

African Women Playwrights. Edited by Kathy A. Perkins. Urbana & Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 364 pp.

Review by Professor Philip Effiong

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African Women Playwrights is a timely and unprecedented collection of plays that introduces refreshing new voices to modern dramaturgy. Compiled and edited by Kathy A. Perkins, this is the first anthology exclusively showcasing plays written by East, West and Southern African women in English. Coming from Ghana, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, the featured dramatists delineate widespread national and regional representation. From the seasoned writer, Ama Ata Aidoo to the more recent Danai Gurira, they range in age from their twenties to early sixties and thus embody an extensive generational spectrum incorporating diverse ideologies, thematic concerns, aesthetic styles and perspectives. The plays are also symbolic of changing perceptions about the role that theater can play in social transformation and are informed by evolving historical realities, which are partially captured by biographical information preceding each play, as well as candid interview responses identifying the factors that have influenced each writer's approach, subject matter and vision.

The first play in the anthology, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) by the Ghanaian playwright Ama Ata Aidoo, was ahead of its time in blatantly identifying cultural conflicts between Ghanaians (and by extension Africans) and African Americans. In this and in her subsequent work, Ama Ata Aidoo advances a larger underlying message about a dearth in socioeconomic cooperation between Africa and its diaspora.

Uganda's Violet Barungi, in her play, *Over My Dead Body* (2008)¹ underscores the importance of education for women in an ironic setting where the impediment to educational opportunities comes from women. It takes violence, a deferral of marriage, near-death and determination to eventually get the point across.

She No Longer Weeps (1987) by Tsitsi Dangarembga confronts the struggles women face in patriarchal societies. Blending themes that revolve around familial rejection, battery, emotional abuse, abandonment, survival and resilience, the Zimbabwean playwright finally explores the use of deadly force as a rebellious statement.

The only Francophone playwright in the anthology, the Cameroonian Nathalie Etoké revisits and redefines the subject of prostitution in *Better Days Come in Bitter Ways* (2009), a monologue excerpt from her unpublished novel, *Le Rêve de Weli* (*Weli's Dream*). The monologue portrays the sex work industry as shifting from the streets to the more sophisticated world of the Internet where White men are the preferred clients for poor, desperate and ambitious African women. Even so, their patrons are acquired under circumstances that are physically repulsive and mentally stressful.

¹ First written in 1996 for the British Council International New Playwriting Award for Africa and the Middle East.

Homecoming (2003), a radio drama, addresses a complex dilemma where family loyalty is tested against the backdrop of heinous crimes. From Kenya, playwright Andiah Kisia (alias Chika Okigbo) presents a sick, elderly protagonist and ex-convict who is forced to confront his criminality in a situation where his safety from a murderous, vengeful mob is only possible if his family is willing to risk its own safety.

Sindiwe Magona of South Africa is the writer of *Vukani! (Wake Up!)* (2009), a proactive AIDS awareness play that reexamines the type of chauvinism associated with issues of sexuality and the epidemic. As a community-based play committed to social action, Magona exposes and denounces the popular belief in some South African communities that raping virgins is a cure for AIDS.

Also from South Africa, Malika Ndlovu (Luen Conning) in *A Coloured Place* (2009)² addresses the challenges that mixed-race communities experienced and still experience in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Relying on a non-realistic style that foregrounds character types and settings, issues of identity, conflict, disunity, economic instability and confusion are rendered through a kaleidoscope of social commentaries.

Juliana (Julie) Okoh's *Edewede (The Dawn of a New Day)* (2000) questions the validity of preserving the age-old barbaric custom of vaginal mutilation which, though often defined as "female circumcision," entails infibulation and clitoridectomy procedures. By implication, the play performs a more sweeping scrutiny of customs that constantly prove to be grossly inefficient, physically injurious and psychologically debilitating. The successful rebellion by women at the end of the play is significant in countering images of African women as powerless

² First written in 1995 in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the SA Woman's Arts Festival.

and submissive, and is reminiscent of insurrections led by women against colonial policies in 1929 and 1946 in southeastern and western Nigeria.

With African and African American women allegedly having the largest number of new AIDS infections, how they cope with the disease is the subject of *In the Continuum* (2006) by the Zimbabwean and African American actors/playwrights, Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter, respectively. The play illustrates a continuous cycle of stereotyping and despair aggravated by gender-specific prejudices that complicate the torment that comes with living with AIDS. While the two characters in the play personify two separate but related worlds, Africa and its diaspora, their worlds overlap but they do not interact. Together, they rely more on the narrative form than dialogue to establish a commonality in the excruciating experiences of Black women infected with HIV on both continents.

Essentially, therefore, the playwrights selected for this collection are active in their communities and urge their audiences and readers to take action in the interest of societal growth. Their plays are utilitarian: they teach, enlighten, expose, inspire and incite. Notwithstanding their stylistic differences, they are unified by their practical, life-changing and society-changing messages, which are rendered fearlessly and unapologetically. Even with the rare departure from realism and convention by Nathalie Etoké, Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter, the plays are not obscured by deep theoretical ideals, but remain conversational, unambiguous and informative.

The Foreword and Introduction to *African Women Playwrights*, which were co-authored by Amandina Lihamba and Kathy Perkins, reiterate cultural and subjective reasons for the prevailing absence of African women from theatrical discourse and critical studies about African

drama. For the accomplishments of these women to receive more than minimal attention, it is necessary to discard the erroneous notion that storytelling and writing are the forte of men.

Traditional gender bias has not only played out in Western scholarly circles but is also common in literary studies on the African continent. Furthermore, the playwriting skills of African women have been adversely impacted by prevalent belief systems that associate women in performance with labels like “cheap,” “loose,” “dirty,” “irresponsible” and even “prostitute.” This has not only discouraged women from exploring this genre, but has also engendered the marginalization of those who have excelled. The problem has been compounded by overall low illiteracy rates for African girls and women. As a student at the University of Calabar in Nigeria, I recall how some female theatre students were compelled to transfer to new departments in order to qualify for future marriage. There were also instances when female theater graduates were convinced that they needed to return to the university and pursue entirely new fields of study, thereby discouraging other young women from pursuing a career in theatre and the performing arts.

Considering the above facts, the dedication of an entire anthology to African women dramatists is groundbreaking. Crisscrossing the text is a persistent image that contradicts the typecasting of African women as menial workers, domestic hands, breeders and submissive partners. This subtext asserts a powerful female presence in all sectors—creativity, business, politics, healthcare, education and activism, among others. The ultimate success of *African Women Playwrights* lies in its potential to encourage the compilation of more plays by unsung African women writers, thereby expediting regional inclusion and translation as vital tools in expanding recognition for women playwrights across the African continent.