

THEATRE

Internationalization of theatrical experience constitutes a notable facet in Sri Lanka's cultural/aesthetic practices. Departing from the convention of looking to European theatre for inspiration and adaptation, Somalatha Subasinghe and Neloufer de Mel have now brought African theatre to the Sri Lankan stage. The Trial and Death of Dedan Kimathi and Opera Wonyosi signify potentialities as well as some problematic aspects of the transfer of African theatrical experience to Sri Lanka's theatrical culture.

While Sonli Dhanapala reviews Dedan Kimathi, Neloufer answers some questions put to her by Pravada about Wonyosi which will be staged in Colombo in June.

Dedan Kimathi: Observations from the Sidelines

Sonali Dhanapala

Ngugi Wa'Thongo is one of Africa's best known writers and playwrights. His play 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi' has been produced in many languages all over the world. We in Sri Lanka recently had the opportunity of seeing it performed in Colombo. What follows are some random thoughts after watching the play in performance at the Lionel Wendt Theatre.

The theatre 'scene' in Colombo is severely divided on the basis of language and, therefore, on the basis of the social class of the audience! Daily performances of theatre in the Sinhala language take place at several sites in Colombo; English language drama surfaces once in a while, either in the form of slapstick pieces written and performed by the elite of Colombo or amateur re-'productions' of West End musicals and the like, in which the expatriate community is also involved.

Thus, when interviews with the director of the play, Somalatha Subasinghe, first appeared in the newspapers stating that she was using Sinhala-speaking actors in a production of 'Dedan Kimathi' in the English language, the production seemed to be something to look forward to. More publicity followed, focusing on the way the actors were being tutored in the pronunciation of English with an African accent. More and more interesting, it seemed!

Having read the play earlier, one knew that the text was couched in typical and colourful 'anti-colonial' and 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric of the nationalist era in African politics in all its glory and that it involved a lot of fist shaking and tub-thumping and sloganeering. In fact, the Sinhala stage of two decades ago, one remembers, was filled with such plays which were denounced by some critics as 'papadam' theatre. But one thought, well, that's alright, it sounds as if it will be an interesting production.

The evening of the performance came around. One went to the theater in expectation. After some delays, usual on an opening night, the curtain went up and the play began.

Saman Perera, who is one of the more charismatic actors on the Sinhala stage, appeared as Dedan Kimathi; he strode on and the stage was charged with the electricity of his physical presence; but, alas, he opened his mouth and killed his performance from the word 'go.'

Watching the actors, many of them who have established reputations on the Sinhala stage, labouring their way through a) the unfamiliar language of English and b) an African accent that almost nobody in Sri Lanka has ever heard, one really felt sorry for them. On the one hand, their efforts were wasted; in spite of the grimacing and contortions of lip and throat, the sounds they produced did not sound like 'African' English; they were just plain unintelligible.

On the other hand, the actors who had some facility with the English language scored hands down; and we, the audience, waited in suspense for the Englishman to begin speaking in his oh so perfect accent, and what a relief when he did! We could finally understand what was being said! Ironic that it was the bad guy who was intelligible and the hero who had marbles in his mouth! And anyway, at the end of the day, what advantage did it serve that the African accent was attempted at such great cost? 'Sinhala' English 'as she is spoke' would have done just as well, one thought, considering that the rationale for the production was the assumption that the anti-imperialist struggle was common to both Ngugi and ourselves.

So much for that. Unfortunately, however, the message itself is a few decades out of date, and, in fact, of barely historic

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interest. The flat characterisations of black as hero and white as anti-hero, the transparent plot, the brave 'mother', the heroic revolutionaries, the treacherous brother, the platitudes, the posturing - all contributed to make 'The Trail of Dedan Kimathi' as dead as a dodo in my estimation. Maybe I am too severe. But one has to admit that the politics of the nationalist 'dream' that lies at the base of Ngugi's play has turned into ashes in our generation; looking back at the rhetoric voiced in the play, therefore, one only sees the ironies, the illusions, the 'jargon', the half-truths and mis-readings of reality that betrayed the nationalist struggles of Africa and that have led to the chaos that Kenya and other countries in that region are in today.

Perhaps one could have salvaged Ngugi's play by re-interpreting it, producing it in a different mode. Who knows, I am not a play producer, only an observer on the sidelines. But this production is so didactic in its framing of the text and somehow, plain and simple 'agit-prop' no longer pleases. We have passed through too many traumatic situations to be any longer

content with revolutionary rhetoric, red flags and clenched fists. We demand to see the truth and the whole truth, we demand to see the dark side of the moon.

From speaking to some of the actors, they appear to have gained a tremendous insight into African society, politics and culture from working on the play with Somalatha, who has always displayed a remarkable ability to relate to, and interact with, children and the young. The mixing of actors and theater persona from the English and Sinhala speaking theater worlds is also a virtue in itself in our circumstances. But all this would have been perfect for a workshop production, not for a play that is put on for an 'average' audience.

For such audiences, then, Somalatha Subasinghe's production of 'Dedan Kimathi' seemed a waste of resources, talent and energy. A real pity, that. And, perhaps, as a codicil, one may add that one wonders whether Ngugi's 'politics of nationalism' are so dead and obsolete in today's world and therefore safe for even the British Council.

Neloufer de Mel Interviewed

MAKING 'OPERA WONYOSI' TRILINGUAL

Why a trilingual production?

It has been important for us to experiment with a trilingual production for many reasons. Firstly, we want to present a trilingualism that is different to what gets called trilingual in Sri Lanka today. Very often, trilingualism means the dominant or hegemonic language remaining in place, with gestures of one-liners in the other two languages. Or, language is compartmentalized. There are plays and tele-dramas in which the Sinhala characters speak only Sinhala, the Tamil only Tamil and so on. We wanted to stage a production in which all three languages are given equal status, and moreover where the actors are required to speak in all three languages. This is because one of our aims was to confront, and come to terms with how difficult it is to learn, speak and act in another language, and through this process, realize the commitment required in achieving this form of trilingualism.

A very important reason for such a production was also the need, within the context of the University, to provide a forum at which students from all three linguistic mediums and different faculties could meet, take part in a production and get

to know each other. Our education system has bred a linguistic and disciplinary isolation which spills onto the social level as well. Students from different faculties and departments tend to remain within their own milieu, and very rarely do English, Sinhala and Tamil medium students really get to know each other. To me, the fact that this production has facilitated such a forum in which, there is not only representation from all three linguistic mediums, but the faculties of Arts, Science, Law and Medicine as well has been a significant achievement.

How difficult has it been, to get the students together?

As with any experimental work, we have had to confront a lot of scepticism from students, academics and critics alike. In terms of getting students together for this production, one of the biggest hurdles was to establish the credibility of the English Drama Society and English Department in this venture. Although calls for auditions etc. were publicised in all three languages within the University, there were those who

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