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# Festivals, including Edinburgh '98 **P** L A N S

James  
Gibbs

**are advanced for the Ubuntu Movement to burst into festive celebration in South Africa, 1999.**

It is to be hoped that the occasion will call forth the best spirits from previous Pan-African festivals, including the 'one-offs', the First World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar, 1996) and FESTAC (Lagos 1977), and the 'regular events' including the Pan-African Festival of Historical Theatre (Accra-Cape Coast) and the National Arts Festival, held in Grahamstown, RSA.

Over the years, those who have been able to get to the capital of Scotland during August have been privileged to feed on an astonishingly varied diet at the largest arts festival in the world. The international contributions to the Fringe have included productions by enterprising African groups, and, with individuals such as Pieter Dirk Uys and Yulissa Amadu Maddy, they have scored remarkable successes, including coveted 'Fringe First' awards.

Offerings at the 1998 Fringe included *Les porteurs d'eau (The Water Carriers)*, presented by the twelve year-old, Reunion-based Le Theatre Talipot. The company has put on twelve productions in the twelve years of its existence, and has toured Indian Ocean islands, East and South Africa, Oceania and North America. It has featured at the Avignon and Grahamstown Festivals, and (in May 1998) distinguished itself at the International Theatre Festival KONTAKT (Poland). With support from UNESCO, 'l'Agence de la Francophonie, SPEDIDAM, ODC,' and various bodies in Reunion, and under the direction of Philippe Pelen, the group has explored 'images and archetypes from the Indian Ocean... The search for this theatrical language (is) ... inspired by mixed-blood and oral traditions, and ...linked with the multiple faces of liquidity.' (Programme Note).

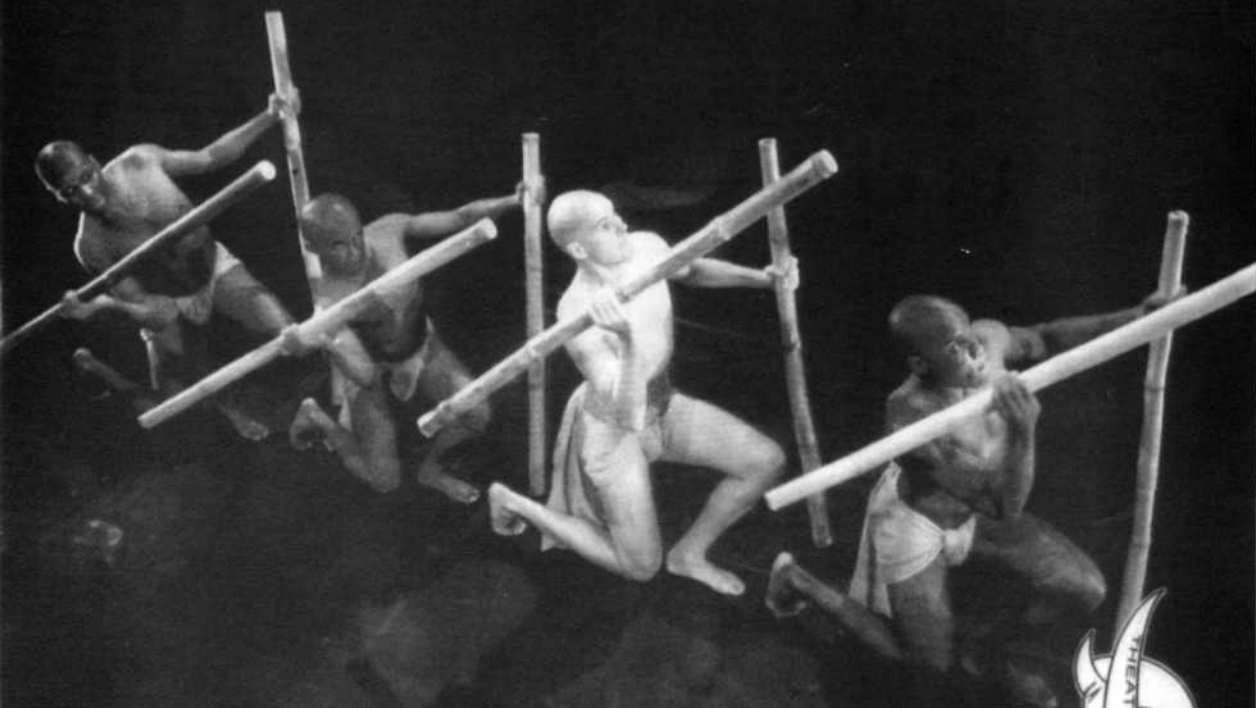
*The Water Carriers*, put on by a cast and design crew that included participants

**T**heatrum Botanicum found that their African audiences often knew the play very well, and, with the help of bridges built by Owour, the local relevance was, not surprisingly, often apparent.

Le Théâtre Talipot  
présente

# Les porteurs d'eau

«The Water Carriers»



Écriture et mise en scène  
Written and directed by  
Philippe PELEN



from India, Madagascar, and the Comoros Isles in addition to those from Reunion, arrived in Edinburgh after winning plaudits and delighting audiences in South Africa. Herman Wasserman wrote: 'it is a brilliant, original, unique piece of physical theatre; and also perfectly relevant for a festival in post-apartheid South Africa that attempts to use the arts as a medium for unifying cultures.' (*Die Burger*). Lyn Gardner concluded her *Guardian* review of the show in Edinburgh: 'Much more than just a piece of exotica, it is impossible not to fall for this show's quiet, poetic charm and its infectious exuberant dance and song.' (She gave it four stars, i.e. she 'recommended' it to theatre-hungry ditherers in drama-sated Edinburgh.)

While Theatre Talipot attracted audiences to its venue (Continental Shifts at St Bride's) the exuberant but far from quiet, *Theatrum Botanicum*, supported in part by Scottish & Newcastle Breweries, made use of Edinburgh's Botanical Gardens for the two productions they had worked on with the Malawi Dance Ensemble. One, appropriately botanical, explored the life of Carl Ingmarrson Linnaeus, who, in the eighteenth century, conceived a system for identifying and labelling plants, but who died, in fear of Divine Retribution, having forgotten his own name. And the other was *An African Julius Caesar*. Thanks to British Council backing, the company had been

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able to work on and perform their 'knock-about, open-air stab at ancient Roman political drama (that) combines African cultures with grass-stains' (*Donald Hutera, Guardian*) in East and Central Africa (Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda). Under the direction of Toby Gough they had 'tailored the play to the culture of each locality (they) played. Working with different actors in each country enabled (them) to fuse music and dance throughout the play with authentic songs and dances absorbed from each country's own traditional celebrations, magic rituals, funerals and war ceremonies.' (*Programme Note*).

In Kenya, Eratus Owour was incorporated into the production as story-teller and Sooth Sayer, and, with the Malawian dancers/actors, he travelled to Scotland. *Theatrum Botanicum* found that their African audiences often knew the play very well, and, with the help of bridges built by Owour, the local relevance was, not surprisingly, often apparent. Writing about the performances in Edinburgh's Botanical Gardens for *The Guardian*, Max Szalwinski described the production as 'a rumble in the jungle not to be missed' -and awarded it four precious stars.

Other African offerings among the hundreds and hundreds that constitute the Fringe of the Festival included *Waiters*, veteran dramatist Stephen Chinfuyise play in

which 'Three restaurant partners-brown, white and black-try to forget their racial differences and make an honest profit. Described as 'Ground-breaking' by *Zimbabwe Independent*, *Waiters* was very favourably reviewed for the World Service of the BBC. The production shares a venue - the Observer Assembly - with nearly two dozen other shows, including *Citizen* by Andrew Whaley, who is already credited with a Fringe First. His play is described as follows: 'A young woman puts male delusions of freedom under the lash in this savagely funny examination of lewd manhood and Zimbabwe's flea-bitten democracy.' Also from Zimbabwe came Over the Edge Africa Dream Theatre who presented an original programme of one-man plays 'Angel Beast,' 'Easy Come, Easy Go,' 'The Man in the Cupboard,' 'Rumours in the Wind,' and 'Diary of a Madman'.

Other events of interest to readers of this journal included Afridonia's children's show: *An African Family Village* which was put on at the Bonnington Resource Centre. Organised by a 'group of African Scots,' the show included 'dancing, drumming, singing, and playing the bagpipes.' Claire Smith advised: 'Take the kids along, join in, have fun, and treat yourself to wonderful African food afterwards. For sheer hospitality, Afridonia score a full five points.' (*Guardian*, 17 August 1998).

Every imaginable performance space is employed during the Festival - including some, such as The Underbelly - beneath the Central Library - which do not immediately hold out much promise. And performances run through most hours of the day and night: the 'performance day' is so long - it starts at about 9.00 am and continues till the early hours of the morning - that theatre-lovers can 'easily' take in, say, five shows in twenty-four hours. One other item from Edinburgh '98 merits a word: the production by the Veritas Ensemble given in what seemed to be a sepulchre ('C too, St Colomba's by the Castle, Johnson Terrace') that could take about 20 members of the paying public at a squeeze. The company's choice was Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix too Frequent*, a 'tragi-comedy about the cyclical nature of love' played out by a newly widowed woman, her maid and a soldier. As soon as it started one was reminded of Ken Saro-Wiwa's farce, *Madam no go Quench Again*. The blurb of *four Farcical Plays* in which that play was published, mysteriously describes the work as a 'treatment of the classical story of the phoenix.' Not at all, it is a thorough-going West African Pidgin English version of Fry's drama, or at least of the Tale of the Widow of Ephesus on which Fry drew! At what point, one wonders, did Saro-Wiwa encounter Fry or the Widow and decide that one or other should be rendered in accents new? His version is, incidentally, so thorough-going that even the stage-direction are in Pidgin! The opening set description reads: 'Na for inside room wey dis concert dey hapin,' and the text concludes with a play on Latin usage that Saro-Wiwa was probably forced to relish alone much of the time: 'E don finis.'