Into Africa and Wole Soyinka: Crash Course Theater #49

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=kn-ER4bL7f8
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is CrashCourse: Theater, and today, we're going to Africa. Now, Africa, as you are probably aware, is a big continent. It's like, 20% of the world's landmass. It's made up of 50 some nations. That is a lot of theatrical tradition. Can we cover all of it in one episode? Absolutely not, but we'll try to briefly give you some sense of the range of traditions and practices while focusing more closely on the influential Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. What's that? Yorick tells me that Soyinka, a Noble prize winner, is still with us. We are talking about living writers. Lights up! (And skulls up).

(CrashCourse: Theater Intro)

Before we get going for real, let's talk for a minute about methodology. Here in America, we don't discuss African theater history a lot. Maybe it's because we spend too much time on that balding Elizabethan dude and his rocking pentameter, or maybe it's because in the pre-colonial period, there were 800 spoken African languages, but not many written African languages, so not a lot in the way of written literary tradition or performance documentation survives. It's also because when colonizers came to Africa, they um, kiboshed a lot of native performance culture. Colonizers ruin things, to put it lightly, though sometimes African artists responded by creating plays that explicitly mocked their colonial oppressors. Fair and a perfect use for theater.

This is all to say we wish knew more and talked more, both here specifically and in general, about the history of African theater and its diverse practices. And we also wish that we were better at pronounciation, so fair warning, I'm probably gonna mangle a lot of words in this episode, but we don't want that to stop us from sharing a few examples of long-standing African performance traditions, many of which are still in use today.

In Nigeria, for instance, the Yoruba people participate in an elaborate masquerade called Egungun, a festival held at the beginning of the planting season.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Participants spend the night before in prayer, then emerge in costume from a sacred grove accompanied by drummers. In Ghana, storytellers specialize in Anansesem, or "Tales of Anansi the Spider". On moonlit nights, storytellers act out these tales, which are both entertaining and educational, designed to reinforce the morals and practices of the community. In Sierra Leone, among the (?~2:28) group, storytelling is also a central part of the performance culture. Stories, called Domei, are told at the end of the harvest season, which the performance typically beginning in the evening.

The audience sits in a circle and the performer moves among them, occasionally integrating questions and interruptions. The audience participates by clapping and sometimes dancing. In Mali, the Bambara people perform a dance called Koteba, which mimics the spiral of a snail and combines movement with comedy. Other communities in Mali are big into puppetry, creating elaborate performances shown before planting and before harvest. Most of the young men and the unmarried women in the community participate, with female singers setting the rhythm for the puppet dance.

In South Africa, the Zulu people practice several forms of dance used in ceremonies and initiation rites. A performance called the Ingoma is danced by boys and girls who wear seed-pod rattles around their ankles. Indlamu was traditionally a war dance but is now performed at weddings. Men perform it wearing skins called (?~3:28) while carrying shields and spears.

Most African states won their independence in the middle decades of the 20th century. During the colonial period, theater in Africa had mostly been by and for white colonists, but after independence, a lot of countries began to support the burgeoning black literary theater and organizations and community theaters worked to bring theater to the people.

In Ghana, playwright Efua Sutherland founded the Ghana Drama Studio in Accra and also helped to start university programs to research indigenous storytelling and performance.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

She wrote plays about contemporary Ghanian life, and several plays for children's theater. And she adapted some Anansi-sam(?) into a 1975 play called The Marriage of Anansewa which combined elements of Western theater with traditional storytelling practices.

In Kenya, playwright NgÅ©gÄ© wa Thiong'o helped create the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Center. The center staged his play I'll Marry When I Want, which is a fusion of dramatic narrative with indigenous song and dance. But the Kenyan government shut down the play and later destroyed the theater. Theater, as we remember from the Romans and the Renaissance English and the Post-Renaissance English and basically all of history it seems, is dangerous to those in power.

The Kamiriithu remained a big influence on other radical African theater groups. In Tanzania, Zambi, and Zimbabwe, artists worked to preserve and celebrate indigenous forms of dance and storytelling while also connecting them to contemporary social and practical life. In Tanzania, which had a socialist economy, universities created a new, non-imperialist performance style for a new political climate. Ngonjera combined verse and dialogue with dance-like gestures.

In 1965, Zambia created a national dance troupe that integrated ancient games, stories, religious rituals, and initiation rites into contemporary dance performance. Zimbabwe supported the growth of several community theaters, and its national dance company is also interested in preserving indigenous forms.

In Senegal and the Cote D'Ivoire, the French government had sponsored theater troupes and plays by black playwrights even during the colonial periods. The plays were usually history plays or theatrical versions of African epics, and they were created by students at French-run teacher training schools, and were written and performed in French. After independence, France continued to send theater professionals to work with indigenous writers and performers- a way of keeping French culture going.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Some artists have embraced France's involvement, but others called for a return to pre-colonial forms.

In South Africa during Apartheid, black artists created a form called the Township Musical- a fusion of jazz and stories drawn from modern life. Meanwhile, the Space Theatre and the Market Theatre which opened in the 1970s specialized in political by white and black playwrights. The best-known South African playwright Athol Fugard is white, but several of his best-known plays, like Sizwe Bansi is Dead and The Island, are collaborations with black artists like Winston Chona and John Connie.

The most significant playwright to emerge from post-colonial Africa is Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.

Soyinka, the son of an Anglican priest, was born into a Yoruba family in Abeokuta, Nigeria in 1934 and grew up alongside a rich performance culture.

In addition to indigenous performances like the Egungun Masquerades storytelling rituals, Christian churches also encouraged the performance of Bible plays. Soyinka was exposed to Shakespeare and Greek tragedies at school, and he could listen to BBC-transmitted radio dramas. He would likely also have been familiar with Yoruba opera, pioneered in the 1940s by Hubert Ogunde, which combined choral numbers with satirical sketches and is performed in Yoruba and pidgin English.

Soyinka went to university first in Nigeria and then in England. In 1959, he became involved with London's Royal Court Theatre. He returned to Nigeria, and in 1960 he wrote is first major work, A Dance of the Forest. His plays are deeply engaged with post-colonial Nigeria, and they often deal with the conflict between tradition and modernity, and how oppression impacts everyday life.

He combined his writings with academic research and activism. While trying to prevent Nigeria Civil War in 1967, he was imprisoned. He was released in 1969 after 22 months in solitary confinement. Two years later, he left Nigeria for a long period of exile.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Soyinka has always been interested in the collision and parallelism between what he sees as a Western theater aesthetic and an African one. He discusses this most directly in his book Myth, Literature, and the African World.

In 1973, he tested some of these theories, adapting Euripides' Bacchae as he saw similarities between the Yoruba god Ogun and the Greek god Dionysus. The synthesis of Western and African traditions didn't always sit well with other African intellectuals. For a closer look at Soyinka's style and his attempt to create a fusion of Western and Yoruba aesthetics, let's turn to his 1975 play, Death and the King's Horseman.

In a preface, Soyinka tells us that this play is based on real events. He says that he realizes that he play risks being read as a facile, quote, "clash of cultures." He asks instead that the play be read as largely metaphysical. Help us out, Thought Bubble:

As the play opens, the Yoruba King has died. That means that his horseman, Elesin Oba, has to die too. His death will help the king to the afterlife and safeguard the community. Elesin dances through the market saying his goodbyes.

As the women dress him regally, he sees a beautiful girl, and he asks Iyaloja, the mother of the market, for an introduction. Yes, that is a euphemism. The girl is engaged to Iyaloga's own son, but Iyaloga can't refuse a dying man, so she says yes. She'll arrange an introduction. The girl is not consulted, because of course the girl is not consulted.

Meanwhile, Simon Pilkings, the colonial officer, and his wife Jane are preparing for a costume party. An officer arrives, announcing Elesin's plan to suicide. Pilkings sees suicide as barbaric, and he's ignorant of the ritual's importance to the village. He orders Elesin arrested, and then he goes off to his party. Is it just me, or do the men in this play have weird priorities?

Elesin's son Olunde returns from medical school abroad. Olunde is pretty Westernized, and he left without his father's permission. But when he learned of the King's death, he came home to help his father see the ritual through.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

So when he learns that his father's dawdling and Pilkings' interference have prevented its completion, he's pretty mad. Good to know that teenagers being embarrassed by their parents is cross-cultural.

Iyaloga comes to visit Elesin in prison and yell at him for not completing the ritual on time. She tells him someone else had to do it instead. A large bolt of cloth is unrolled, revealing Olunde's body. Elesin is so distraught that he strangles himself with his chains just as Pilkings rushes in. Iyaloga's like, "happy now?" Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Despite what Soyinka says, this play is, in some ways, very much a culture clash. The British and the Africans see death and ritual differently. And that difference drives the tragedy. Though, of course, it is worth noting that only one group, the British, tries to impose their own vision, which makes it a tragedy of imperialism.

And if we look beyond this, the play also fuses two styles, the Egungun Masquerade and the Western classical tragedy, into one whole. And it explores, in both British and African communities, the use of ritual- the ceremonial suicides and the masquerade balls- to support social and cultural systems.

Probably we'll never know as much as we want to know about African theater before colonialism. But African theater after colonialism, though hindered by civil war and state oppression and systems like Apartheid, it's flourished. It often creates deeply interesting dialogues with old forms while pushing forward new ones.

We'll see you next time for our final episode of Crash Course Theater. It's the one many of you have probably been waiting for: it's an all-singing, all-dancing look at the golden age of the Broadway musical. Will York(?) create a one-skull(?) kickline? You're gonna have to wait and see. But my bet is on yes. Until then, curtain.

===== (12:00) to (12:33) =====

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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