Biyi Bandele–Thomas

Coming Out Grinning
Interview by Holger Ehling

Biyi Bandele–Thomas is one of the most interesting younger writers in Nigeria today. Born in 1967, the first year of the Biafra War, he grew up in the small town of Kafanchan, near Jos. Being of Yoruba ancestry in this environment of Hausa culture was one of the formative elements of his youth. He studied Dramatic Arts at the University of Ile-Ife. He has been living in London since 1990. His works of fiction include The Sympathetic Undertaker and other dreams (1991), The Man Who Came In From the Back of Beyond (1994), Resurrections in the Season of the Longest Drought (1994), Death Catches the Hunter & Me and the Boys (1995), and The Street (1999), and he has also written an adaptation (1999) of Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko.

This interview was held on March 9, 1993, in the office of dipa-Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, the German publishers of Biyi Bandele–Thomas’s novels.

Holger Ehling: Your novels portray a Nigeria which is far from a nice place to live in. Your leading characters are disturbed, cannot come to terms with what is going on around them. Why are you so critical of your country?

Biyi Bandele–Thomas: Nigeria within the last ten or fifteen years has undergone a remarkable transformation from a country that was very, very wealthy, as wealthy as any other nation on earth, to being one of the most impoverished. When I was a kid, when I was probably about seven or ten or eleven years old, I remember being able to buy a lot of books, every week, every day; I was totally into buying books. And I would get pocket-money from my Dad, who used to give all the kids pocket-money every morning before going to school. And while my brothers bought footballs and things like that with their money, I would buy novels. A lot of them were what you would call ‘trashy’ pulp novelists like James Hadley Chase and Nick Carter. Later on I started going to a library. I encountered

the European classics and I read a lot of the philosophy – just anything I could lay my hands on, I would read.

*Is it still possible for the average Nigerian to go out and buy a book whenever he wants to?*

Now, no, it’s not. First of all, if you go into a bookshop – the bookshops are there, but there aren’t any books in them. All that you find are textbooks, because that’s the only thing that sells. Or if you do find works of a creative nature, of fiction, you find that the average novel, a hundred-page novel, would have to be sold at around 90 to 100 naira for the publisher to break even. And 90 naira, that’s almost a week’s salary for the average worker, that’s a lot of money to spend on a book when you still have to eat, to pay your rent, you still have your children to send to school – the basic necessities of life to see to.

*But there isn’t only that physical hunger that has to be satisfied by food and drink and whatever, but there’s also that kind of intellectual and psychological hunger which can only be satisfied by reading-material. Is there anything in Nigeria at the moment that can satisfy this kind of hunger?*

In any society where there is an economic crunch, the first casualty always seems to be the arts and so, right now in Nigeria, there is that big, big hunger, I suppose, for literature, which in a way is being channelled into going to the theatre. Theatre seems to be experiencing a big boom right now. I remember in December last year there was a production of a play called *The King Must Die Naked* by the new National Troupe. In Nigeria we do not normally have these long runs like you have in the West; originally the play was intended to be on for about three weeks, but it has closed just now, apparently, and it had packed houses every night – and the National Theatre’s main auditorium seats a couple of thousand. People were coming every night and they were really surprised, because the experience, especially with English-speaking theatre, sometimes has been really uneven and unpredictable. Sometimes you find you have packed houses and sometimes after the opening night you have to drag people in.

*Why is it that people seem to be so interested in theatre? There are the legendary productions of Hubert Ogunde and the tradition of the Yoruba travelling theatre in general. Why is it that people are going for that kind of entertainment?*

Hubert Ogunde is known today as the father of Nigerian theatre. He started in the late 1930s, early 1940s with what he called concert parties, which were very loosely based on the structure of operas here, even though the content was very Yoruba. He later progressed to making films. He turned some of his stageworks into cinematic stories, and the films were very successful. Ogunde single-handedly created a Yoruba film industry. Today, every single week you have dozens of films, maybe