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Rotimi and Death in the Artsville

Ololade Bamidele

co-incidences do jar at one sorely: about a year before, on August 19, 1999, the African-American ethno-musicologist, theater director and pilgrim into traditional African polytheism, Esilokun Kinni-Olusanyin passed on at the University College Hospital, Ibadan. She had fallen victim to the malignance of advanced breast cancer.

That was after leaving the United States some twenty-three years earlier to dwell in a society to which she had traced her roots. Not just that, also after etching an imprint on the University of Ibadan community as distinguished teacher and ethno-cultural scholar. During her lying-in-state/burial on the 11th of September 1999, notable among those commiserating with the University and her family was foremost playwright and director of theater, Olawale Gladstone Rotimi. He had just returned from a journey, a four-year sojourn in the Americas and came to bid farewell to Esi whom he knew largely by reputation.

Exactly a year after her demise on August 19, 2000, Rotimi and Esi became fellow wayfarers. He died of a heart condition induced by hypotension.

The season itself had not been a particularly cheerful one as the tide of death and mourning turned loose on the larger Nigerian artistic community. On April 29, 2000, the 'hip cat', Zeal Onyia, popular music act who is reputed to have hit the highest trumpeting pitch in the country sank into the murk of cancer of the duodenum; by May 31, it was Oyin Adejobi, renown performer and doyen of the folk theater. In August, the tide closed in on Sammie Akpabot, 'the oracle of Ibadan', multi-instrumentalist, composer/musicologist. Beyond these are, Joe Emordi, comedian and versatile player on the live and electronic stages who passed on in the aftermath of a series of strokes in August. Also, Jennifer Ossai, one of the rising stars in the firmament of the Nigerian home video, particularly known for her high profile sex role in the video, *Glamour Girls*.

With the passing of Rotimi, Onyia; of Akpabot and Adejobi, an interesting phase of modernism in African arts and performance seems to be ending - the torchbearer phase of those who evolved at the interface between traditional art forms and the historically given Western forms/technologies of performance. They were originary figures striving to contain

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LEFT:
Renown playwright/theater director, Ola
Rotimi

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Doyen of Folk theater, Oyin Adejobi
Zeal Onyia and wife

OF the many directors on the Nigerian stage when he was alive, Rotimi held exception as one who more painstakingly sought out the best performing talents and patiently trained them to his standards.

diverse energies and weave them into creative compacts that are both African and modern.

Ola Rotimi trained as a dramatist in the United States of America and his major professional break came in 1968 when he staged *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, his adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as artistic director of the Ori-Olokun Theatre of the then University of Ife. He had earlier on graduated from Boston University, where his playwrighting career began with the 1963 production of *To Stir The God of Iron*, which however did not attain the profile of a rave script or performance.

Between then and 1968, Rotimi took a Master's of Fine Art (M.F.A) degree in playwrighting and directing at Yale University, returned to Nigeria to a Research Fellowship of the University of Ife's (now Obafemi Awolowo University) Institute of African Studies. His play, *Cast the First Stone* was then performed by the Unife Playhouse, but like the first, it attracted scant attention from the viewing and critical public.

Subsequently, when the Cultural Centre of the Institute

started out in 1968, he became director of its acting troupe - a post which afforded him the opportunity to experiment with his ideas on drama and theater.

A tragic way of seeing was essential to Rotimi from the beginning and this seemed to mark a persistent refrain through much of his dramatic oeuvre. In his early outing with *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Rotimi's possible fascination with the tragic tended him toward its high literary form, he adapted from the mode of Sophocles' Greek classic an expression of a modernism depicting the inter-connected basis of human experience. It relates the story of a prince, Odewale, destined to kill his father and marry his mother, in the fashion of its Greek precursor. Though, in the process of re-contextualization, Rotimi serves slight twists to the overbearing determinism of the original and imbues the motivating Oedipus myth with 'local color'.

And, it was from these early productions that he displayed a rare ambidexterity, as innovative playwright and exceptional director, which became the hallmark of what is known as



'Rotimi theater'. Kemi Atanda-Ilori writes that from then, "the major strength of Rotimi appears to lie in the excellent combination of the tragic and the comic, of music with action, and of mime with choreographed movements. With *The Gods*, Rotimi seems to have discovered his own elements and he integrates these fully into his next play(s)".

Apart from *The Gods* which is possibly his better known play till date, Rotimi careered as playwright through some three remarkable phases: that of the historical plays, *Kurunmi* (1969), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1971); the brief 'absurdist' phase, *Holding Talks* (1970) and the politically charged social-oriented plays, *If...* (1979), *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1985), and more recently, *Man Talks*, *Woman Talks*. Though, as the dates of publication of the plays show, these are not essentializable phases describing the growth from one tendency to the other, they more than less make for the possibility of marking the varied reach of Rotimi's drama. Even, an offering like *Hopes* straddles the boundaries of the historical and social-oriented plays.

In the first marked phase, the historical plays revolve around the figures of highly willed characters caught up in situations leading toward violence and warfare, it is then that both the choices they make and the peculiar excesses of their characters give the plays their tragic tenor. The eponymous heroes of *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, encounter different circumstances of war: the first being about the violent conflict between Ijaye and Oyo resulting from the wrongful installation of a king, Alaafin Adelu in the old Oyo kingdom to which Ijaye was vassal in the mid-nineteenth century. Here, as commander-in-chief of the Oyo army and leader in Ijaye, Kurunmi's moves to forestall the subversion of tradition couples with far-reaching aspirations which drive the plot to its disturbing denouement. The second unfolds varied factors (salient among which is an historically muted pecuniary motivation) informing the punitive expedition sponsored by the British against the ancient Benin Kingdom late in the nineteenth century. And Oba Ovonramwen's peculiar attempt at

containing the unfolding mayhem. In dramas of power and privilege, high vaunting ambitions, intrigues, deception and ultimately tragedy, Rotimi zeroes in on the subtle and overt factors resolving into the failings of leadership and the ripple effects these have on society.

While in *Holding Talks*, Rotimi could be said to have flirted with the mode of 'absurdist' drama in its representation of the problematics of 'regular' language to show the hollowness of meaning and action; it also signaled a revision in the aesthetics of his dramaturgy which continued into and made remarkable exhibition in the social-orientation plays. The coterie of 'grand' characters which Rotimi cultivates in the historical plays give way to the ordinary folk. In *Holding Talks*, the protagonist is a barber in whose shop the text plays out.

If... is perhaps one of the few Rotimi plays striking at an ardent social vision, it chronicles the lives of a group of ordinary people living in a tenement in some slum in Port Harcourt city. They are tenants to a wily landlord who threatens to evict them if they refuse to vote for his party at election time. This group of tenants bond themselves into some sort of social class seeking to stand up to the oppressor, which is what the landlord represents to them.

Hopes of the Living Dead takes from the crisis of 1928-32 at the Leper's Colony in Uzuokoli (now in Imo State, Nigeria) to present a play suggestive of various levels of symbolic interpretation, and *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) is a punchy satire on the inane glories and cravings of the political class.

Though Rotimi achieved much of his reputation as dramatist, it was as theater director/practitioner that he attained unrivalled heights in his career. His proficiency in harnessing the resources of the theater to create unique performances became the essence of what is described as 'Rotimi theater'. And beginning from his early years as artistic director of Ori-Olokun players in Ile-Ife, Rotimi fashioned out and honed on a notion of theater thriving on a grandness in execution: disciplined spectacle, impressionistic stage designs, professionalized standards in dance, music etc. Of the many directors on the Nigerian stage when he was alive, Rotimi held exception as one who more painstakingly sought out the best performing talents and patiently trained them to his standards. His production style was quite advanced: while many directors co-ordinated the music score to their productions through unison singing or at best with two part harmonies, one part being an improvisation on the main part, Rotimi achieved on his stage the feat of co-ordinating four-part harmonies to some of his productions. He was often described as a genius in cast and crowd management on stage. Few directors could rival him in co-ordinating large crowds in shifting scenes, and before he succumbed to passage he is speculated to have been working on a play with a cast of 500 players!

For his mastery of details in theater organization, both on and off-stage, Rotimi was generally credited as 'the superb technocrat of Nigerian theater.' He saw to it that all the standards of his productions were professional, and as quintessential crafts person, he was one who even while writing his plays had the details of directing at the back of

mind. He would write a play, do test productions of it and record these on video. Based on the range of interpretations brought to bear on the script by the players, Rotimi would then revise rough edges out of the script, braid in new insights and thereby sharpen subsequent productions of the play.

In the vintage years of his career, during the late 1960s into the 1970s at the Ori-Olokun Theatre in Ife, a typical Rotimi production deployed the total resources of theater to the effect of drawing the audience into a rapturous compact with the players and the on-going presentation. This ability to suck the audience into the life-world of his productions depended as much on Rotimi's capacity to elicit deep emotional responses from his audience (which also drew to his theater criticisms of monotony) as on the ease of accessibility to his productions. And the latter has been a recurrent decimal by which some critics keep making distinctions between Rotimi's so called 'populist' playwrighting and presentation mode and the 'esoteric' mode of some of Wole Soyinka's offerings.

In those years when Rotimi led the Ori-Olokun players, wrote about eight of his twelve plays for the group and assumed heights in his prowess as stage crafts person, it is reputed that each single production of his plays was a unique and 'new' presentation in its own right. Each succeeding production of a particular play was realized with the distinct freshness of an 'original', and with this, he must have produced hundreds of pieces of his plays as original theater. It was at this heights of his powers as playwright-director that Rotimi attempted some of his more enduring experiments, not only in the technical aspects of staging, but in his experiments with multi-lingualism which traverses *If...*, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*. These plays which are varied linguistic conurbations - what the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes as heteroglossia - have characters who speak straight English, pidgin versions of English and diverse Nigerian languages which are translated to and fro for the benefit of audiences not versed in certain accents.

The tragic refrain pervading much of Rotimi's efforts as dramatist seemed to permeate into the closing part of his life: he passed on four months after his wife of about three decades, the French-Canadian Hazel Mae Gaudreau, did without finishing some of the grand projects he had committed himself to for some time. He spoke of some new plays about to be completed which would take his career into newer levels; he also had intended to revive the 1960s/70s Ife Festival of the Arts and the Ori-Olokun Theatre with its theater-in-the-round style of performances reminiscent of the earlier Yoruba Alarinjo theater. These are tasks, it would seem, bequeathed to succeeding generations of drama and theater devotees - if only to affirm the dictum: life is short, art is eternal. GR