

AFRICA ON THE CONTEMPORARY LONDON STAGE

Edited by Tiziana Morosetti



Africa on the Contemporary London Stage

Tiziana Morosetti
Editor

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palgrave
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ISBN 978-3-319-94507-1 ISBN 978-3-319-94508-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94508-8>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018954351

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Cover illustration: Jose A. Bernat Bacete Getty Images

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication would not have been possible without the encouragement and commitment of Palgrave Macmillan, and their flawless support throughout the publication process. Vicky Bates has been particularly helpful, and I wish to thank her and Victoria Peters for their work. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

The idea for this volume came to me in 2013 while researching the archives of the English Stage Company at the Victoria and Albert Museum for a paper that I presented at the *50 Years of Theatre in the African Academy* International Conference (Ibadan, Nigeria) and formed the basis for my chapter in this collection—comments and advice on my paper were extremely helpful also in devising this collection. The 2013 annual conference of the African Theatre Association (AfTA) at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the University of Derby was also inspiring, Mervyn McMurtry's intervention on Fugard, Kani and Nthsona's *The Island* being of particular interest to me.

Heartfelt thanks also to Femi Elufojowu Jr for his recollections of his London career and his work with Tiata Fahodzi; your words of encouragement were also really important.

But of course, my warmest thanks go to the contributors of this collection, whose support has been crucial for the completion of this project, and whose chapters I am delighted to have edited. I am especially grateful to Ade Solanke, Rotimi Babatunde and Dipo Agboluaje for accepting to be interviewed, and then taking the time to review their pieces.

As usual, Luke has been my shoulder in moments of disheartenment, and Noemi an absolute delight. I am thankful to both for their patience and love.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Oladipo (Dipo) Agboluaje is a playwright and academic. His first play *Early Morning* was produced in 2003 at Oval House Theatre in South London; it was followed by several other plays, adaptations and radio plays. Amongst these, notable are *God Is a DJ* (Redbridge Drama Centre, 2006), *The Estate* (Soho Theatre, 2006), *The Christ of Coldharbour Lane* (Soho Theatre, 2007), *For One Night Only* (Ovalhouse, 2008), *The Hounding of David Oluwale* (West Yorkshire Playhouse, 2009), *Iya-Ile (The First Wife)* (Soho Theatre, 2009), *The Garbage King* (Unicorn Theatre, 2010), *Giant Killers* (Theatre Royal Plymouth/Polka Theatre, 2013), *Obele and the Storyteller* (World Book Capital, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 2014), *Immune* (Royal and Derngate Northampton, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Theatre Royal Plymouth, 2015) and *New Nigerians* (Arcola Theatre, 2017). His first collection of plays, *Plays One*, was published by Oberon in 2014. He is the 2009 winner of the Alfred Fagon prize for playwriting for *Iya-Ile (The First Wife)*, which was also nominated for an Olivier Award. Agboluaje has also published poems and short stories, and he is a recipient of an Interweaving Performance Cultures fellowship at the Freie Universität, Berlin.

Rotimi Babatunde is a writer and playwright. His short story ‘Bombay’s Republic’ was the winner of the 2012 Caine Prize for African Writing, and his fiction and poems have been widely translated. Babatunde’s plays have been produced at venues such as the Halcyon Theatre, Chicago (*A Shroud for Lazarus*), Riksteatern, Stockholm (*The Bonfire of the Innocents*) and the Royal Court, London (*An Infidel in the Upper*

Room). Babatunde was one of the five playwrights behind *Feast* (Young Vic, 2012), and his adaptation of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* was produced at Theatre Royal Stratford East (2015) and the Arcola Theatre (2018). Babatunde has received a Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation award for his fiction and has been awarded fellowships by Ledig House, New York; the MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Centre in Italy, among others, and his plays have been broadcast on the BBC World Service. He lives in Ibadan, Nigeria.

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James Gibbs was educated at universities in Bristol, Leeds and Washington DC. In 2007, he retired from a career as a teacher and researcher that had taken him to universities in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Belgium and the UK. In 1986, he published *Wole Soyinka* (Macmillan Modern Dramatists) and he was co-editor, with Jack Mapanje, of the *African Writers' Handbook* (1999) and, with Kofi Anyidoho, of *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film* (2000). Since retiring from the University of the West of England, he has continued his university contacts as an external examiner for the University of Ghana and pursued his interests in African literature and drama through editing and publications. He edited *African Theatre: Companies* (2010), the *Festivals* issue of the same series (2012) and the volume (15, 2016) that explored links between Africa and *China, India & the Eastern World*. His collection of essays on the Ghanaian theatre, *Nkyin-Kyin*, appeared in 2009 and his account of the first production of Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* was included in *African Theatre: Histories* (2010). In 2017, he

contributed to the SOAS conference to mark the 55th anniversary of the Makerere Writers' Conference and in 2018 to the Bristol conference on Small Magazines in Africa.

Lynette Goddard is Reader in Black Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London. Their research and teaching are focused in the areas of the politics of race, gender and sexuality in contemporary black British playwriting. Their publications include *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (Palgrave, 2007); *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (Palgrave, 2015); *Errol John's Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (2017), and co-editing *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama* (Palgrave, 2014). They are currently researching plays about race relations that have been staged in Britain, as understood through such topical themes and issues as race and the police, race and mental health, race and immigration, race and education, race and sport, race and religion and race and far right politicians. #BlackLivesMatter #BlackPlaysMatter

Tiziana Morosetti is a fixed-term affiliate with the African Studies Centre, Oxford, where she teaches African Literature; she also collaborates as an associate lecturer with the Department of Theatre and Performance, Goldsmiths, University of London. She is deputy-director of the journal *Quaderni del '900*, and the membership secretary of the African Theatre Association (AfTA). She is the editor of *Staging the Other in Nineteenth-Century British Drama* (2016).

Steve Nicholson is Professor of Twentieth Century and Contemporary Theatre at the School of English at the University of Sheffield. Much of his work explores relationships between theatre, society and political contexts. He is the author of *Modern British Playwriting: The 1960s* (2012), published as part of Methuen's 'Decades of Modern British Playwriting' series. Amongst his other publications: *British Theatre and the Red Peril: The Portrayal of Communism 1917–1945* (1999), *The Censorship of British Drama, 1900–1968* (4 volumes, 2003, 2005, 2011, 2015).

Alex Oma-Pius holds an MA in Dramatic Arts from the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (Bulgaria). His love of Theatre-in-Education as a force for social change encouraged him to form IROKO Theatre-in-Education Company in 1996. IROKO, winner of The Guardian Charity award, uses African theatre arts to enhance education, skills, health and well-being of people of all backgrounds and abilities. As

Founder and Artistic Director, he is responsible for developing all IROKO's work and has designed innovative and educational Heritage Lottery-funded research projects that helped to preserve and raise awareness of African heritage and culture in the UK. More recently, he has been involved in using African theatre to help develop the practical English language skills of refugees and to explore social issues such as homelessness and mental health. As visiting lecturer, he teaches African theatre skills in various universities in the UK and abroad. He also works as consultant to national institutions like the BBC, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the British Museum amongst others, and on matters promoting and preserving African arts and heritage.

Michael Pearce is Lecturer in Socially Engaged Theatre at the University of Exeter. As well as a teacher and an academic, he is also a practitioner—he trained at the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris and has worked as an actor/deviseur, director and facilitator in his native Zimbabwe as well as in South Africa, France, Germany and the UK. His research examines black British theatre in relation to the cultural and political spaces of Africa, the Caribbean and the USA. He is the author of *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* (2017), as well as chapters and articles about contemporary black British playwrights and practitioners.

Arne Pohlmeier is the director and co-founder of Two Gents Productions. Originally from Germany, he grew up across the globe in Cameroon, the USA and Wales, and this internationality is reflected in his work. A migrant himself, he brings his own experiences to bear on his love of Shakespeare. Two Gents Productions is the product of this union: formed in 2008, Two Gents performed at Shakespeare's Globe in 2012. Their new show, *The Moors*, by Tonderai Munyevu, is performing at Tara Theatre London in November 2018.

Ade Solanke is a British-Nigerian playwright, screenwriter and academic. She was a Fulbright Scholar and a Phi Beta Kappa International Scholar at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts where she earned an MFA in Film and Television. She also has a post-graduate diploma in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London, where she taught scriptwriting, and a BA Hons in English Literature from the University of Sheffield, which recently awarded her its Distinguished Alumni Award. Her first stage play, *Pandora's Box*, was showcased at the Almeida Theatre in 2008, then had its world premiere at the Arcola

Theatre, Hackney, in 2012, enjoying standing ovations and sold out shows. It won a Best New Play nomination from the Off West End Awards, won awards for Best Play at the African Film Awards and the Nigerian Entertainment Awards, and was also nominated for the \$100,000 Nigerian Prize for Literature, Africa's biggest literary award. In 2014, *Pandora's Box* toured nationally to 16 venues—the largest ever tour of a black play in the UK. Her play, *The Court Must Have a Queen*, was on at Hampton Court Palace in 2018 and featured John Blanke, an African musician in the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Her drama, *Phillis in London*, about Phillis Wheatley, the enslaved teenage prodigy who came to London in 1773 to publish a collection of poetry, has been performed in England, Barbados and Gambia, and will have a full production in 2019. She worked in Hollywood as a story analyst for Sundance, New Line and Disney. Earlier in her career, she was voted 'London's Top Youth Entrepreneur' for her writing business in a national competition. She regularly contributes to Africa Writes, the annual Royal African Society literature festival at the British Library. She lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich and is the founder and artistic director of the theatre and film company Spora Stories, telling the dynamic stories of the African diaspora.

Victor Ukaegbu is Undergraduate Portfolio Leader for Media and Performance and Principal Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Bedfordshire. He is the author of *The Use of Masks in Igbo Theatre in Nigeria* (2008), and co-editor of *Reverberations: 'British-ness', Aesthetics and Small-Scale Theatres* (2013). He is Deputy Editor of *African Performance Review* and the founding General Secretary of the African Theatre Association (AfTA). He specialises in African theatre, Black British and Diaspora theatres, applied theatre, ethnodrama and intercultural and postcolonial performances.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Tiziana Morosetti

‘The first Nigerian Musical to hit London’s west end’,¹ *Wàkàá* (Show, 2016) is only an example of the varied performances written and produced in the capital by African artists or British-born artists of African descent in the past ten years.² Productions include Levi David Addai’s *House of Agnes* (Ovalhouse, 2008) and *I Have a Dream* (Polka, 2011), Femi Oguns’s *Torn* (Arcola, 2008), Ade Solanke’s *Pandora’s Box* (Almeida, 2008; Arcola, 2012) and *East End Boys, West End Girls* (Arcola, 2014), Two Gents’ *Vakomana Vaviri ve Zimbabwe* (Ovalhouse, 2008) and *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* (Ovalhouse, 2010), Janice Okoh’s *Egusi Soup* (Sir John Mills, 2009; Soho, 2012), Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (National Theatre, 2009), Oladipo Agboluaje’s *Iya-Ile* (Soho, 2009), *The Garbage King* (Unicorn, 2010) and *New Nigerians* (Arcola, 2017), Inua Ellams’s *The 14th Tale* (Arcola, 2009), *Untitled* (Soho, 2010) and *Barber Shop Chronicles* (Dorfman/National, 2017), Anthony Abuah’s *Another Biafra* (Cockpit, 2010), Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods* (Cochrane, 2011), Chuck Mike, Antonia Kemi and Tonderai Munyevu’s *Zhe: [Noun] Undefined* (Arcola, 2012), Bola Agbaje’s *Belong* (Royal Court, 2012) and *The Burial* (Albany, 2013), Ola Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad*

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T. Morosetti (ed.), *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94508-8_1

Again (George Wood Theatre, Goldsmiths, 2012) and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Lost Theatre, 2015), Mojisola Adebayo's *Desert Boy* (Albany, 2011) and *I Stand Corrected* (Ovalhouse, 2012), Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *The Island* (Young Vic, 2013) and *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (Young Vic, 2014), Denton Chikura's *The Epic Adventure of Nhamo the Manyika Warrior and His Sexy Wife Chipso* (Tricycle, 2013),³ Yael Farber's *Mies Julie* (Riverside, 2013), the multi-authored *Feast* (Young Vic, 2013), Gbolahan Obisesan's *How Nigeria Became: A Story, and a Spear That Didn't Work* (Unicorn, 2014), Diana Nneka Atuona's *Liberian Girl* (Royal Court, 2015), Lola Shoneyin and Rotimi Babatunde's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, 2015; Arcola, 2018), Mongiwekhaya Noma Dumezweni's *I See You* (Royal Court, 2016), Cont Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative* (Gate, 2016), Michael Williams and Cape Town Opera's *Mandela Trilogy* (Royal Festival Hall, 2016), Theresa Ikoko's *Girls* (Soho, 2016), Jonny Steinberg and Isango Ensemble's *A Man of Good Hope* (Young Vic, 2016), Zodwa Nyoni's *Nine Lives* (Arcola, 2016), and Kgomotso Khunoane's *The Fall* (Royal Court, 2017).

Bringing together academics and theatre practitioners currently active in London, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* is the first collection of essays and interviews to focus specifically on this 'African' corpus—a theatre that stems from the collaboration of playwrights, directors, and producers who were born and/or trained in Africa; from the influence of African theatre practices; from a background of African premières; from the involvement of African companies; in short, from the specificity of African cultures, languages, and theatrical contexts. In examining the artists and companies that have made (not always in unquestioned ways) Africa 'visible' on the London stage, this collection discusses whether the Africa that emerges from the London scene is stereotypical, or whether it has, on the contrary, contributed to an understanding of the continent and its arts. Following in the steps of volumes such as the recent *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama*, which makes 'the case of a black dramatic canon' (Brewer et al. 2015, 1) distinct from the Asian and the African American, but which combines West Indian and African artists in its scope,⁴ *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* argues for a further specificity of African theatre, to the exclusion of playwrights from the Caribbean or of Caribbean descent. Important productions about Africa such as debbie tucker green's *Truth and Reconciliation* (Royal Court, 2011) and *random/generations* (Minerva, 2018) or Charlene James's *Cuttin' It* (Young Vic, 2016), are therefore not included in our examination.⁵

This is not to deny the common challenges that black theatre (and communities) face in contemporary Britain. The reality of economic and social disadvantage, as well as the racism and prejudice that continue undermining relations in the UK are such that it is ‘not surprising [...] that the most visible black playwrights in recent years have been those whose work explicitly addresses the urgent social issues of our times’ (Goddard 2015, ix). Furthermore, while the appointment of Kwame Kwei-Armah as artistic director of the Young Vic in late 2017 is a ‘major step forward for diversity in British theatre’ (Ellis-Petersen 2017), the funding issues discussed above all in Part II of this volume, as well as issues of under-representation of black communities in theatre and film, and the disinformation and/or racial prejudice in the expectations of audiences and critics mean that effective equality on stage is yet far to be achieved.

Nor is our intention here, in excluding Caribbean (diasporic) writers, to imply a monolithic interpretation of what ‘Africa’ is (or should be) on the British stage. Rather, this is to share with previous criticism an increasing uneasiness with the use of the umbrella term ‘black’ for cultural backgrounds as diverse as the African, the Caribbean, and the black British. If, on the one hand, the term ‘black’ has become, in the words of Yvonne Brewster, ‘synonymous with underdeveloped, underprivileged, under-represented’ (2009, 65), on the other it has also turned out to be ‘a convenient’ definition ‘given to those in search of relatively small amounts of earmarked funding or attention, [a] kind of neo-colonisation’ (ibid.) that may, in Keith Peacock’s analysis, ‘encourage a ghettoisation of their [black playwrights’] work’ (2015, 153). In her study *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (2003), Gabrielle Griffin has similarly observed that whereas ‘[t]he “blackification” of women from diverse communities in Britain facilitated the adoption of the term “black” as the signifier of a political allegiance of people who suffer/ed racialized oppression in Britain’ (10), this term may not reflect the work of the many playwrights that ‘thematises the issue of differences between Black people coming from African countries and Black people coming from the Caribbean’ (12)—a point that has also been stressed by more recent criticism (Ponnuswami 2015, 83). If, in the words of Michael Pearce (2017), ‘[t]oday black tends to refer to people of African ancestry only’ (ebook, Notes on Terminology), general definitions like ‘black British’ still refer to both the African and African-Caribbean heritage, hence our argument for a closer focus on Africa. While ‘black British’ is used in this volume to hint to the wider context of BME theatre in the UK when playwrights are

British citizens, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* also wishes to represent a point of departure from studies of black British theatre, the perspective of which the chapters in this collection aim at complementing by offering a specific focus on the African component of this theatre.

Two factors in particular—the ‘mainstream recognition’ (Goddard 2015, 3) enjoyed by black British theatre in the twenty-first century, and ‘[t]he new millennial prominence of British Nigerian cultural presences on the stage’ (Brewer et al. 2015, 8)—furthermore require a shift in perspective. The massive migration of West Africans, Nigerians especially, from the 1980s onwards⁶ is of particular relevance here, as it has meant, in Peacock’s words, that ‘[t]here was now a black African presence that brought with it a first-generation ethnicity, which in some ways was alien not only to the white population, but also to the Caribbean community’ (2015, 157). Ekumah has also acknowledged that ‘[a] much less visible African diasporic narrative in Britain is now [from the early 2000s] beginning to counter the dominance of a discourse about the African Caribbean identity on the British stage’ (2015, 181). A distinction between African and Caribbean discourses and, indeed, communities is evident in the work of younger writers such as Bola Agbaje (b. 1981), who ‘brings a different voice to the black British theatre landscape’ as her plays ‘reflect the impact the growing black population of African origin is having on the British theatrical landscape’ (Pearce 2017, chapter 6). While acknowledging the contribution of younger playwrights like Agbaje, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* highlights the work done by African artists in the capital before the current emergence of West African (Nigerian) playwriting, focusing especially on the contribution of seminal figures like Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, and Biyi Bandele to an articulation of Africa on the British stage.⁷

By shifting the focus from a racial to a geographical denominator, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* aims at offering an overall perspective on the history of the African presence, indeed of the very notion of ‘Africa’, on the contemporary London stage. By focusing more closely on playwrights and performers from Africa or of African descent—both black and white—the volume highlights networks and legacies that have remained in the shade in previous studies, examining the London stage in relation to stages in Africa, and collaboration between playwrights and companies of African descent. In so doing, the collection discusses a wide variety of performances, genres, and theatrical traditions. These include (following Jatinder Verma’s distinction) cross-cultural and ‘Binglish’

performances—that is, performances that either ‘draw upon the encounters between different cultural sensibilities, as these are represented in their producing teams—actors, directors, designers, writers, etc.’ (1996, 194) or feature ‘Asian or black casts, produced by independent Asian or black theatre companies’ (ibid.)—as well as multi-cultural productions, performances with a ‘racially-mixed cast which, by not seeking to draw attention to the racial mix of the producing team, are not generally attempting to confront the dominant text-based convention of British theatre’ (ibid.). By exploring these varieties, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* wishes to complicate the picture Verma offers (the reader will soon realise that there is more to African performances in London than this categorisation may suggest) while avoiding the somewhat prescriptive nature of previous studies.

In highlighting the failure of ‘multi-cultural’ production to ‘confront the dominant’ conventions of British theatre, Verma does in fact ascribe performances a political role that this collection does not assume necessary for them to be equally interesting or worthy of study. Implied in the adoption of a geographical denominator for the artists and performances included in *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* is in fact, to an extent, a ‘de-politicisation’ of the subject. This does not mean that politics are not central to the production and reception of the artists and companies examined in this collection, nor that African (and black) performances take place independently on politics. It is, rather, the very idealisation that has characterised the African presence on the London stage that is under question. By idealisation I refer here to two main phenomena: (1) the conformation of African performances to given (racial) prejudices, expectations, or prescribed standards of what ‘authentic’ ‘African’ theatre is (or should be) in the critics’ and audiences’ mind (the *exoticisation* of African theatre); and (2) the assumption, in analyses such as Verma’s, that productions by BME artists should, in response to these very expectations, themselves propose a *trajectory* of their theatre as addressing, when not openly discussing, the circumstances of black communities in Britain. While the great majority of the productions examined in this collection do indeed address and discuss these circumstances, and are characterised by political instances or purpose, it is important to keep in mind also those performances that escape this pattern, and/or complicate this picture.

To put it differently, our aim in this book is to offer evidence of what artists from Africa or of African descent *do* and have done in London theatres, including when their work is questioned by their own community

and/or does not ‘advance’ a political cause. When inverted commas are adopted for ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ in the following chapters, this is then not to imply a prescription of what African theatre should be, but rather to problematise the very notion of ‘Africa’, as constructions of the continent on stage have been marred by prejudice and expectations that may still be in place today. Inverted commas are also employed to signal the distance expressed by playwrights not from their African heritage, but rather from the implications that the very label ‘African’ has had or may have for their work—as expectations in this direction from funding institutions also have an impact on theatre (see Brewster 2009, 78).

In gathering evidence (Part II) from the direct voice of artists and companies currently active in London, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* furthermore examines the ways the history of the African presence on stage has affected and changed that of London theatres. Because, of course, a history of Africa on the London stage is also perforce first and utmost a history of theatre in the capital, and of how this has expressed evolving expectations of ‘Africa’ while working as a major launch site for African performers and playwrights. Some of the companies that participated in the Globe to Globe experience,⁸ which in many ways epitomises the potential and risks of the London stage when it comes to performing Africa, were, for instance, specifically formed for the occasion. For others, performing at the Globe was not only, as Femi Osofisan puts it, ‘unprecedented good fortune’ (2013, 2) but also ‘an obvious advantage’ as ‘with an open space and a thrust or apron stage, making no provision for any scenery or elaborate props’ and a ‘fully visible’ audience (ibid.), the Globe stage presented many of the characteristics to which African companies/artists were already used to.⁹

On the downside, however, while supposedly presenting ‘genuine’ African renditions of Shakespeare, most of the African performances at the festival were not produced or noticed in the countries of origin of the companies. While this can be explained with lack of funds for some (Pohlmeier 2013, 85), a reason behind this contradiction can also be seen in the very nature of the festival, as ‘[f]or the organisers [...] the target audience was primarily and exclusively the London one [...]. Hence, in selecting the troupes to feature at the festival, the languages spoken by the extant immigrant communities in London were the decisive criteria’ (Osofisan 2013, 6). If, on the one hand, ‘the various ethnic communities in London who witnessed their groups perform and heard their language spoken on such an imposing stage, will have gained some new confidence

in their cultural identity' (10), on the other 'the decision by almost all the companies to play up the *exotic* elements in their productions' (7, my emphasis) to adapt to audiences at the Globe testifies to the challenges of performing Africa to diasporic and non-African communities alike.

Whereas no facile celebration of the London stage is therefore contemplated in this volume, the effort of the single venues that have supported the work of African artists and companies is duly acknowledged, *Africa on the Contemporary London Stage* designing a map of London theatres that overlaps with, but is not exhausted by, that provided by previous studies on black (African) playwrights and companies in the capital. Alongside the Royal Court, which features prominently in this collection, the National Theatre and smaller venues like Arcola Theatre, Soho Theatre, Ovalhouse, the Young Vic, the Almeida, the Theatre Royal Stratford East, and the Westminster Theatre are also comprised in the discussion.

Chapters in the volume have been arranged in loose chronological order and divided into two parts. Part I comprises contributions by academics from a range of theatrical expertise (from Shakespearean to black British and African theatre) examining a history of 'Africa' on the London stage from the 1950s to the present day. Part II, focusing on the last 30 years, investigates the work of African companies and theatre practitioners, including one introductory survey on leading companies Talawa Theatre and Tiata Fahodzi (Victor Ukaegbu), two contributions by the founders and directors of Iroko Theatre and Two Gents (Alex Oma-Pius and Arne Pohlmeier respectively), and three interviews with the playwrights Ade Solanke, Rotimi Babatunde and Dipo Agboluaje.

Chapters 2 (James Gibbs) and 3 (Steve Nicholson), as well as 7 (Sophie Duncan) address the construction and representation of 'Africa' on the London stage, examining performances that, although sold as 'authentic' to audiences, grow out of the pressure and support of non-African institutions, and/or feature stereotypical representations of African cultures. While it is difficult, to an extent even dangerous, to try and establish borders between performances that are 'genuinely' African and those that are not—not least because at the very core of many earlier pseudo-African performances was a pretence of 'authenticity' that punctuated the exoticisation of the African continent¹⁰—Gibbs's and Nicholson's chapters reveal how problematic the portrait of 'Africa' can be when certain interests or politics are in place.

James Gibbs' *Freedom*, London 1955: A Story of Modern Africa Written and Acted by Africans, or Perhaps Not', investigates how this all-African production, written by the Nigerian John Ifoghale Amata, the

South African Manasseh Moerane, and the Ghanaian Dr Abayifaa Karbo, was inspired by the leader of Moral Re-Armament (MRA) Frank Buchman, and effectively responded to the MRA ideology. Largely employing archival material, Gibbs highlights how behind *Freedom*, the performance of which even led on screen to what was at the time dubbed ‘the first African-made film’, was part of MRA political strategies—an attempt, through the very employment of Africans as performers and writers, to validate the movement’s principles. Alongside the production of *Freedom* at the Westminster Theatre and its adaptation into a film, Gibbs also investigates performances in Paris and in Nigeria, revealing important distances between audiences, and the different receptions of this play.

In the following essay, Steve Nicholson’s ‘Africa on the British Stage, 1955–1966’, the ten-year period between Reginald Craddock’s *Night Returns to Africa* (1955) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* (1966) is investigated with regard to the key images of Africa that were offered to theatregoers in London and elsewhere. While discussing plays by both British and African playwrights, Nicholson outlines a trajectory of representations of Africa on the British stage that includes a focus on the theatrical reception of the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s, the incredibly successful production of the South African township musical *King Kong* (1961), and the reception of Nigerian artists such as Soyinka, John Pepper Clark (Bekederemo), and Duro Ladipo. Central to Gibbs’s and Stevenson’s analysis is the way in which performances from or about Africa, even when written and produced by African artists, were framed within narratives that re-established racial and artistic hierarchies between African and Western theatrical practices and could embrace prejudicial expectations of ‘Africa’ on stage.

The closing chapter of Part I, Sophie Duncan’s ‘Black Masculinity and The Black Voice: Casting and Canonicity in the National Theatre Gala’, similarly problematises notions of Africa on the London stage by examining materials from *National Theatre Live: 50 Years on Stage* gala performance (2013). The chapter investigates two moments in particular, the showing of Act III Scene 3 from Adrian Lester’s *Othello* (National Theatre 2013)—which superimposes Lester’s interpretation and Lawrence Olivier’s *blackvoice* in his own *Othello* (Old Vic, 1965)—and footage from the film adaptation of Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2005). Both examples reveal profound anxieties about the ability to accommodate black masculinity, especially of African descent, within the British theatrical canon. Arguing that ‘British theatre still conceives African

identity in overwhelmingly visual terms', Duncan moves the scope of her analysis from the much-explored blackface interpretation of Olivier to his use of a pseudo-African voice, and complements her examination focusing on the other important black play at the gala, Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*.

Questions of voice and 'African' accents are also examined in my own essay (Chap. 4), "'On One of Those Sunday Nights": Fifty Years of Africa at the Royal Court Theatre',¹¹ which investigates productions from Johnstone and Gaskill's *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* (1958) to Bola Agbaje's *Belong* (2012) to discuss approaches to Africa at the Royal Court. While this venue has provided a launching-pad for several authors from Africa or, more recently, of African descent, representations of 'Africa' on the Royal Court stage are informed, I argue, by the progressive gentrification of this venue, as well as by its politics in regard to diversity. Employing material from the English Stage Company archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum to discuss in particular William Gaskill's position at the Royal Court and focusing on the reception of Nigerian playwrights (Wole Soyinka, Yemi Ajibade, and Tunde Ikoli) in the 1960s and 1970s, my chapter concludes by examining Bola Agbaje's recent work with this venue, her linguistic choices and her translation of Nigeria on stage.

Chapters 5 (Michael Pearce) and 6 (Lynette Goddard) also examine British Nigerian playwrights, investigating the seminal contribution of Biyi Bandele and Dipo Agboluaje (respectively) to shaping (African) satire on the London stage, with a focus on the influence of Nigerian theatrical practices in the work of these two authors. It is also highlighted that the work of Bandele and Agboluaje is challenging in that it reflects multiple, fluid identities and changing cultural backgrounds, speaking to the duality of diasporic African communities in the UK. Bandele's *Marching for Fausa* (1993), *Resurrections in the Season of the Longest Drought* (1994), and *Two Horsemen* (1994) are examined in Pearce's 'Biyi Bandele's Theatre of the Afropolitan Absurd', which argues that the playwright's comedic style, while inspired by the European Theatre of the Absurd as well as by Nigerian performance traditions, brought an 'Afropolitan sensibility to the British stage' and was therefore instrumental in challenging dominant representations of Africa and its cultures.

On the other hand, after briefly introducing the work of Tiata Fahodzi and of contemporary playwrights such as Bola Agbaje, Inua Ellams, Janice Okoh, and Ade Solanke, whose writing mainly addresses questions of diasporic identity in Britain, Lynette Goddard's 'Nigerian Political Satire

at the Soho Theatre: Class, Culture, and Theatrical Languages in Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Estate* and *Iyale (The First Wife)*' focuses on the playwright that more than others has turned to Nigeria as both a setting and a source of inspiration. Goddard investigates the use of specific dramatic structures, the strategic incorporation of Nigerian as well as European sources, and the interrogation of social hierarchies in *The Estate* (2006) and *Iyale (Iya-Ile, The First Wife)* (2009), while offering an insight into the still-in-progress third chapter of this trilogy, *Fractures*. Discussing the translation of Nigerian satire in Agboluaje's work, Goddard (like Pearce) stresses the relevance of a Nigerian sensibility in these productions, and further expands on the emergence of West African playwrights on the British stage.

Part II of this volume includes, as mentioned, contributions by theatre practitioners and companies active in the capital. Chapters 8 (Victor Ukaegbu), 9 (Alex Oma-Pius) and 10 (Arne Pohlmeier) explore the history of companies that have provided a vehicle of expression for African artists in London, investigating both their full productions and their work with communities through readings, workshops and training programmes. Victor Ukaegbu's 'Disrupting Historical Mis-Representations and Constructions: Talawa Theatre, Tiata Fahodzi and Representations of Polyphonic Africa on the Contemporary London Stage' discusses the work of these companies to trace disruptions of monolithic representations of Africa in British theatre. The productions of these two companies, including their most recent work, are examined within a history of misrepresentation of African cultures that Ukaegbu outlines to the inclusion of popular performances and the infamous appearance in London of Sarah Baartman (the 'Hottentot Venus') in 1810. The chapter highlights patterns of representation of Africa and examines the phases through which the response of African artists has been articulated on the London stage from the late 1980s to the present day.

The work of African companies that, like Talawa Theatre and Tiata Fahodzi, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s—such as the now defunct Zuriya Theatre Company and Ritual Theatre Arts (see Alex Oma-Pius's chapter), Fraudsters Inc. (see Michael Pearce's chapter), and the still active Collective Artistes¹²—as well as the more recent Two Gents (see Arne Pohlmeier's chapter), Spora Stories (see interview with Ade Solanke), and Femi Elufowaju Jr Ensemble¹³ are crucial to the articulation of an African presence on the London stage. As Elufowaju Jr affirms (personal communication), until the emergence of these companies

the African theatre presence despite being rotund and magnificent in theory was in fact negligible. But more importantly, the genre, from an African theatre practitioner's perspective, as the years ahead would dictate, remained non-existent. [...] Historically decent parts in theatre for actors of African descent were very few and far between. In the early nineties both late John Adewole and Rufus Orishayomi of Zuriya Theatre Company, and Ritual Theatre Arts respectively played their roles as artistic directors strenuously to impact Africa on to our national Stages. They were very successful in galvanising access and participation within grassroots communities, however it was with much regret that their main objectives and overtures were never entirely realised before their individual untimely demise. [...] Naturally the persistent lack of an African theatre tradition within our British theatres invariably exposed a huge chunk of potential audiences which through the decades appeared to be institutionally marginalised and ignored. And it was this phenomenon in 1997 which prompted the charge which Tiata Fahodzi set itself then and continually represents today.

The need to re-capture the attention of these 'institutionally marginalised and ignored' audiences has been translated by African companies both on stage and in educational activities. Alex Oma-Pius's 'Iroko Theatre and the African Theatre-in-Education Scene in London' (Chap. 9) explores the Theatre-in-Education scene of the 1980s and 1990s and examines differences in approach and content between earlier African companies such as Zuriya and Ritual Theatre Arts (as well as Project for African Arts and Culture, and Ujamaa Theatre Arts) and Iroko Theatre. The work of this company, which comprises full productions, workshops and performances in schools, community centres and other informal venues, and collaborations with eminent institutions such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, is discussed in relation to learning issues, young audiences, and the disadvantaged communities addressed by Iroko Theatre. The chapter also examines the advantages of using African theatre elements and techniques when addressing audiences across a range of backgrounds, ages, and ethnic origins.

Chapter 10, Arne Pohlmeier's "'But [We] Will Delve One Yard Below Their Mines/And Blow Them at the Moon": Two Gents—'Africa', Shakespeare, and the Silent Revolution', examines the genesis and work of this company including *Vakomana Vaviri ve Zimbabwe or Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2008) and *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* (2010), as well as the Globe to Globe experience in 2012. Providing an in-sight account of rehearsals, networks, and tours, this chapter discusses the challenges of translating

‘Africa’ (Zimbabwe more specifically) in the performance of Tonderai Munyevu and Denton Chikura (who [at the time of writing] constituted the company with Pohlmeier), while expanding on the company’s main source of inspiration, Mbongeni Ngema, Percy Mtwa, and Barney Simon’s seminal South African play *Woza Albert!* (1983).

Last but not least Chaps. 11, 12, and 13 include interviews with Ade Solanke, Rotimi Babatunde, and Dipo Agboluaje that cover issues of representation, questions of funding, differences between audiences in and outside London, as well as the playwrights’ relations with specific venues such as Arcola Theatre, Ovalhouse, Soho Theatre, the Royal Court, and the Young Vic. My interview with Ade Solanke explores her work as founder and writer of Spora Stories, with a focus on *Pandora’s Box* (2012) and *East End Boys, West End Girls* (2015) and Nigerian diasporic issues in her writing. The playwright’s experience of the Arcola Theatre stage and audiences’ reactions (especially to *Pandora’s Box*) are also discussed at length. Rotimi Babatunde’s interview, conducted by Ying Cheng, focuses on his co-writing of *Feast* (2013) as well as on his adaptation of Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2015; 2018). The playwright’s experience at the Royal Court, his ‘translation’ on stage of elements of the Nigerian Yoruba world view, the reception of audiences and critics to his contribution to *Feast*, and the Nigerian sources of his writing are also explored. The last interview, with Dipo Agboluaje, focuses on the longer career of this playwright and his works *The Estate*, *Iya-Ile* (*The First Wife*), *The Hounding of David Oluwale*, *Obele and the Storyteller*, *The Garbage King*, and *New Nigerians* in particular. Issues of representation and stereotype in portraying Africa on stage, the playwright’s Nigerian sources, his views on other African artists in London, as well as Agboluaje’s relation to Ovalhouse and Arcola Theatre and his experience of audiences outside London, are all discussed in this closing chapter.

Our hope with this volume, which is by no means exhaustive, is to trigger further debate and reflection on notions of ‘Africa’ on the London stage, while accounting for the specificity of this rich and exciting African ‘corpus’ in the history of contemporary British theatre. While there is no way Africa can be prevented from being ‘wrongly’ portrayed on stage—and while drawing lines between ‘truthful’ and inaccurate, ‘real’ or ‘fictional’ representations of Africa may itself be a problematic exercise—it is important to keep on interrogating issues of ‘authenticity’ on stage, as the presence of Africa on the London stage is still marred by prejudice and stereotype, while suffering from lack of funding as well as occasional sup-

port. On the other hand, the complex, multi-layered productions of playwrights from Africa or of African descent suggest that a response to the mis-interpretation and stereotyping of African cultures, although solidly informed by a political conscience, cannot be solely described in terms of their inherent social or political value. The case studies examined in this collection are, rather, an example of the aesthetic *as well as* identity issues behind African productions in London, and of the multiple challenges that inform the work of African (and BME) playwrights in the capital.

It is our wish that the materials presented in this collection may contribute to a fuller acknowledgement of the legacy of African performances and theatre practices on the London stage, while further undermining stereotypes surrounding Africa and its cultures. Hopefully, the flourishing of occasions and opportunities for artists from Africa or of African descent to express themselves fully in a more varied, less marketised, and further-reaching theatrical environment in Britain will make these wishes redundant.

NOTES

1. <https://www.facebook.com/Wakaathemusical/>.
2. At the time of writing: 2008 to March 2018.
3. The theatre is now (2018) named Kiln Theatre. All references to the Tricycle in this book predate this change. See <https://kilnthatre.com/>.
4. Michael Pearce's *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* (2017) also includes a separate section on Africa (alongside two others investigating the USA and the Caribbean). However, because Pearce's angle is on the 'multiple spatial, cultural and political contexts' (Introduction) that have informed black British drama, geographical areas are interpreted as (or in relation to) thematic concerns rather than *strictu sensu*. A playwright like Bola Agbaje is therefore discussed in the section dedicated to the Caribbean, while Kwame Kwei-Armah and Mojisola Adebayo are examined within the influence of the USA on black British drama. The section on Africa includes, alongside a focus on Inua Ellams, plays by debbie tucker green that explore the African continent.
5. Chapters in this collection also tangentially consider plays set in Africa written by non-African playwrights, while entirely excluding plays that are merely 'evocative' of the continent (such as the long-running *The Lion King* at the Lyceum). Recent productions such as Gillian Plowman's *Yours Abundantly from Zimbabwe* (Ovalhouse, 2008), Matt Charman's *The Observer* (National Theatre, 2009), Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (National Theatre, 2010) and Stella Feehily's *Bang Bang Bang* (Royal Court, 2011), while not examined by this collection, should, however, be