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## A History of Theatre in Africa (review)

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(Review)

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works well, alternating some deep textual and theoretical readings with some finely researched pieces that illuminate little known areas of Bessie Head's life and influences. While all the essays make contributions to the field, Helen Kapstein's "A Peculiar Shuttling Movement': Madness, Passing, and Trespassing in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*" employs a particularly impressive use of postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies approaches to reveal new and vital elements of Head's most famous novel. Kapstein writes: "All dressed up in the mismatched outfit of a South African Botswanan 'colored' mad woman writer, Bessie Head skirts the edge of the colonial imagination. Forced into liminality, she makes the margin her center, unabashedly announcing her presence there" (95).

Taking a different methodological tack in one of her two contributions to the volume, Colette Guldemann combines some excellent historical background from Head's time as a writer for the *Golden City Post* with some theories of discourse to investigate the posthumously published novel that was written while the author still lived in South Africa; her essay is titled "*The Cardinals: Reclaiming Language through the 'Permanent Revolution of Language': Literature.*" While not exactly breaking new ground, Loretta Stec's "The Didactic Judgment of a Woman Writer: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*" makes several important observations about the intersection, in Head's short stories, of oral storytelling conventions with the exigencies of the written text. She also notes the ambivalence and duality with which Head both portrayed and seemed to value or reject actual Tswana traditional culture.

Overall, this is a worthy and valuable addition to the body of scholarship on Bessie Head's work and times, and Maxine Sample and her collaborators should be commended. My one carp has nothing to do with the quality of the volume but with its prohibitive pricing, which may, in effect, keep it from being commonly used in the classroom.

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**Martin Banham, ed. *A History of Theatre in Africa*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Bibliography. Index. \$130.00. Cloth.

Martin Banham's preface to this compendium of African theater expresses the hope "that the reader will be reminded of the extraordinary complexity of African performance culture, of its richness, agelessness and beauty; that he or she will see much that offers coherence and continuity, even within diversity, on the vast stage of Africa" (xvii). The book keeps its promise. Each of the twenty-one essays contributes to a collage intended to raise and answer questions or to revisit old themes; at the same time, they propose new directions to stimulate debates that will, undoubtedly, go on for a very long time.

The study of the African novel followed that course, so it is hardly surprising that this work on issues in African theater takes the same trajectory.

The problems dealt with by Kole Omotoso's opening essay would probably sound peculiar to those unfamiliar with issues surrounding cultural production in Africa, but by the time one gets to the closing essay of the volume, Osita Okagbue's "Surviving the Crossing: Theatre in the African Diaspora," it becomes clear that this anthology would indeed be a valuable source for any study of pan-Africanist politics and philosophy: in one way or another, every contributor affirms that any discussion of African cultural productions must include a close look at ritual practices. They affirm as well that the black experience is universal. It is always about the reversal of the malignancy of ethnicity and of the damage done by the forces of oppression and injustice, about restitution and redress, about the rights and liberties that follow the resolution of identity crises.

The great debates in African literature in the 1970s raised questions about the existence of anything that could be called authentic African literature. African drama was part of that debate, as it remains in the twenty-first century. Ahmed Zaki's essay on Egypt suggests that while "theatre in the form of written, staged and acted drama is a comparatively modern construct in Egypt... the roots that have nurtured and helped the Egyptian theatre to develop its own unique style lie in the performing arts that appeared over five thousand years ago. The palimpsest of modern Egypt is in effect the result of its long history, different religious traditions, the influence of diverse occupying powers, an Islamic heritage and modern pan-Arab affiliations" (13). This thesis serves all discussions of African theater. It is a history of oratures and rituals and festivals and ceremonies, of the melding of the secular and religious. In the case of Egypt, Zaki follows a tradition from the pharaonic period through the Graeco-Roman, to the Christian era and the modern. Kamal Salhi pursues a similar evolution in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The highlights are the same, as are the continuities and the amalgam of the traditional and indigenous with the new and foreign. By the time we get to Khalid Mustafa's essay on Sudan, the peculiarly African world and its theatrical propensities become very clear.

Students of West African theater are bound to appreciate the impressive research and collation of disparate sources and materials in the contributions of John Conteh-Morgan for Francophone theater and Dapo Adelugba, Olu Obafemi, and Sola Adeyemi for Anglophone theater. These are brilliant studies revisiting the debates on African theater and its pre-colonial roots in the traditional vectors of ritual, legend, folk tale, festival, and ceremony. Concert parties appear as transformative glues, followed by timid imitations and tentative experimentations of the colonial period, before the indigenous is reempowered by its own more confident catalytic talents, ushering in the exciting products of modernity. The imperialism of alien cultures gives way to authentic national expressions, quite often with the vestiges of the imperial presence in tow.

In Jane Plastow's chapter on Ethiopia and Eritrea, the fulcrum of history is Christianity, arcing back into the days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, then to the Coptic foundation, and finally to the post-coloniality of Haile Sellasie and the Marxist radicalism of Mengitsu Haile-Mariam. It is a theater history from ritual and ceremony to revolution and pragmatism, mediated by national leadership and the demands of the historical moment. And indeed it does not matter whether it is Ethiopia or Eritrea, theater serves its sponsors' needs. This thesis carries over to Ciarunji Chesiana and Evan Mwangi's contribution on Kenya. They argue that traditional forces serve their needs through ritual and ceremony, as do colonialism and imperialism. The conflicts between people in power and the cultural nationalists, from precolonial Kenyan drama to the confrontational experimentation of the Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o generation, define the particular nature of Kenyan theater.

We have a somewhat smoother evolution from ancient pre-Christian rituals to what prevails today as theater for development in Tanzania, according to Amandina Lihamba. Tanzania draws from an old kiswahili tradition, its relationship with Asia, and a checkered colonial heritage swinging from German to British colonialism, each leaving its own stamp. Eckhard Bretinger's contribution on Uganda revives the memory and legacy of Okot p'Bitek, whose brand of pragmatic cultural nationalism was one of the markers for African literary criticism in the 1970s and early '80s. What mattered most for p'Bitek were context, access, and relevance. Ostensibly, Uganda's affair with theater for development still thrives on that legacy, whether it is in Acholi, Luganda, or English, in works by Robert Serumaga or Rose Mbowa.

There are two contributions on southern African theater. The first covers Malawi, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zambia and portrays a history attempting to recapture performances from the region's deep past of mimes and rituals, from rock art and dances, religious ceremonies and secret societies. This tradition, as usual, collides with colonial attitudes and forms before pragmatically evolving into modernity. In the second essay by Yvette Hutchinson, South African theater emerges with all the attributes of that country's turbulent history. It is an old performance tradition, coming from storytelling and evolving with the storm of history through songs and orature, dances and praise poetry, and tapping into the heritage of European colonialism. Neither apartheid nor divisive ideology, draconian restrictions nor subversive radicalism could stop its rich and vibrant development from its communal ritualistic foundations into its present state of eclecticism and urbane sophistication. It is indeed "a critical, subversive, paradoxical combination of multiple worlds and languages" (368).

Luis R. Mitras's "Theatre in Portuguese-Speaking African Countries" discusses theater history in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola. The study shows a relationship between the practices on the continent and the island cultures of Cape Verde, São Tomé, and Príncipe. The same colonial

ancestry does not quite translate into carbon copies of each other. They hold on to the influence of Catholicism and indigenous traditional forms, but the politics of independence change the character of the theater in places like Mozambique and Angola, where theater evolved "in the service of the revolution" (391). Roshni Mooneran's contribution on the islands of Mauritius and Reunion suggests a different kind of problem. It appears that theater in those islands has been geared toward dealing with insularity and distance from other peoples and cultures. There is an obsessive preoccupation with the creation of a new identity through creolization of language and culture, with little time and space for the familiar combativeness and grandstanding usually associated with cultural nationalism.

*A History of Theatre in Africa* closes with Osita Okagbue's fine panoramic view of African theater as it aggressively accretes and syncretizes into beautiful new forms far away from home. The chapter speaks to the richness, the complexity, and most important, the resilience of the African spirit and its traditions in the theater, in religion, and in the arts generally. It is a fitting conclusion for this thoughtful and well-researched collection.

It may sound sentimental to call Martin Banham's husbanding of this collection a labor of love for African theater. Nevertheless, the work will endure as a classic reference for all studies of the history of theater in Africa. It will be difficult to match the volume's intellectual seriousness, its readability and clarity, and its sense of dedication. With this fine collection, Banham again leaves an indelible footprint on the territory that he has been exploring for so many years.

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**Brent Hayes Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*.** Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

397 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth. \$24.95. Paper.

La première moitié du vingtième siècle a-t-elle témoigné d'une collaboration soutenue entre les Noirs d'Afrique, des Antilles et des Amériques? Très peu de chercheurs qui s'intéressent aux "mondes noirs" répondraient négativement à cette question. Au détour d'une conversation, au hasard d'une lecture scientifique, l'on a pu apprendre que la figure intellectuelle emblématique africaine-américaine, W.E.B. Du Bois a fini ses jours au Ghana, où il avait finalement élu domicile à la l'invitation du premier chef d'État de ce pays indépendant, Kwame Nkrumah, qui avait lui-même fait ses études dans l'une des rares universités noires des Etats-Unis: Lincoln University, en Pennsylvanie.

Si beaucoup de recherches sur les mouvements littéraires ou intellectuels noirs sont émaillées de ce type de révélation, difficilement trou-