International Theatre Institute



THE WORLD OF THEATRE

2011 Edition

"When going through the articles from different parts of the world, one can see how diverse and colourful our culture is even in this age of globalisation. In one hand the strong waves of major theatrical trends influence and sometimes dominate the national forms, on the other hand there are sincere efforts to assimilate those meaningfully in local traditions as well as safeguarding the indigenous theatre forms.

It might be interesting to point out some trends coming out of the articles. In Africa, theatre is now a combination of two or more art forms. There is an effort to revive the African traditions which were negated by the colonial regime. Theatre for development has successfully taken the art form to the masses making it more meaningful."

The World of
THEATRE
2011 Edition

An account of the world's theatre seasons
2007-2008 and 2008-2009

Edited by
Ramendu Majumdar
Mofidul Hoque

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TANZANIA

Vicensia Shule

Writing about the theatre in Tanzania needs a snapshot of the historical account as it shapes the current practice. Theatre in Tanzania, like in other African countries, can be traced back to 'traditional' societies. Before colonization, these societies had a performing culture including dance, mime, rituals, storytelling, poetry, masquerades, and wrestling, which were not done in isolation. The combination of two or more forms defines theatre in Africa.

Both the colonial governments in Tanzania, that is, the Germans and the British, introduced the theatre which was basically the reproduction of Elizabethan theatre. Known for their aggressive indoctrination of theatre, the British introduced 'their' drama as the model of theatre. This was mostly practiced in schools where they built proscenium arch stages and used imported costumes. This influenced even the drama competitions, coordinated by the British Council, in the schools between 1950s and 1960s. These school competitions were in English and focused on works of writers such as William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, and many others. As a result, there were two major misconceptions about theatre in Africa. First, it was said that there was no theatre in Africa and what the colonialist brought was 'the' theatre. Secondly, the 'surrogate' theatre, then, was propagated to be seen as an elite culture. Since the training of 'theatre' was done in schools, only few Africans could attend as it is widely known that only the privileged could attain colonial education. African theatre was, therefore, denied the right of existence in its own form. Furthermore, the elites looked down upon their own theatre and even allowed the Christian missionaries to ban their members from participating in theatre since it was perceived to be devilish and barbaric.

After the independence in 1961, Tanzania, led by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (1922-1999), embarked on the project of reconstructing the 'national culture'. The aim was to enable Africans, Tanzanians for that matter, to regain their pride which was shattered by slavery and colonialism. The process to build a socialist state (*dola ya kijamaa*), as it was for the struggle for independence also, was to a larger extent accompanied by theatrical productions and performances. By early 1970s, the state managed to establish national art groups (NAGs) which worked as a model of theatre performances in Tanzania. These included National Ngoma Troupe (1963), National Acrobatic Group (1969), and National Drama Group (1972). All these groups received the government's full support. Although dissolved in the early 1980s due to socio-economic circumstances, these national arts groups left a political governing structure which can be seen in the current Tanzanian theatre groups.

The emphatic imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the mid-1980s compelled the government to abandon the project of reconstructing and promoting national culture. Apparently, other social services such as education, health, and infrastructure suffered from the removal of subsidy following marketization, and downsizing policies prescribed by these neo-liberal institutions. Likewise, by the end of 1980s, theatre was commodified like any other commodity. Since it was previously used to promote the prevailing political ideology, and was offered for free, theatre was forced by the circumstances to be marketable. This includes becoming apolitical and giving focus more on entertainment than being didactic. Theatre was, therefore, wedged in the promotion of developmental issues if it had to receive financial support, thus becoming both a social and economic propaganda tool.

The emphasis of IFI's policies on development also facilitated the popularity of Theatre for Development (TfD) – a form of theatre that started in the late 1970s as a counter-reaction to the centralised form of the government and a solution to economic hardship, following the economic crisis of 1970s. By emphasizing on participatory approaches to development, TfD has been regarded as one of the methods to empower the peripheral communities to take responsibility in realizing their own development.

Theatre Activities

Currently, there are two major theatre activities in Tanzania : training and performances. On training, most of the practicing theatre artists are amateurs. Few of them have been trained through workshops and seminars organised by various national and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Tanzania Theatre Centre (TzTC), Eastern Africa Theatre Institute (EATI), and Southern Africa Theatre Initiative (SATI). The National Art Council (BASATA) has been conducting a number of training programmes for the young and practicing artists since its establishment in 1984.

Other forms of training include 'formal' education provided by the state-owned institutions. Since its independence, Tanzania has had only three major training institutions. These are the College of Arts, and, later, Butimba College of National Education's Programme in Theatre Arts which were established in 1976 and 1982 respectively. The College of Arts was, later, transformed into Bagamoyo College of Arts (BCA) in 1982, which is currently renamed as the Institute of Arts and Culture, Bagamoyo (TaSUBa). University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), the third state-owned institution, remains the oldest one to teach theatre. Started in 1965 as a course, theatre education was later developed into a full-fledged theatre department in 1967. Music and fine arts were added to the department in 1972 and 1974, respectively, to form a Department of Art, Music, and Theatre, which is currently known as the Department of Fine and Performing Arts. These amendments were basically done in response to the state's *Ujamaa* (African Socialism) policies which constituted in the 'traditional' African cultural practice.

For more than 35 years after its independence, Tanzania did not have a cultural policy. Presidential statements and directives, especially Mwalimu Nyerere's speeches, were implemented as the cultural policy. Absence of the policy resulted in the marginalization of theatre and other performing arts within the government structures

and budgets. This gap was also directly reflected in the education system where, neither theatre nor performing arts was incorporated in the primary and secondary curriculum as subjects of evaluation. It was not until 2008, when arts subjects, including theatre, were introduced in the the secondary school syllabus. Still, it is difficult to evaluate the success due to the the lack of teachers and teaching materials.

Indeed, the use of English as a teaching language limits the conceptualization of theatre as a simulacrum of culture since most students are more conversant with Kiswahili which is the national language. There are various theatre festivals and activities in Tanzania. Prior to privatization, *Nyumba ya Sanaa* (The Artists' House) used to organize weekly performances. The oldest and famous festival which has reached an international standards is the Bagamoyo Art Festival (BAF), which is coordinated by TaSUBa for more than a quarter of a century. Participants in the festival come from various places in Tanzania, countries of Africa, and others states. There is also a biennial EATI regional festival, which rotates among the member countries— Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The last festival in Tanzania was held at Bagamoyo in 2006. Others include the annual fiesta music organized by the Prime Time Promotions, which started mainly in Dar es Salaam a decade ago and currently takes place in major cities such as Arusha, Mbeya, Mwanza, and Tanga. There is also the annual MaKuYa festival in Mtwara to celebrate the theatrical richness of Makonde, Makua, and Yao ethnic groups. The festival is coordinated by an NGO in Mtwara, known as ADEA (African Development through Economics and Arts). There is also the Sauti za Busara Music festival, taking place annually in Zanzibar and is organised by Busara Promotions. These festivals bring together various artists from Tanzania, other African stales Africa and other counties to celebrate the richness of African music. Although the annual Zanzibar Film Festival (ZIFF) is based on films, various theatrical groups are also invited there.

Before being mainstreamed in the government's education system in 2006, the University of Dar es Salaam, through the Department of Fine and Performing Arts, used to conduct two major annual festivals. The first is the Children Theatre Festival which started in 1991 and the *Tuseme* (Let's speak out) festival for girls empowerment, which started in 1996. Both the festivals were employed to nurture and enkindle children and youth not only in the use of theatre as a product for their career, but also a process to enhance their social and academic lives in schools. Started in Tanzania, currently *Tuseme* has been adopted by more than fourteen African countries south of the Sahara.

There are also international institutions in Tanzania which run various theatre activities on regular basis. These include the long serving cultural institute, The Russian Cultural Centre, The British Council with WaPi (Words and Pictures) festival, Alliance Française de Dar es Salaam, with Barazani program, and the re-opened Goethe-Institut Tanzania.

In terms of the publications, in addition to other publishers, the Department of Literature of the University of Dar es Salaam in 2009 has published a book, *Tell Me Friends: Contemporary Stories and Plays of Tanzania,* which is a collection of various plays by different playwrights. Furthermore, many groups produce improvised plays attached to development themes (Theatre for/in Development) and very few, such as Parapanda, produces scripted plays. For example, in 2009, Parapanda produced *Mfalme Saltani,* the Kiswahili translation of Alexander Pushkin's *The Tale of Tsar Sultan.*

Theatre Setting

In Tanzania, various venues are used for theatre performances. These include open spaces in the villages and in towns/cities few buildings which served as theatre houses still exist. Others include the TaSUBa theatre in Bagamoyo, Coastal Region, the new BASATA theatre in Dar es Salaam, the Little Theatre in Dar es Salaam and Arusha constructed in 1947 and 1953, respectively. While looking at the rural and urban settings of Tanzania, it is evidently found that there are differences in terms of theatre practices. For example, while in the rural areas theatre practice remains 'traditional' with contemporary touches, in the urban it is more 'contemporary' with traditional touches based on dances and drama.

In the past two sessions 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, there has been a slow growth of theatre industry, especially if theatre is taken as a product. There are many reasons for theatre to lag behind and for the failure to become a vibrant and sustainable activity. Firstly, the governing neo-liberal policies force theatre to compete in unlevelled ground with other performing arts, such as video-films, radio, and television drama. Since theatre lacks infrastructure especially in the urban centres, it becomes difficult to survive out of development projects. This implies that the theatre that exists is the instrumental on while the rest depends on festivals which are not substantial.

Secondly, instrumentalization of theatre during the reconstruction of national culture, resulted in the perception that theatre is a 'value-free good'. Even the development partners, (donors) approach to use theatre as 'a tool for communicating' development agenda' has weakened theatre's sustainability, hence, becoming dormant at the end of the development projects.

Thirdly, lack of professional guilds is a challenge whereby it becomes difficult for thespians to consolidate their resources to protect their bargaining power over the state. There are established groups/companies/NGOs or trustees such as Parapanda Theatre Lab Trust, Mionzi Dance Theatre, Tanzania House of Talents, etc. and several parties/associations such as Tanzania Drama Actors Association (TDAA) and now, the Federation of Artists in Tanzania. Still, it remains unrealistic for all the artists throughout Tanzania to unite and form guilds which can foster their demands on issues pertaining to theatre as profession as well as their rights such as the copyright law implementation and piracy scourge. It is, however, envisaged that the recent efforts to introduce theatre as a subject at the lower levels of education will, in long run, change the current *status quo* of theatre in Tanzania.

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