Osofisan's *African Antigone*

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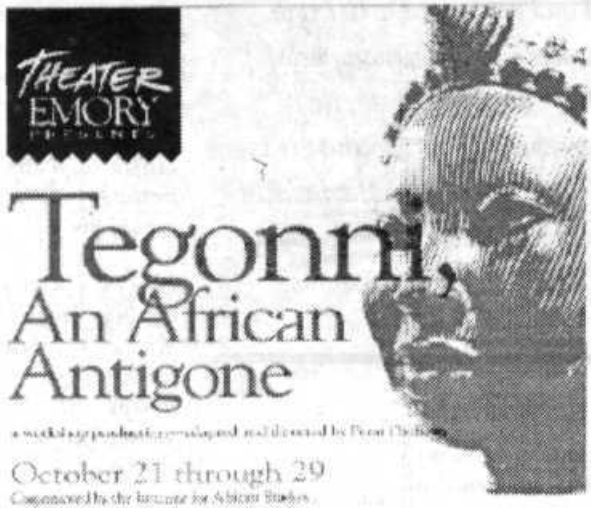

It was not the first honour abroad. Femi Osofisan, professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's 'poet of the votile verse' now in residence at Emory University, a centre of professional theatre activities in Atlanta, Georgia, had last October a series of performances of a dramatic adaptation co-sponsored by Emory's Institute of African Studies.

After an impressive showing in the 1992 National Black Arts Festival during which his company played to 'sold-out houses,' he was to re-enact the same feat, for no less than one week, at Theatre Emory where he adapted and directed a workshop production of ***Tegonni, an African Antigone.***

For the play, he presented a Yoruba village as a microcosm of the African world where men remain because of other men. It was a world where you were distraught by the death and edified by the progress of the other fellow. A world where the words of elders prevailed and offered direction and guidance to the young and upcoming generations. This atmosphere of 19th century Yorubaland provided the setting for this classical drama woven around a political power tussle and civil dissent. A succinct narration of the script runs thus: 'On the morning of her marriage to a British officer, Princess Tegonni is stopped in her bridal procession by soldiers guarding a corpse. It is Tegonni's brother who, since he fought on the losing side in a recent civil war, is to be denied traditional rites of burial at the order of the colonial governor. Tegonni's consequent struggle between her loyalty to her brother and her love for her fiancé is intensified by the clash of cultures and the struggle for power that surrounds her.'

As customary with the poet and performer who has produced close to fifty plays for the stage, television and radio, this particular drama, ***Tegonni***, went beyond the mundane or cosmetic. It got fundamentally to the very roots of race relations and personal courage in their diverse manifestations, albeit in a world full of proclivities and prejudice. And like the blacksmith in his forge, he continually struck the conscience of humanity, a fraction of which was in the audience, provoking their thoughts and presenting a viewpoint of universal brotherhood based on equity and mutuality.

The sociological basis of the play was pungent and cogent. For 'life in our country,' the playwright said, 'is a series of episodes in a grandiose melodrama.... Everything is acted out to the screaming pitch of hysteria.' Above all other considerations therefore, his concern for this play was 'to look at the problems of political freedom against the background of the present turmoil in Nigeria where various military governments have been bent for decades now on thwarting the people's desire for democracy, happiness and good government.'

The play, replete with traditional Yoruba music and dance, is a celebration of African creativity characteristic of Osofisan's productions.

In addition to this production, was a forum in the Munroe Theatre auditorium in which Osofisan participated. Other eminent academics on the roll included Biodun Jeyifo, formerly of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, now professor of Literature at Cornell University; Folabo Ajayi-Soyinka, professor of Women's Studies and Theatre Studies at University of Kansas; and Sandra L. Richards, associate professor of African-American Studies and Theatre at Northwestern University.

In residence at Emory this last fall, Osofisan presented his adaptation of ***Antigone*** originally by the classical Greek dramatist Sophocles at Emory as part of a 'brave new works project'. The play ran in the evenings of October 21, 22, 26, 27, 28 and 29, mediated by a single matinee on October 23. The latest adaptation brings to three the adaptations of classical Greek drama related to Yoruba mythology and culture. The first was an adaptation of Euripides' ***The Bacchae*** by Wole Soyinka in 1972 commissioned and produced by London's Royal National Theatre modestly titled ***The Bacchae of Euripides***. The second became the very popular play, especially with Nigeria's secondary school pupils, adapted by Nigeria's other highly acclaimed dramatist, Ola Rotimi, titled ***The Gods Are Not to Blame***, which was adapted from Sophocles' ***Oedipus Rex***.

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