

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

## *Theatre for Development*

by Miles Lee\*

### *Abstract*

This paper underscores the role of drama in instruction and education. It recognizes the existence of drama in traditional African societies, and goes on to show how the dominant values of missionaries introduced a new type of drama in Africa. This type of drama alienated the majority of Africans even after their countries has attained independence. The paper narrates many struggles by the author to popularize drama in East Africa, and goes on to discuss why university graduates (in East Africa) do not take up acting as a career. It ends by highlighting the failures and successes of instructional/educational drama in East Africa.

### *Résumé*

Cet article met en exergue le rôle du théâtre dans l'instruction et l'éducation. Il reconnaît l'existence du théâtre dans les sociétés traditionnelles africaines et montre comment les valeurs dominantes des missionnaires ont introduit un nouveau type de théâtre en Afrique. Ce type de théâtre s'est aliéné la majorité des Africains même après l'accession à l'indépendance de leurs pays. L'article évoque plusieurs des combats que l'auteur a menés pour populariser le théâtre en Afrique de l'Est et montre pourquoi les diplômés d'université n'embrassent pas la carrière d'acteur (en Afrique de l'Est). Enfin, il rend compte des succès et des échecs du théâtre dans le domaine de l'instruction et de l'éducation en Afrique de l'Est.

\*The Late Mr. Miles Lee passed away in June 1986, and was for several years Senior Instructor in Radio Broadcasting at the Kenya Institute of Mass Communications, Nairobi, Kenya.

At a UNESCO-sponsored Audio-visual Aids Conference held in New Delhi, delegates representing over fifteen Asian countries unanimously agreed that the most successful media for instruction and education were, in order of impact, drama, puppets and films. Naturally the effect of drama, puppets or films used in a community for educational purposes must depend largely on the existing social conditions and education.

## *Drama in Africa*

A study of African masks and their uses have strong parallels in early European dramatic forms.

Classical and medieval drama in Europe sprang from similar ceremonials and other religious practices in Greek and Roman civilizations. Sanscrit and Asiatic Drama have sprung from comparable indigenous roots. The format of the Western Theatre as we know it today with all the accessories of Proscenium arch, Scenery and Lighting and other devices are by and large an alien happening and influence.

In the days of the British Empire the then colonialists and administrators were quick to develop and assist in the development of Amateur Theatrical groups, in order that their people might maintain their cultural values in otherwise alien and strange countries.

Local indigenous cultural and creative practises and ceremonies were 'stamped out' or 'hit on the head' by early missionaries and colonialists alike, thereby following the grand pattern of colonisation as set by Greek and Roman conquerors alike. This process of elimination caused either defiance in the form of secret cultural societies or more often than not by compliance to the new imposed standards, thereby doing irreparable damage to the natural growth of indigenous customs and possible dramatic forms.

Many of the so called National Theatres in the capitals of the Third World were inherited and never built to accommodate local creative activity. Taking Kenya and Uganda's National Theatres as an example, in both cases these were actually built and partially owned by the leading European Amateur Theatrical societies with the assistance of the colonial administrators. In Uganda the then governor 'raided' the National Coffee Board Fund to assist local amateurs to build the theatre on the basis of the administration donating £2 for every £1 raised or donated by the societies themselves.

In both cases these theatres were eventually 'taken over' by the newly independent countries' ministries of cultural and social services. The 'take over' battles were long and bitter.

I stress this because both countries are now saddled with theatres which were not built or designed for local cultural practices, but only for mounting Western style drama and concerts. The restraint of Proscenium arch, curtains and scenery were those into which local creative activity has had to squeeze itself regardless of indigenous form and style. Perhaps even more of a set back was that 'local

audiences' had never been encouraged or even allowed to enter these temples of Western culture in pre-independence days. The budding entrepreneur African dramatist and company using such premises still has to 'hire' such theatres to cover electrical and other costs, as well as being immediately faced with luring an audience into a building from which hitherto they had been totally excluded.

This leads to one of the first practical and economic problems facing a local theatre company. The audience in Africa for Western format plays in cities is comparatively small. So that if a company wants to go on tour to make a living, or stay together as a creative group, it is immediately faced with lack of circuit and audiences which are used to going to plays. As a result many local African creative groups are more or less dependent on state radio and television to make a living.

### *Costs of Drama*

Recently the chartered Accountant Mr. Jon Catty who specialises in accounting practises for Theatrical Entrepreneurs and Managers wrote in *Drama*, the quarterly theatre magazine, "There is no such thing as a typical theatrical production but in London production costs include the expenses of rehearsal salaries for actors and staff (usually four weeks for a play, six weeks for a musical), director's and designer's fees, building the set, making the costumes, paying the theatre and its staff, fitting up the set and lighting, printing and advertising and, in the case of musicals, the cost of orchestrations, music copying and musicians' rehearsals. Here is a typical budget:

	MUSICAL	PLAY
Scenery and properties	125,000	20,000
Costumes	50,000	8,000
Sound and lighting	25,000	2,000
Salaries for factors, musicians and staff	75,000	12,000
Fees to director, designer, choreographer, ect.	25,000	10,000
Theatre rent and charges	25,000	5,000
Fit up of set and lighting	15,000	5,000
Travel and set transport	5,000	1,500
Printing, advertising and publicity	60,000	20,000
Management fees	4,000	2,000
Legal fees and insurance	5,000	1,000
Casting and audition expenses	5,000	1,000
Orchestration and music copying	30,000	—
Rehearsal rooms, scripts etc.	5,000	1,500
Sundries	6,000	1,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	£460,000	£95,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>

There are, of course, many variations from production to production, but these are the main items of expenditure incurred.

Having spent most of the money raised on production costs, the producer prays for good notices and long queues at the box office. It will be seen that the sums involved in running the show, quite apart from the huge costs of producing it, are horrendous.

The examples below indicate that merely to cover the weekly running costs of a play it is necessary to take £15,000 at the box office, and £50,000 for a musical. In fact, takings from customers have to be 15% more than this to cover the imposition of VAT.

	MUSICAL	PLAY
Salaries — actors and staff	12,000	3,250
— Musicians	4,500	—
— theatre staff	6,000	2,500
— national insurance	2,000	600
— holiday provision	800	200
Theatre — rent	10,000	3,000
— light, heat and other charges	1,500	1,000
Publicity	2,000	1,500
Hire of equipment etc.	2,500	500
Management fee	500	400
Insurance	250	50
Royalties — authors	3,750	1,125
— director/choreographer	2,000	450
— designers	500	75
— management	500	150
Sundries (cleaning, replacements, etc.)	1,200	200
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	£50,000	£15,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>

Again it should be noted that costs fluctuate greatly from show to show. A musical's break-even figures can vary from £40,000 to £60,000, and a play particularly one with a large cast or with a star receiving a percentage, might need to take £20,000.

So much then for the costs of Western styled drama in London. However turning back to the national theatres in East Africa the present director of the Kenya National Theatre, assures me, this year, that the cost of one week at the National Theatre in Nairobi would amount to not less than £4,000 or 80,000/=. This figure includes: The cost of hiring the Theatre, staff and electricity. It also covers the making of scenery and costumes as well as the necessary advertising and publicity. This figure does *not* include the salaries of the company hiring the theatre, but would only apply if the artists were in the un-

paid amateur category. It should also be noted that rehearsal time outside the theatre tenancy is not included.

Is it surprising then that these national theatres are mainly used by the affluent European amateur societies as opposed to the new young African groups who are struggling for creative identity and a professional existence?

### *The Role of Radio and T.V.*

The awareness and need for the re-vitalisation of national African cultures has been appreciated and is being actively approached by national Radio and TV stations.

Recently the Voice of Kenya (VOK) in conjunction with the Office of the Vice President and Ministry of Home Affairs – National Council for Population and Development mounted a series of ten radio dramas with constructive messages or situations dealing with population control.

It is interesting to note that these dramas with a minimum cast of four rising to a maximum cast of ten have cost £3,000 or 60,000/=. This figure does not include pre-research and pre-testing of sample programmes. Nor does it include recording costs which have been done by the state radio, nor the final editing and mixing costs of the programmes which have been done at the Government's Kenya Institute of Mass Communication (KIMC). The budget quoted covers actual production costs and fees for cast, writers and sound radio producer.

Ten thirty minute programmes have averaged out for basic production at £300 or 6,000/= a programme. The success and impact of this series is yet to be felt and assessed.

On VOK Television a well known folk group of actors mount a thirty minute weekly series in colour known as 'VITIMBI'.

The set is a permanent one, namely a poor man's Hilton or a typical African wayside shanty eating house. The cast varies in size from Five to eight according to the incident being portrayed. The actors and producer of this group receive a weekly maximum of not more than £225 or 4,500/-. The star players and comedians receive a fee of £25 or 500/- a week.

This Group is very much 'development conscious' and their incidents are based on comic situations and dialogues which point to and underline conservative and more backward social habits.

The methodology used by this very successful 'folk group' is particularly interesting. It is based on the well tried Italian Renaissance formula of Commedia Del Arte. That is to say the main characters are permanent stock social prototypes, and the episode to be presented is based and worked out on a series of situations chosen and selected by the producer. During rehearsal and recording the producer's job is to see that the actors maintain the logical sequence of 'situations'; the actual dialogue used tends to be an 'ad lib' impromptu affair or 'off the cuff'. The producer actively ensures also that the cast does not over-

run its allocated time. Such productions, successful and they might only be maintained by a close knit group of experienced performers. This is an art in itself.

Next I should like to turn to a live 'Variety and Talent Spotting' programme broadcast live by Radio Uganda on a regular 3 monthly basis. I was responsible in 1962 for inaugurating and bringing this programme into existence. And though this happened some years ago, this very popular broadcast is still going and is now in its 24th year on the air.

At the time in question the National Theatre in Kampala was very short of money – so taking advantage of their situation we had the State Radio negotiate a permanent contract with the theatre committee. For a fixed payment of £400 or 8,000/= from the Ministry, the State Radio would be allowed to record 12 extracts a year from any production or cultural event in the National Theatre which we considered to be of entertainment value or importance. It also allowed the Radio to use the National Theatre on 4 Sundays a year for Broadcast purposes direct (additional 4 Sundays were allowed for Rehearsal) from 9 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. without additional hiring costs. The extracts recorded in the theatre were edited and transposed with suitable radio commentary before being transmitted later on the air.

The Sundays we needed for our vernacular 'Variety and Talent Spotting Programmes' which were still an untried event. Our formula was this:- By announcements on the radio we called for choral groups, soloists of all sorts, singers – folk actors, comedians, musical units and story tellers to come for audition in any vernacular or English at 9 a.m. the next Sunday in the National Theatre. The heads of vernacular services, the two masters of ceremonies and myself auditioned solidly from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. By 6 p.m. we were able to tell the groups which had been selected for the next Sunday Live Broadcast. Selection of course endeavoured to give as wide a variety of acts and groups as possible and suitable for radio. If we had too many choral groups we asked some of them to come and take part in a late broadcast.

During the next week in conjunction with the two masters of ceremonies I worked out a very closely timed running order with musical links and MC announcements between each group performing. The Sunday of the live broadcast arrived, as well as anything from 12 to 16 groups who had been selected to take part in the live transmission. The number of artists could be as many as 300, particularly if several choral or musical groups were participating.

Each actual group, regardless of numbers was paid 50/= for entering the competition. Cash prizes of 150/= would be awarded to the best group in each competing category of Act or Artists. The judging would be done after the live transmission went off air – by each group coming forward to receive 'Timed applause' (this was done on 4 stop watches) from the Studio audience in the theatre. Award winners were announced later on the radio in the local news items.

The studio audience were admitted to the National Theatres at 2/= per head

at 2. p.m. From two to three p.m. we hired a traditional group of musicians to play in front of the curtain to give 'warm up music' to the studio audience. At two minutes to three the curtain rose to disclose the first participating group and the two masters of ceremonies. Also on a rostrum against a well lit cyclorama sat a small Police Band Unit in 'dress' uniform. The band's function was to play opening music to get us 'on air' before the two M.C.'s welcomed the audience and explained in English and vernacular the proceedings. The first group performed and the band played suitable link music to allow the artists to exit as well as the new group to take its place; at the same time the master of ceremonies adjusted and moved microphones where necessary. A smooth transmission for the radio listener was so maintained — it was only the studio audience that saw the physical changes taking place but this was all part of the fun for them. This formula was followed for the full 2 hours of live broadcast, at the conclusion of which the judging took place. All acts were recorded at the same time as the live transmission and the material so gained was broadcast at a later date. This live transmission became so successful that we later extended it from 3 to 6 p.m.

I have dealt with this radio "development of talent" show at some length because it had a remarkable effect with the then "intellectuals on the Hill" — namely Makerere University. The English (later the Literature) Department along with the students said, "look what the peasants are doing so successfully on Radio Uganda. We are writers and budding dramatists, we should do something about this too". As a result approaches were made to me as the producer in charge of features and drama and we soon rapidly had the students writing and supplying us with plays for radio adaptation so that eventually we were able to present four local Friday night theatres on the air each month. So, unintentionally, the success of the peasant and folk talent spurred the academics and their students to utilize the local state radio for their creative efforts.

Another social off-shoot of this programme was that it attracted local audiences for their first visit to the National Theatre, Kampala. I hold the opinion that any state radio that has not yet tried a similar talent spotting programme should venture to do so. The results can be quite remarkable. However it should be pointed out that technically it is far simpler to organise and direct amateur talent into correct microphone position and smooth transmission running than it would be if they were in TV studios (often for the first time) unused to camera positions, techniques and excessively strong lighting.

### *University Theatre*

By 1965 due to the unflagging zeal, optimism and energy of David Cook (Later Professor of Literature) as well as the support of Professor M. Macpherson Makerere student energy was harnessed and the Makerere Travelling Theatre came into existence. Originally it played both in Uganda and Kenya. But shortly the Nairobi University followed suit and the Nairobi Stu-



dents University Travelling Theatre was born. Both of these highly commendable creative ventures have been documented and written about in University publications and elsewhere.

Scripts of some of the pioneer sketches and plays by Makerere Travelling Theatre players later appeared in 'Short East African Plays in English' (Editors D. Cook & M. Lee) published in Heinemann's African Writers Series. This was the first occasion in fact that East African dramatists had appeared in print in this well known series. Hitherto, the creative writers of West Africa had held this field unchallenged.

I suspect that many people hoped that these travelling theatres would lead student graduates to devote their energies to full time professional theatre at a later date.

The fact that this has not occurred, at least in East Africa, is due I feel to the urgent social pressures of local societies. In particular the 'respectability' and usefulness of the professional theatre has still to be accepted and established. An example of this is when you look at the flourishing amateur activities of school drama, which is now often aided and encouraged by local ministries of education. It is not unusual to find that many parents complain to schools that plays and drama are not in the Examination Syllabus and therefore the headmaster and school are wasting pupil's time and parents' money by encouraging such activities. Sometimes parents even infer 'irresponsibility' on the part of the School.

Although we are not dealing in detail with School and Youth Drama I would draw your attention to an article which appeared in the now defunct TRANSITION (Edited by Rajat Neogy) when the South African literary figure BOB LESHQAI wrote:-

The African child, though almost neglected is a most important part of the common man. . . It is important that our theatrical activities should evolve around him, for the children will become our future writers, critics, actors, technicians, producers, designers and audiences. Theatre for the child is not only an entertainment; it is a vital educational experiment. It is here that the child's critical powers are challenged and his creativity aroused from slumber.

To support this view the University travelling theatres have always had an eye on isolated schools for performances as well as isolated rural communities.

The would be graduate actor or dramatist who might well want to devote a career to professional theatre is faced not only with the question of 'respectability' but the very vital questions of livelihood and career. With one or two exceptions the graduates and school leavers have found it almost impossible to make a living from the theatre. However both state radio and television have greatly benefitted from University and other

school dramatic activities, insomuch as many graduates and school leavers have found careers in state Radio and TV. Here they can often display their creativity and ability by introducing and encouraging drama programmes either as producers or as participants.

It should also be remembered that the new graduate or school leaver is often faced with the immediate need of offering financial support to the larger family group. Particularly so when the family unit have undergone hardship and financial deprivation so that 'their children' should receive education, thereby making it increasingly difficult for the young person choosing a career to say "Father dear, I am going to become an actor or actress"!

### *Advantages of Drama*

One important advantage is that local habits, allusions and customs can be readily interpolated into live drama which is not so when it comes to film and other recorded media. Whilst working in India I found that one of the many problems involved in planning tours of educational programmes was the diversity of languages. A simple and successful solution to this problem was found by producing programmes composed of mimed drama along with simple dance dramas. The mimed plays were always presented with a costumed narrator — cum — singer sitting at the side of the stage. Depending on the region and consequently the audience's knowledge of the regional language an additional narrator was added on the other side of the stage to speak and sing the local vernacular; this in no way affected the actors style and performance.

I used a similar approach when I was given the formidable task of forming Uganda's first National State Dance Troupe, namely 'The Heart Beat of Africa' which had to be produced for presentation in overseas Proscenium Theatres as well as Arena Theatres.

A handsome lady radio announcer dressed in full 'busuti' lit only by spotlight sat as the story teller for the evening to introduce foreign audiences, to the customs and dances of Uganda and to link the many traditional items. When travelling this state company of 72 artists through United Arab Republic, Greece and other parts of Europe, it was a fairly simple matter to acquire a local narrator dressed in national costume from either state radio or theatre to add a simpler translation of what the Ugandan story teller had said. This in no way affected the timing of individual numbers and items but simply added a little more time to the programme before group dance or song began.

Drama (used here to include spoken plays, mime, puppets and dance-drama) depends for its effect on the co-operation and participation of its audience. A drama staged either in a modernly equipped auditorium or performed in the open air with no scenery and lit only by reed torches, makes the same demands on its audience. The life of the drama cannot exist without the audience's emotional and imaginative response as well as some degree of personal identification.

The distinguished theatre historian, and stage designer, Dr. Richard Southern states, albeit categorically, that:

The essence of theatre does not lie in what is performed. It does not lie in the way it is performed. The Essence of Theatre lies in the impression made on the *audience* by the manner in which *you* perform. Theatre is essentially a reactive art. He also goes on to say:-

The Arts of Making equal the Creative arts. Arts of Doing equal the Performing Arts – Acting – Music, Singing and Dancing. Drama may be the thing done but Theatre is doing. Theatre is an Act.

A further rather practical example of indigenous form was used in "settings" for Heart Beat of Africa. Ugandans use a local papyrus type reed bamboo known locally as 'lumuli' which is formed into wind break fences on the shamba. I was particularly taken with its possible dramatic uses. Accordingly we had long rolls of fencing made, 15 feet wide and 7 feet high. Instead of the traditional string which normally held these together we substituted the binder with 'leather thongs'. This allowed the whole thing to be rolled up like a carpet when not in use or for transportation purposes. We always travelled six rolls of this material and were able to make additional entrances and exists on proscenium stage and Arena Theatre as well as using it as back drop if required. When lit against a cyclorama, the natural bamboo colour is not only rich but highly reminiscent of an African atmosphere. When lit from behind only, lovely silhouettes were obtainable – particularly as the light came through the bamboo rods. The fluid flexibility of these 'fences' allowed the possibility of all types of shape to be formed, from an entrance to a traditional boma to traditional pillars in a local King's Palace. These fences had to be supported from behind by either metal stands or wooden stakes. This device received much favourable comment from European critics who stated that: "the lovely settings could only come out of Africa."

Already considerable drama activity is going on in many countries for its wider use in educational work. Much of this effort is however uncoordinated and unrelated. The old adage of "nothing new" is aptly illustrated where the technique of the "living newspaper" is concerned. This form of theatrical presentation was evolved in America during the great depression of the thirties. China and India, quite independently and unaware of the American usage, evolved the same technique at the time of famine in Punjab. A handful of Indian theatre workers explained the cause of the famine and taught the villagers how to queue in orderly fashion when they applied for food relief. Hitherto a queue and its purpose was inexplicable and unknown in that particular area.

Four if not more of the Indian State Governments have song and drama departments connected with their social services. The state of Madhya Pradesh is a typical example. Drama was put on an organised basis to combat the dis-

rupting influences caused by large troupes of prostitutes travelling the rural areas. Over four years groups of village actors along with professional units composed of three or four persons have been built up and trained. These tour a regular circuit of villages and have done much to combat the travelling troupes of prostitutes. Simple songs and dramas are also presented which assist in explaining certain aspects of the current five year plan. It is worthwhile noting that at least one of these units is so adept that should they enter a village where a quarrel is taking place they are able to dramatise and act out the problem in the evening performance *comedia dell'arte* fashion. In so doing the tension of the community is reduced.

### *Successes and Failures in Development Drama*

Some local drama activities have achieved success and reached a level of stability and efficiency. Others have crumbled and disappeared. On investigating the reasons for failure I have found the most frequent cause of collapse to be the fact that drama forms are being used in an uninspired manner and by specialists of other professions. Already over-burdened with demands of their skill, the enthusiastic would-be drama workers have not sufficient time or energy to come to grips with the complexities of drama in education to use it effectively. Nor the time to establish contact and arrive at some understanding of the indigenous art forms, should they exist. It is not a question of importing streamlined European theatre methods, but rather a matter of understanding the indigenous creative thought process in order to make this the starting point for redevelopment. The successful use of drama in an educational or community programme lies in the appreciation and knowledge of how to acquire inspired simplicity, clarity, and last but not least, an overall sense of enjoyment. Too frequently one finds that the message to be imparted is the chief concern. The techniques of the medium along with adaptation of indigenous methods and materials are lost sight of and untouched.

From experiment and after following blind trails I have found that it is possible to create entertaining and effective performance on such unlikely subject material as compost and soil preservation. Furthermore, working in collaboration with a linguistic specialist it has been possible to invest a series of amusing playlets the underlying purpose of which is sentence construction. ('The Four Friends' Series by R. Mackin & M. Lee, O.U.P.)

Taking the best of intentions for granted, the agricultural, health, educational or social specialist has not the time or inclination to study in detail the essential technique and essence of drama. Moreover, while to produce a drama given stage, lights and full technical paraphernalia presents one sort of problem, staging a performance with no facilities except that of local persons who possess a natural and often spontaneous histrionic talent poses quite another. Under these conditions it is difficult to use any form of drama for an educational programme in an effective manner, unless special study of simplified techniques

has been made along with a synthesis and selection of indigenous materials, habits and conditions.

### *Special Training Courses*

What is needed to fill the gap as well as to assist those who wish to use drama under new conditions is the establishment of special courses. At these the worker in the community field could acquire those techniques most suited to his local conditions as well as providing an opportunity for experimentation and discussion of his particular problems. The existing European summer and drama school courses in no way supply the particular simplified techniques, understanding or adaptability needed when dealing with drama in rural or urban conditions in an underdeveloped area or country. By necessity these courses are governed by the amenities, outlook and conditions of Europe.

The formation of specialized courses would provide a reciprocal and mutually beneficial meeting-ground for the drama-in-education specialist as well as for the specialist and field worker of community development. At a time when communication with the individual is vital, the economical and flexible medium of drama should be exploited and developed to serve the needs of education and community development.