BSQ-16

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

City Hotel
Box 24
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Theater in Sierra Leone

September 10, 1980

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

African drama can be classified in two categories: literary plays and popular theater. The literary plays usually are written by persons with Western university training. Often these authors have resided for long periods in Europe or America. Their plays are drawn from an African background but are aimed at an educated audience found mostly in the West. The works are as much literature as theater, to be read as well as to be performed.

Popular theater is created solely to be produced; usually the plays are not published. They are performed primarily for African audiences in local languages. Theater members often have had little formal training, or at least little or no contact with the Western stage.

Sierra Leone presents a good example of the differences in these two types of theater, but because of its history Freetown has a popular theater that is unlike its equivalent in other parts of Africa.

This country has only two published playwrights, Raymond Sarif Easmon and Yulissa (formerly Pat) Amadu Maddy. Easmon has written two plays, Dear Parent and Ogre (1964) and The New Patriots (1965). Maddy published a volume of four plays, Obasai and Other Plays, in 1971.

Easmon, a Freetown Creole, was trained as a doctor in England. His plays reveal strong pro-British sentiments. They are drawing-room melodramas, influenced probably more than anything else by the plays of George Bernard Shaw. The set in which most of Dear Parent and Ogre takes place is the elegant living room of Dauda Touray, a modern African aristocrat. There are plush armchairs, a cocktail cabinet, a hi-fi console. Although Easmon says the set should combine "Continental and African cultures," the room obviously belongs to a wealthy, sophisticated, Western-educated person. Only the color of Touray's skin reveals his African heritage.

Touray is the leader of a political party of people who, to his mind, "are bred to rule." Within the time period of the play, his party's victory in national elections makes him prime minister. The plot of the play is Touray's attempts to thwart his daughter's intention to marry an internationally famous pop

---

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute studying colonial influences on West African nations. His current interest is the cultures of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

singer. The young man is quite as charming and dashing as the Touray family, and even more wealthy, but alas, he is a detested Yalie. No, it's not that he went to school in New Haven. The Yalies are a people who traditionally have served the ruling Tourays. They are a caste of musicians; in real life they are the people who in francophone West Africa are called griots. Although they frequent the courts of chiefs and kings, the griots have servile status and are not allowed to marry outside their group.

In the play, father is outmaneuvered by daughter with the aid of her French stepmother, Touray's second wife. The play presents a never-never land of unity and justice, giving lip service to the real Africa of corruption and tribalism, then dismissing it with a string of platitudes. The most pompous lines show Easmon's admiration for British rule. After Touray becomes prime minister, he declaims in a soliloquy: "But, OH AFRICA, I so want to do more for you, much more than fill your children's bellies with three square meals a day. I am deeply conscious that there are things of the spirit, fundamentally more important than bread. Justice! Yes, justice—that is my profession, my first love! Dear Luawaland. The English brought you, and left us, a standard. In whatever else I may fail (with great solemnity) may NEVER one of my countrymen stand up in a court of law and say: I NEVER KNEW THE ENGLISH DO THIS."

Leaving aside the question of British standards of justice in colonial Africa, I dare say many Sierra Leoneans would willingly dispense with any demand for justice in return for just one square meal a day.

Easmon continues this strain of anglophilia in The New Patriots. Much else is the same as well—the drawing-room set, down to the settee and the cocktail cabinet; the aristocratic characters; the triumph of love over factionalism. This time the division is between Creole and upcountry tribesman. The protagonist is George Hayford, an urbane Creole who has just become chief justice. His son has an affair with the daughter of a government minister who is a member of one of the tribes in the provinces and who is also corrupt. The main plot of the play is whether John Hayford will do right by the minister's daughter. In the end, he decides to marry her because she needs him, while her rival for his attention, Violet Ellis, a well-bred Creole, is stronger willed, more able to take care of herself, and too chaste to have let John compromise her.

The play also deals with the corruption of the government minister and, an outgrowth of this, a workers' riot for more pay and cleaner government. George Hayford calms the stone-throwing mob, since, as we all know, the true aristocrat is the working man's best friend. It is the unscrupulous politician who claims to represent the common man while he is stuffing his pocket with ill-gotten gains who is the cause of all the poor man's problems. Hayford also uncovers the corruption of the minister and his upcountry partners in government (the prime minister is honest as the day is long but incapable of controlling his appointees) and brings them to justice.

The country in which the action takes place is not named but it can only be Sierra Leone. Easmon's Creole prejudice comes out strongly, overwhelming his probable intention of making it an appeal for unity. He cannot conceal his conde-

scension toward the indigenous peoples of the country. The corrupt minister lived in a Creole home as a boy, but that good influence "did not succeed in civilizing all his tribal instincts." At one point, John Hayford tells his future bride, "You people have got so crazed with power as power, you've not even begun to see that the true purpose of political power is good government." It is clear Easmon thinks that, next to the restoration of British rule, the best thing for Sierra Leone would be the installation of a Creole oligarchy.

Easmon's plays are strictly European in manner and speech, and reveal a typically European view of Africa. Amadu Maddy in Obasai and Other Plays shows a much greater African influence. His work stresses sound and music. The plays can be enjoyably read, but hearing them even more than seeing them performed would add greatly to their effect.

By far the best of the four is Gbana-Bendu. It is also a story of political corruption, but in a wholly African setting, and with much more depth and complexity than in Easmon's plays. Gbana-Bendu shows the influence of Samuel Beckett, I believe, but it also owes much to the rhythms and mystery of rituals in African village life. In this way, Maddy ties the European format of a stage play to the source of African theater.

The play opens with a long dialogue by two men, Shadow and Beggar. It is these characters that make me feel the influence of Beckett. They are penniless victims of society, but also keen observers of life who seem untouched by what goes on around them. They alternately spout nonsense and philosophy. They are at times antagonists, at other times a team. They act as foils to each other and as a Greek chorus for the play. And, as in Beckett, their speeches, full of meaning but short on sense, can get a little boring.

The sense and nonsense continues in a more traditional context in the second scene when Umu, a beautiful maiden, confronts the Gbaks, servants of a priest who are preparing for her sacrifice. The action is contained in song and dance, gibberish and poetry. Shadow and Beggar arrive on the scene and decide to save Umu from the priest, Ur'Tamrokoh. The priest uses the ritual of the sacrifice not only to maintain his authority over the villagers but as a cover for robbing their homes. Instead of sacrificing the young virgins, he keeps them in a harem in the sacred grove.

Like many modern plays, the attraction of Gbana-Bendu is not in the development of the plot but in the rapid exchange of words and thoughts. Harold Pinter is probably another playwright who has influenced Maddy. The Sierra Leonean lives in Europe and has long been involved with play production there. Yet he does not leave the reader or the audience in befuddlement as many modern playwrights do. Beggar, in a closing speech that is almost an epilogue, sums up the action of the play. Through him, Maddy makes comments that are both political and philosophical, although ambiguous.

"I don't understand it all. I truly, honestly and sincerely don't believe it could happen. Ur'Tamrokoh the corrupter. Umu the disguised corrupt. Partners of evil deceits and exploits. She was possessed by no devils. She was no sacrifice to any god or Oracle. She's an actress of the greatest thieving racket and plays her part well. What a good and clever director

Ur'Tamrokoh is. A good seducer too. Old and wise, schemist and simple. Umu, she knows how to lie while her Gbakanda people love and lap the beauty of untruths. She's a voluptuous maiden. I was jealous and wanted her. We became cruel to Ur'Tamrokoh. To the people of Gbakanda. No, we were not really; we spoke the truth. (Shouts) Did we? Did we?..."

The three other plays in Maddy's collection are much shorter and lesser works, but they all show his interest in sounds and music. The settings and the plots are more genuinely African than Easmon's. Besides his European influences, Maddy probably owes much to the work of the great Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, particularly his A Dance of the Forests.

Many African dramatists are trying to create African theater on the European stage, but they cannot overcome the main difference between the two dramatic modes—the role of the audience. In the West the role is passive. In Africa the audience is traditionally part of the play. African theater, like all theater, developed out of religious ritual. Because these rituals are performed for the benefit of the community, the roles of performer and spectator are not mutually exclusive. In its long development, Western theater has erected barriers between players and playgoers, one physical and one psychological.

Traditional African theater is characterized by the absence of these barriers. The plays are performed in an open space with spectators all around. The actors often make their entrances out of the crowd. Physically, the audience is part of the play. More important is the psychological connection between the performers and the spectators. The audience considers itself part of the play, so it is not inhibited about joining the action. Members of the crowd may shout out comments or instructions to the players, and the actors may come out of their roles to respond and to elicit more comments.

Unless Western audiences can change their attitude toward a play, African writers will not be able to bring African theater to the Western stage. Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland has made an attempt in The Marriage of Anansewa. Copying the traditional storytelling-acting methods of the Akan peoples of her country, she keeps the entire cast in front of the audience at all times, bringing actors out of the group to perform their roles as needed. Yet all she achieves, it seems to me, is a play within a play. She may show Western audiences what African theater is like, but she hasn't really brought them African theater. When critics talk about African playwrights maintaining a link with tradition, what they mean is the writers have depicted African customs and beliefs on the stage for Western audiences.

The gap between African theater and the West may be unbridgeable. To experience African theater, Westerners probably have to see a popular group perform in an African locality. One such group from Nigeria is in London now, however, and it would be interesting to see the audience's reaction to it. If enough Africans are in the seats, perhaps African theater has come to Europe.

Nigeria and Ghana have had professional touring groups performing plays in local languages for many years. Critics normally refer to these groups when they discuss African popular theater. Freetown has its own brand of popular theater, reflec-

ting the roots of the city. It is more Western-oriented than its equivalent in Nigeria and Ghana, and it is strictly unprofessional. For the most part, I have found it rather tedious, but I miss out on a lot by not being well-acquainted with Krio. Freetonians flock to the plays and thoroughly enjoy themselves.

In the six weeks I've been here I've seen seven plays performed by five groups. Plays are put on for three to five nights in either of two rented halls. Groups may produce new plays or revive popular shows of the past. The average size of the house is about half capacity, between 200 and 400 people. Tickets are sold at two or three prices, ranging from $1 to $3, which is comparable to the admission prices for movie theaters.

The plays reveal the origin of theater here, which could not develop from rituals because of the opposition of Christian missionaries. Unlike other areas where missionaries were at a disadvantage in their fight against African customs, in the colony of Sierra Leone the missionaries always had the upper hand. For a time in the early history of the colony, they were given administrative and magisterial powers by the government. So theater developed mainly through the churches and the schools, and these two institutions figure prominently in many of the plays I've seen. The influence of the church was evident in the opening scene of Dele Charley's new play, Adopted Pikin (Adopted Child). A minister gives a sermon to the audience and then begins a hymn. Much of the audience was familiar with the song and joined in. When a collection was taken and actors passed among the crowd with paper plates, most people dug into their pockets and purses for coins.

In Born to Lose and its sequel, The Return of Essehdaetay, Christian belief is intermingled with the supernatural and African mythology. In the first play, a woman goes to a witch to have a curse placed on her sister, whose land she wants to inherit. The witch appeals to Sanjo, god of fire. The sister dies in childbirth and her son, Essehdaetay, leads a miserable life in the home of his wicked aunt until his twenty-first birthday. That night his mother's ghost appears to him, explains the cause of her death and asks for revenge. Essehdaetay leaves home and goes to a man he calls Teacher. Although this man is apparently a Christian priest, his costume and makeup bring to mind the Shaolin monks that are a popular feature of kung-fu movies. The priest tells Essehdaetay how to enter the underworld to ask Sanjo to lift the curse. He gives the boy a cross to protect him, but also a couple of magic garments and several books about the mysteries of the planets.

Thus armed, Essehdaetay makes his trip into the underworld and encounters ghosts, devils and evil spirits before reaching Sanjo and forcing the god to remove the curse. The journey was the most ambitious and accomplished piece of dramatic production I have seen here. The set of gravestone crosses cast in a blue light and the constant wail and gibbering of the damned admirably represented hell. Considering the lack of technical equipment and training available to the group, it was marvelous theater. More of the same was in store in the sequel, as Essehdaetay enters his aunt's womb as a cloud of smoke (this was done offstage) and repays her for her cruelty. She is pregnant for twenty months and finally enters the hospital where modern medicine succumbs to the powers of witchcraft. Here the writer

again reveals his debt to films. Another well-staged scene in which Sanjo's bass voice comes out of the possessed woman's mouth and her mouth glows with a blood-red light was clearly influenced by The Exorcist.

The action becomes a bit confused at the end. The priest tells Essehdaetay that it is unchristian to continue his revenge, but after some debate the hero goes through with his plan to kill his aunt and the witch. This brings his death but God sends a flock of angels to bring him to heaven where he rejoins his mother. Both plays have Christian burial scenes, and the audience again joined the hymn singing.

I have already described in one letter the plots of Charley's semi-historical, anti-colonial plays, The Blood of a Stranger and The Return of Kindo. This is a popular genre; later this month a group I haven't seen yet will perform The Tragic Death of Patrice Lumumba. Traditional village life is the theme of Sumangama by the Bun Cultural Theater. The title is a Mende word meaning incest and the play tells the story of a man who impregnates his sister. They are found out and the sin is expiated through a ritual ceremony in a sacred forest. The most interesting feature of this play, from my point of view, was that the whole story was revealed beforehand not only by a prologue but by the program, which gave details of the action of every scene. Telling the audience what it is about to see is a frequent device. The Essehdaetay plays made frequent use of narration to explain the action, but no other play I saw went to the extreme of Sumangama in eliminating all suspense from the show.

The mistreatment of adopted children is another popular theme. Whether this is a universal plot or borrowed from Western fairy tales, I don't know. It occurs not only in the Essehdaetay plays but in Charley's Adopted Pikin and the other Krio play I've seen, Pikin Wae Nor to Me Born. As indicated by the titles, the two plays have similar plots. Charley's is a bit more complicated, as the heroine of the play is the real daughter of the man she believes is her adoptive father. Pikin Wae Nor to Me Born is a more straightforward story of a boy who overcomes the harshness of his childhood to become a wealthy and respected adult. Both plays emphasize the importance of education and seem to express the belief that adopted children make good students. The second Pikin also shares with Essehdaetay a refusal to forgive the offending parent when the tables are turned, even though in both cases they are relatives. I find that a little surprising in Africa where family ties mean so much.

All these plays were written and performed by local people with little or no theater training. Charley, the most experienced of the playwrights, is a physical education teacher. His only professional training has been a couple of workshops, although this month he goes to England for a ten-week theater course, sponsored by the British Council. The theater companies are all youngsters in their late teens and early twenties. Some are students, some have jobs, some are unemployed. The groups coalesced of their own accord when several people who liked acting happened to come together. Syl Johnson, president of Sierra Magnamex Theater, which produced Pikin Wae Nor to Me Born, said he formed the group about three years ago after watching television and wondering what the actors were doing

that he couldn't do. Bun Cultural Theater is part of a coalition of youth groups begun by Social Welfare Minister Alhaji Bun-Mansaray to try to combat unemployment and inactivity among youngsters in his parliamentary district.

The lack of training makes every production uneven. Plays usually start about half an hour after their announced 8:30 p.m. curtain time (and the audience continues to arrive for another half hour after that) and are drawn-out affairs, with frequent curtain closings and inexplicable delays. The lighting is annoying; a play may proceed in total darkness one minute and with all the house lights up the next. The acting relies on natural talent, which is not uniform. On the whole, to a Western viewer the performances are reminiscent of a rather shabby high school production.

My admiration for the players makes me want to soften that harsh judgment. I went to two rehearsals of Adopted Pikin. Charley's group, the Tabule Experimental Theater, rehearses under a carport behind a private home. When it rains hard, the actors have trouble making themselves heard above the pounding on the metal roof. The group usually doesn't have an opportunity for a dress rehearsal on the stage because it can't afford the cost of the hall, $50 a night. For Adopted Pikin, a brand new play, Charley only gave his group three weeks to prepare. He said if the actors have more time they become stale in their roles. Unfortunately, it didn't quite come together for the opening performance. Three-quarters of the play went well, the smoothest production I had seen, but the last three scenes fell apart. The problems seemed to be the cast just didn't have enough time to learn their lines thoroughly nor enough familiarity with the stage to know where they should be.

The Freetown audiences are not critical. Mistakes are greeted with laughter, as is almost everything else in the play. I told you how the death of Kindo and the suicide of his father evoked howls of mirth. The audiences want a good comedy, and if the jokes are slow in coming they will provide their own. They are like a group of unruly boys in a darkened movie house. The boldest compete for attention by yelling out gags. When the action gets slow, the volume of conversation goes up. People are always going in and out for refreshment. Beer, soda and meats on sale in the lobby are brought into the hall, and by the second act lines are punctuated by the sharp retort of empty bottles kicked over.

The crowd will applaud a piece of good acting (it appreciates volume and broad expression rather than subtlety) but it doesn't normally reward the actors with anything but laughter. There is usually no applause between acts or at the end of the play. People may keep quiet for a particularly sad or exciting moment, but nothing keeps them subdued for long. The playwrights hate it. Every one I've talked with has complained that the audience "won't sit still for the message." This reveals that the writers have their eyes on the Western theater rather than traditional African theater. Charley spoke to me about the traditional attitude toward plays and expressed a desire to take his group on tour to the villages, but from what I've seen he has made no attempt to involve his audiences in his plays.

The attitude of the writers may be expected since the Freetown theater is derived from Western sources. I am uncertain how to judge the audiences' behavior. Some of it is due to the

lack of social conventions that keep the more obstreperous in line in the West. The theater here is also a more middle-class entertainment than in the West. The crowds are the same as those that go to the movies, and there too they are boisterous. Whether a part of the audience's reaction can be attributed to a residual African feeling for participatory theater, I don't know.

I was surprised to learn from Syl Johnson that the audiences have only recently begun to come back in large numbers. For the past year, he said, people have been afraid to attend the theater as a result of the halting "at gunpoint" of a Sierra Magnamex performance. The play was called Poyo Ton Wahala (The Trouble in Poyo Town), written by John Karbo. It first ran in 1965 without any problem, but when it was revived last year some government people took offense at its pokes at bribery and corruption. Following the closure of that and some other plays, the government issued an executive edict in November setting up a censorship office. Responsibility was given to the minister of education who delegated it to a person in his department. This man has an academic rather than a political background, so he doesn't know what exactly he is looking for in the plays. He also has retained his other duties in the department and so has little time for censorship.

Everyone I talked with complained about the censorship, more because of the delays in getting plays approved than because of the restriction on expression. Bun-Mansaray, the government minister, said the censorship was inhibiting the growth of the theater. He plans to call a meeting of the theater groups to make a presentation for government support to the minister of cultural affairs. When I told this to Johnson, he was dubious. He doesn't trust any politician and won't have anything to do with the government. In a meeting with the education minister about the censorship, he said that politicians are only interested in "power, money and women." I doubt he's going to get much support from the government.

Karbo told me he feels Sierra Leone playwrights have to leave the country to get the freedom and the backing to write. I don't agree with the first part of that. Many great plays have been written under strict censorship laws. I do think that theater needs financial support to flourish. The great periods of dramatic development in a country seem to have been periods of affluence. The Elizabethan age is the most obvious example of this. If this is true, Nigeria is the place to look for the development of African theater. Without more money in people's pockets and some official backing, Freetown popular theater, for all its energy, probably won't be going anywhere.

Regards,

Bowden

Bowden Quinn

Received in Hanover 10/14/80