generous layout employed by Cambridge University Press does not conceal their inadequacies. In many cases the entries Conteh-Morgan provides are actually shorter than those that Clive Wake penned for the World Theatre. So automatically are Wake's essays credited in his bibliographies, that a reference appears even when, in the case of Madagascar, there was no entry in the earlier volume.

The inadequate research which characterises Conteh-Morgan's entries does not prevent him making absurd assertions: writing of Werewere-Liking he says she is "one of the three women writing for the stage in French-speaking Africa!" (24) At no point do we glimpse evidence of the sort of research that would justify this assertion.

In several cases entries have simply been transferred from the 1988 volume to the new book. This has happened to Michael Etherton's material on Ghana and Ghanaian playwrights. His entries on individuals have worn well - though the absence of material on younger writers is an obvious gap. But the "country entry," now generously laid out, is exposed for what it always was: a somewhat distant view written in the early eighties. Etherton made assertions about professional theatre in Ghana that were inaccurate even in the sixties, and the reproduction of his essay makes it appear that he is unaware of the important changes that have taken place in relation to professional drama since 1983. His entry does not touch on the

new provision of performance spaces in Ghana: there is, for example, no mention of the Chinese-designed National Theatre which, after several years as a major talking point among those interested in Ghananian theatre, was opened in 1993. This would not matter so much if Etherton had not said a National Theatre does not exist.

Even in cases where contributors are still deeply involved in the national traditions about which they write, the updating has sometimes been cursory. The entry on Tanzania, for example, is reproduced almost verbatim from the 1988 volume, and a brief final paragraph has been added. This is not good enough.

While the limitations mean that the volume can not lay claim to the redressing, the revision and the expansion one had hoped for, the contents is not uniformly limited and passe. For instance, Christopher Kamlongera has submitted a longer entry on Malawi - one which not only draws attention to recent changes in the political climate, but also reflects those changes. He is, for example, able to write about censorship.

Some of the entries, such as those by Margaret Macpherson on Uganda and by Chris Dunton on Nigeria, are particularly refreshing and well informed - though, sadly both contain a fair amount of discouraging news. Dunton finds himself in a volume in which the left hand does not always know what the right hand is doing: in the Introduction to Nigeria, written I suspect by Obafemi, we read about Ola Rotimi's contribution to "the growth in the establishment of fully professional and commercial theatre companies" through African Cradle Theatre. (73.) In Dunton's entry on Rotimi a few pages later we read that ACT "folded in 1993 (because of) lack of funds." (82.)

Looking more generally at the volume, there are other instances where the editorial work lacks coordination. For example, there is surprisingly little about Anglophone Cameroon despite the fact that this theatre tradition has been extensively written about by Siga Asanga (editor of The African Theatre Review, Richard Bjornson, Stephen Arnold and Hansel Ndumbe-Eyoh. The neglect would not have been so astonishing if Ndumbe-Eyoh had not written a Ph.d thesis on The Development of Drama in the Cameroon 1959 - 1979 for Banham's own Department.

While the African section is the work of many hands, the Caribbean was divided between William Woodyard (Hispanic Caribbean) and Errol Hill who took on the rest, excluding, as we have seen, some Francophone islands. Theatre buildings in Grand Caymen and the Virgin Islands are mentioned in the Introduction, but the theatrical traditions of those places are not examined in any detail. No reason is given for this.

Hill's contribution would have made a substantial publication in its own right. He impresses with his galleries of personalities - a crowded throng by comparison with Africa partly because he has included performers and directors as well as writers. Much of this is new partly because World Theatre was so scandalously inadequate in its coverage of the Caribbean. As it stands, Hill can point to this volume and feel justifiably proud that he has contributed to redressing a balance.

The volume might be worth buying for Hill's contribution. There will be some who want it for Dunton's - after all his recent study of Nigerian drama retails at staggering 45; there will be a few who will buy it for the new details on Uganda, Malawi, or South Africa. But for those looking for value for money, the weighty World Theatre volume at £37 Sterling is the obvious buy. Especially since the African and Caribbean guide has been pegged, by the publisher's greedy marketing people at £35 Sterling.

James Gibbs