

## **A History of African Radio Performance**

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**Fiona Ledger, BBC Drama Producer, looks back at the last four decades of BBC radio drama across Africa.**



**Prof. Wole Soyinka -**

"African radio drama is a bonus for writers and listeners"

BBC African Performance is a unique annual season of radio drama now entering its fifth decade. The Nobel Laureat Professor Wole Soyinka believes the season penetrates Africa's borders in one fell swoop.

"They are listening in Zimbabwe at the same time as in Sudan, in South Africa, in Nigeria, in Sierra Leone. And this is definitely a crushing of boundaries in a way that even the written word on its own may not have."

It was back in 1960 that the late BBC producer John Stockbridge was asked by the Head of the African Service to devise some kind of drama for African listeners. He came up with a series, a soap opera set in London.

No copy survives, but the star does. Yemi Ajibade, then a young actor new to the UK, took the role of a social worker, moving around England and settling quarrels.

One of the early plays was Ama Ata Aidoo's "Anowa", broadcast in 1968. Now a grandmother of African literature, Ama Ata Aidoo was then 26 years old. Her play was about a woman who turns down a young man,

considered a good catch by her parents, only to elope with an undesirable.

### **Ama Ata Aidoo: In the dock! in 1968**



**The late Jeillo Edwards** - Secretly keen on the romantic lead.

The power of attraction and its disastrous consequences was a common theme in African theatre. Equally strong was the battle of the sexes. Jeillo Edwards has always been adept at playing big and strong women, though she has confessed to being keen on taking the romantic lead. Invariably she played across from the now late Alex Tettey-Lartey in the gender war.

Another lead actor and now one of the UK's most successful performers, is Saeed Jaffrey. He played alongside Alex Tettey-Lartey in *A Mile to Go*, by Kuldip Sondhi, the story of an Indian businessman attempting to leave a hostile African state, only to be thwarted at the last minute.

### **Saeed Jaffrey: A triumphant climax!**

Kuldip Sondhi combines writing with the hard commercial world of a hotelier. Few playwrights can rely on their work for a sole source of income. Nigeria's contribution to radio drama has been enormous and it continues to yield the most drama scripts on an annual basis in the whole continent.

Today one of Britain's leading young playwrights is Biyi Bandele, who comes from Nigeria. The first radio play he ever wrote, *Forbidden Fruit*, was broadcast in 1991 on the BBC African Service.

**Biyi Bandele: "You are the only mosquito in my net, the only sugar in my tea."**

Many plays in BBC African Theatre were strongly political, as well as full of personal anguish. In South Africa politics and human suffering fused to produce drama which was traumatic, funny and driven.

While apartheid ruled, London was full of South African writers, actors and directors: Lionel Ngakane, Alton Khumalo, John Matshikiza, Jabu Mbalu. Many returned with majority rule.

Ugandan Vincent Magombe had been cut off from Africa and the West by nine years of study in the Soviet Union. He submitted his first script to the BBC within a week of arriving in London, a complete unknown from Moscow.

"The experiences in Russia were extraordinary and I kept seeing things that really gripped me as an artist, as a writer", he said.

Actor Joe Marcel, a regular performer on BBC African Theatre, ended up in Hollywood. He shot to stardom playing black English butler to Will Smith's boy from the hood in the TV hit, Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

**Joe Marcel: "Popping my 'p's"**

The 1960s and 70s were lean times for black actors. Jeillo Edwards, the first black actress on British television, says she lived on BBC African Theatre, then a monthly production. "But I decided to get married. I thought at least I'll have something to eat and a roof over my head!"

The secret of the success of some writers and actors was versatility - moving from radio to television to stage. No one demonstrated that more clearly than Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa. In 1972 his play Transistor Radio was chosen for production by BBC African Theatre. It was the pilot for what became a hugely successful comedy on radio and then television,

featuring the feckless but ever hopeful Basi.

But Saro-Wiwa moved away from the world of writing and commerce to the world of politics in the 1980s. He paid the price in 1994 when he was executed, accused by the Nigerian government of murdering political opponents in Ogoniland.

In the mid 1970s BBC African Theatre was reduced from a monthly affair with a dedicated group of actors to six plays a year broadcast weekly over a six week period. In 1994 the name African Theatre was changed to African Performance to allow for music, readings and drama-documentaries to have their place in the season. In 1994 the decision was also taken to record two plays a year on location, working with local actors and writers across the continent.

Three plays continue to be recorded in the BBC studios in London every year to great acclaim.

"One of the main things about being involved in African Performance is the energy of imagination, the energy of story-telling," says Leo Wringer, another actor to have made it in Hollywood.

For Ben Onwukwe, a veteran African Performance actor, "Suddenly I come in this building and there's actors' power! There's the power of the performer who is listened to, whose contribution is discussed."

For writer, Biyi Bandele, BBC African Performance does something unique. "I think the fact that African Performance reaches every corner of the continent is wonderful. It provides the only forum right now for cross-continental dialogue and I think it is very very crucial that it should go on."

### **Recent Plays: African Performance Season 2006**

You can listen to the plays online on the BBC World Service Website

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>

### **First Prize: Eternal Forever**

This year's winning play is written by John Rugoiyo from Kenya. This is an imaginative piece of writing, set in 2410 in a united Africa that is pushing back the boundaries of scientific research. "Eternal Forever" is also the quest of a father to find his wife and child.

The play was directed by Solomon Mugeru.

### **Second Prize: Slayed Dog**

The second prize-winning play by Nigerian Chika Maureen Ukaigwe looks at mob justice in Africa. The drama follows the emotional journey of three young friends as they come to terms with the loss of a close friend through a case of mistaken identity, and their efforts to find justice on his behalf.

The play was directed by Alice Martin.

### **Joint Third Prize: The Spots of the Leopard**

A well-known proverb says that a leopard does not change its spots - but Jamila won't hear this, as she builds her future on an act of betrayal. But the past is always bound to catch up... Set in a domestic setting in Sierra Leone, *The Spots of the Leopard*, by Mohamed Sheriff, handles sensitive issues of deception, abuse and love.

The play was directed by Ondina Fonseca.

### **Joint Third Prize: Once Upon a Time in Lagos**

The play by Efo Kodjo Mawugbe is a comedy about two young men who live together in Lagos, Nigeria, and need to make some money. Much of

the humour centres on an age-old rivalry between Nigeria and Ghana - something of the David & Goliath of West Africa - epitomised in these two characters. The friends get into some scrapes that challenge their relationship, but all's well that end's well.

### **Showcased Drama - Paperchase**

Drama hits the airwaves on **Bush Radio** in Cape Town. In Paperchase, Niq Mhlongo tells the story of a young man who hoodwinks his way through university as he pulls the "cultural card" on the white administrators. But the cultural card also takes him to the reality of life... Funny, bitter and very contemporary.