

Biodun Jeyifo: The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria Lagos: Nigerian Magazines Publications, 1984

There is no shortage of books on the market about African theatre, but the **Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria** is almost unique. Whereas critics have written predominantly about plays published as texts and intended mostly for elite audiences, Jeyifo has focussed on a popular, semi-improvised, non-literary theatre form.

Yoruba Travelling Theatre has received some attention from critics. The German Africanist, Ulli Beier wrote several articles on what he called Yoruba Folk Opera. As the term 'folk' might suggest, Beier had a rather romantic notion of Yoruba Travelling Theatre as being mainly a revival of precolonial performing arts like **Alarinjo**, but in a somewhat newer dress. For Beier the plays of E.K. Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo, which packaged their traditionalism with some element of literary polish, epitomized Folk Opera.

In reaction to Beier's neotraditionalism, Eburn Clarke wrote a very informative monograph, **The Theatre of Nurbert Ogunde**. Her study of Ogunde's career, which stretched from the 1940s to his death in 1990, celebrates his art for its rough, improvisatory, commercial and very urban qualities.

Jeyifo's book is a useful corrective to both Beier's and Clarke's approaches, in that he emphasises the eclectic nature of Yoruba popular theatre. The element of artistic traditionalism is certainly strong; he suggests that an important reason for the travelling Theatre's popularity is that it becomes "both a repository and medium for the revitalization of the traditional performance arts of the Yoruba people". Many popular theatre artists specialize in reviving specific precolonial performance skills, but Jeyifo goes to some pains to show that there are other artists, such as Moses Olaiya, who use a much more urban, vaudeville style of performance, incorporating mixed media techniques of film inserts and recorded music to supplement the live performance. One of the most fascinating elements in the book, is, in fact, Jeyifo's explanation of the extent to which Yoruba popular theatre has adapted to the multiple media of film and television without losing its identity.

What makes the **Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria** most impressive is the way Jeyifo has provided a context for understanding the theatre form. This is partly a historical perspective, showing the relationship between Yoruba Opera and different traditions of cultural influence. There is also, however, a very closely argued analysis, from an undogmatic Marxist viewpoint, of the economic and social imperatives affecting the Travelling Theatre's productive base. Occasionally this leads to some contradictions. For example, in the description of the slick, commercial theatre of Olaiya, Jeyifo's enthusiasm for the popular performance seems somewhat at odds with his intellectual disapproval of the materialistic ethos suffusing Olaiya's productions.

In general, however, Jeyifo keeps a good balance between description and theoretical analysis. One reason for this is that he constantly keeps the theory close to specific examples. The book is a rich source of factual information: interviews with artists, statistics, quotations, extracts from plays, plot synopses and photographs of posters, rehearsals and production skills.

The massive detail clearly comes from someone who knows the Yoruba popular theatre from the inside, without being a partisan of a particular artist or school. At the same time, Jeyifo rarely allows the plethora of facts to obscure the main thrust of his social, aesthetic, historical and ideological analysis. He has no illusions about Yoruba popular theatre providing any sustained rigorous analysis of Nigeria's economic base or social superstructure; what it does provide for the Yoruba audiences (and for many non-Yoruba Nigerians too), is a vital sense of cultural continuity and solidarity. What ultimately emerges from the book is a vital enthusiasm for the popular theatre:

In all the performances of the Travelling Theatre troupes ever attended by this writer, a suffusing gregariousness, a feeling of being at a public rite, at a communal festivity have always been so palpable an emotional and spiritual ambience that one could almost feel and touch and taste it.

The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria gives the reader a vicarious taste of that ambience.

One slightly discouraging feature of the book is how difficult it is to buy, (which accounts for the long time lapse between publication and this review). The publishers, Nigeria Magazine, who, among other books, have produced the massively indispensable, **Drama and Theatre in Nigera: A Critical Source Book**, have done a superb job of printing and presentation. It is to be hoped that such books are a sign that the domination once held by European-based publishing houses over African text-production is at last being broken. However, as Gibbs also bewails in his review of Saro-Wiwa's plays, the difficulties of buying African books in Africa needs to be urgently solved; (I bought my copy of Jeyifo's book in England). Popular theatre is becoming an increasingly dynamic force throughout Africa. It is essential that theatre practitioners and enthusiasts in different regions should have the opportunity to share the informed wisdom of works like Jeyifo's.

David Kerr.