BERNTH LINDFORS

Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka at UNIFE:
A Newspaper Controversy

Theatre history is beginning to emerge as an important new discipline at African universities. Master’s theses and doctoral dissertations on aspects of local theatre history have already been produced by scholars from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Tanzania, Malawi and several other countries with strong theatrical traditions. The first of these professionally trained theatre historians did their advanced degrees abroad, but today an increasing number are completing their studies at home, investigating phenomena that can be researched more exhaustively in an indigenous setting. These pioneering young academics are recovering Africa’s theatrical past.

One problem in carrying out such research is that of locating reliable documentary records. Even relatively recent events will be remembered by various witnesses differently, so the theatre historian must make an effort to cross-check oral interviews by consulting written materials and other tangible records produced during the period under scrutiny. For a history of a stage company, for instance, he or she would have to examine printed programmes, contemporary newspaper reviews, published interviews, and whatever photographs or films of performances might still survive. Some of these materials will be housed in convenient archives or held by individuals active in the company concerned; others will be lost or scattered and will have to be sought out by resorting to techniques reminiscent of those employed by Sherlock Holmes. It is entirely possible that vital records will elude even the most intrepid scholar simply because they appeared in media regarded as too ephemeral or too fragile for preservation; they may be remembered and talked about, but copies can no longer be found.

This is often the case with newspaper items that made a sensation in their day but were never systematically recorded, collected and archived. How does one get hold of such data? If there are no newspaper indexes to refer to and no well-stocked newspaper libraries within easy travelling distance, the researcher may be faced with the proverbial problem of hunting for a needle in a haystack – and a faraway haystack at that. It may be useful, therefore, for academic journals to reprint important documents that are now extremely rare or inaccessible to most.
researchers. As an example of what I have in mind, I am offering for reproduction here a set of interesting cuttings from 1983 issues of the *Nigerian Tribune*, a newspaper published in Ibadan. Though these are relatively recent materials, the *Nigerian Tribune* is not held in many African newspaper collections, so the important theatre debate stirred up in its pages a few years ago will be unknown and unavailable to the vast majority of scholars interested in contemporary Nigerian theatre history.

The controversy focused on the University of Ife theatre and on two distinguished Nigerian playwrights who had directed productions there: Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka. Rotimi, after returning from undergraduate and graduate theatre studies in the United States in 1966, was attached briefly to the University of Ibadan before moving on to the University of Ife to take up an appointment as Director of the University Theatre, a position he held until 1977. Soyinka, based at the University of Lagos from 1965 to 1967 and held in detention from 1967 to 1969 during the Nigerian civil war, spent 1970 to 1975 in self-exile in Europe and Ghana. Upon returning to Nigeria, he accepted an appointment as Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife and soon became involved in dramatic productions there. When Rotimi left, he took over as Head of the Theatre Arts programme and Director of the University Theatre, positions he held until he opted to take early retirement in 1985. During their twenty years at Ife, these two talented directors, who also had become Nigeria’s pre-eminent playwrights, made the “Unife Theatre” into one of the most exciting centres of theatrical activity on the African continent.

Inevitably, people compared them— as playwrights, as directors, as men of the theatre. Each had a compelling theatrical vision and a distinctive professional style. Each had a strong personality. And each had devoted backers and detractors who argued interminably about the respective merits and demerits of both. When one of the Soyinkaphiles ventured to publish in the *Nigerian Tribune* a brief account of the Unife Theatre that belittled Rotimi’s achievements there, it was only natural that the Rotimites should respond. Indeed, the response came from Ola Rotimi himself, who offered a lengthy rebuttal in three installments. This prompted a “correction” from Soyinka, which in turn led to a series of rejoinders from both sides. The whole palaver is reprinted here, starting with the first salvo, which was fired on February 12th by Kole Omotoso, then a Lecturer in Arabic at the University of Ife and a good friend of Soyinka: