

YERIMA, AHMED. *Modern Nigerian theatre: Geoffery Axworthy years, 1956 – 1967*. Ibadan, Kraft Books Limited, 2005. (pp. 167)

Any history of the development of Nigerian theatre that does not include the contributions of Geoffery Axworthy, the pioneering head and founder of Nigeria's first School of Drama, would be incomplete. Thus, the significance of Ahmed Yerima's *Modern Nigerian Theatre: The Geoffrey Axworthy Years, 1956-1967* (hereafter MNT). Written in a language that is laconic and lucid, the 'interview turned book' is a mine of information not only about Axworthy and his contribution to the then nascent Nigerian theatre but about that period (1956-1967) in Nigerian theatre history. With more than thirty plays and critical works like *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (2003), *Basic Techniques in Playwriting* (2004), *Ideology and Stagecraft in the Nigerian Theatre* (with Olu Obafemi in 2004), MNT is another feather in the cap of the award winning playwright, director, actor, and scholar. In a society like ours, where the labours of past heroes are easily forgotten, MNT is a bold step in the right direction. The gaps in the knowledge of students of drama in and outside Africa is bridged by information gathered from diverse sources into a single volume. This is well illustrated in the preface written by the venerable Dapo Adelugba (who was a student of Axworthy). In his words:

These reflections will be of lasting value not only to the general reader but also to the historians and scholars of arts. Geoffrey Axworthy's present and future students are among those whose research headaches will be considerably eased by this brief but brilliant document.

It is apposite to note here that the author is not just writing as a lover of Nigerian theatre, but was his student at the University College, Cardiff. Also, both Axworthy and Martin Banham, Axworthy's assistant at the School of Drama at Ibadan, served as external examiners to Yerima, when he was at the prestigious Royal Holloway College, University of London.

MNT is structured in eight chapters with numerous appendices. The 'Introduction' describes Axworthy's theatrical ideology. He is not one of those Eurocentric scholars who rejects the notion of the existence of traditional African drama. A brief chronology of Axworthy's life is given in this chapter. We are introduced to his influence and the reasons for his love of the theatre. Called by the then Head of English Department, Molly Mahood, Axworthy joined the University's School of Drama from the University of Baghdad, where he was in the same position he would later occupy in Nigeria. Axworthy would go on to develop the potential of the newly built Arts Theatre. He emphasized the process of acting drama within the theatre, which to him is only an ordinary building. This was a time when the Yoruba traveling theatre was at its peak with Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo as its forerunners. As a result of this, the importance of the University theatre to the community became crystal clear as the town and gown lacuna was bridged.

The second chapter, 'Axworthy in Nigeria', provides a picture of what he met at the School of Drama. Theatrical activities like the Students Dramatic Society and Ibadan Operatic Society were already on ground. The operatic groups mentioned above were also in vogue. Thus, plays had been acted before Axworthy's appearance on the Nigeria theatre scene. Some of these plays include *Don't Use Big Words*, *Tobacco Roads*, Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Moliere's *That Would Be a Gentleman*. In addition to financial grants from Cocoa Funds, Ford Foundation, and the 1962 Rockefeller Foundation, Axworthy was also helped by some of his friends and theatre lovers. They include his deputy Martin Banham, Ulli Beier of the School of Arts at Osogbo, and Derek Bullock, then headmaster Of Government College, Ibadan. The first groups of staff include Egun Odutola, a graduate of Rose Bruford School of Drama, Bill Brown, a Harvard trained Technical Director, Demas Nwoko, a Theatre Design expert, and Mary Caswell. The

school, which was officially opened in October 1963, started with thirty students.

Due to the renovation of the School's Art Theatre and Axworthy's lack of enthusiasm for the Greek proscenium style of stage, the University Traveling Theatre came into being. Plays were performed in cities across the country, including Dapo Adelugba, et al.'s adaptation of *That Scoundrel Suberu* (1961), and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1962) and *Comedy of Errors* (1963). In 1964, seven Shakespeare plays were staged across the nation to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Shakespeare. These plays were well received by their audiences. In fact, during their first tour, a local chief summoned the cast to perform for him. *That Scoundrel Suberu* was performed in Benin, Enugu, and Cross Rivers, among other notable cities by popular demand. The reception of the cast in Onitsha during the production of *The Taming of the Shrew* was marvelous. The proscenium wall was literally broken as female members of the audience were cheering for Katherina. But in Kano, the predominantly male audience became angry with Katherina. This situation "gave an interesting interaction of the audience with the play" (33). In the same vein, the cathartic effect of *Danda* on the Calabar audience was astonishing. After the play, a member of the audience, who works with the Ministry of Education, thanked the crew for bringing the play because of its thematic focus on national unity. Beyond mere entertainment, the national spirit was rekindled as a result of the play.

In the next chapter, the impact of drama clubs during the period covered by the test is discussed. Some of the clubs like the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society, Players of the Dawn, Hoi Phrontisai, Soyinka's 1960's Masks, and Mbari Club. The influence of the early literary journals is also commented upon. Journals such as *Ibadan*, *Transition*, *Black Orpheus*, *University Voice*, *The Spear*, *Flamingo*, and *The Horn* (later *New Horn*) served as narrative space on literary development and issues in the country, while *Ibadan* became the site to discuss

and analyse dramatic events *cum* other literary issues.

With his love for local theatre practitioners and the exchange of ideas between the School and local artistes, Axworthy created a link between the School and Kola Ogunmola, a notable figure in the Yoruba Travelling theatre. Ogunmola was chosen because Duro Ladipo was not interested in working with the school, and Hubert Ogunde was more “commercially inclined than artistically” (44). The marriage of both the School and Ogunmola gave birth to the staging of Amos Tutuola’s pioneering novel *The Palmwine Drinkard*

Axworthy’s association with two leading Nigerian dramatists, Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark, forms the fulcrum of chapter six. In 1959, Soyinka joined the School of Drama and played the role of Yang Sun in Axworthy’s production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Good Woman of Setzuan*. After that, he started his 1960 Masks, a theatre group which staged some of his plays like *The Lion and The Jewel*, *The Trial of Brother Jero*, *The Strong Breed* and *the Swamp Dweller*. Soyinka, however, left the School for the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1962. As for John Pepper Clark, their association was of mutual benefit, exemplified by Axworthy’s suggestion that Clark re-title his play *Song of a Goat* (to replace *Rain on the Sea*).

The circumstances and reasons for Axworthy leaving the country are explained in the seventh chapter, ‘Axworthy Exit (1967)’. In his words, he left partly because of the illness of his wife and the lack of availability of medical treatment for her. Personal safety is another reason he left the country. He describes the tension hanging like the sword of Damocles over the nation, which resulted in the fratricidal civil war that started the year he left, during which period intellectuals, dramatists inclusive, were being hunted, harassed, and hounded into prison.

The last chapter of the book expanded upon prospects for the relationship between the Universities and theatre practitioners. Axworthy's successful experiment of this association has been replicated by the second generation of Nigerian playwrights (theatre practitioners) who are mostly university-based. Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande are classical examples in this regard. And, if I may add, the third generation of Nigerian playwrights, Ahmed Yerima inclusive, have followed suit.

A major value in the book lies in the voluminous appendices, where apt articles that researchers might not have access to are reproduced. They include extracts from Adelugba, et al., *That Scoundrel Suberu*, songs in *Comedy of Errors*, *Danda*, Production notes of the 400th year celebration of Shakespeare, the Preface to the working script of *The Palmwine Drinkard*, and the School of Drama's play list. Also included is the interview with Kola Ogunmola by Dapo Adelugba, Axworthy's Seminar essay, "An Arts Theatre and the School of Drama," and an interview with Dapo Adelugba on Theatre Practice. The book concludes with another interview with one of Axworthy's students, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede.

This book is a mine of information about early national theatre personalities like Demas Nwoko, Wole Soyinka, Sonny Oti, Nkem Nwakwo, Dapo Adelugba, Martin Banham, J.P Clark, Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Joel Adedeji and others. MNT is highly recommended for theatre practitioners, historians, playwrights, scholars of the arts, and lovers of the Nigerian and world theatres.

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