



Utopia Theatre's
'Iyalode of Eti'

The Deep Roots And Shelter of Theater

African theater in the United Kingdom is reaching out to the creative community in robust and valuable new ways, dispelling stereotypes and adding to the value of the African story.

BY ALASTAIR HAGGER

IN THE YORUBÁ FOLKLORE OF south-west Nigeria, the Iroko tree is a symbol of ferocious spiritual power. Cut the tree down, and imperil your fate. Cultures across the African continent venerate great trees as places of shelter and communion, the theaters of the precious in human life.

In the United Kingdom (UK), two theater companies with Nigerian roots are weathering the coronavirus storm with the defiant resilience of African hardwood.

The London-based IROKO Theatre Company was founded in 1996 by Alex Oma-Pius, who had trained on a scholarship from Nigeria at the National Academy For Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA), in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the 1980s. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, the scholarship program was dissolved, leaving Oma-Pius stranded in the UK; after an internship with the African theater company, Zuriya, he was inspired to strike out on his own.

“My professor in Sofia had always told me, ‘Alex, tap into your culture. Folklore, folklore, folklore,’” he says. “My childhood memories of traditional stories just came alive with that internship. But it had always been my dream to move what we were doing away from just drumming. Although they loved the stories, it’s the jumping up and down that people like.” He laughs at the memory. “With IROKO, we started to find a way to let people know there was more to what we were doing. What is the value of an African story? How do we want this story to impact their lives?”

For nearly 25 years, IROKO has toured all over the country, using the tools of African storytelling to not only teach life skills to the young, but also bring comfort to sufferers of age-related conditions such as arthritis and dementia, in ways that western storytelling techniques are perhaps less well-equipped to deliver. “African storytelling is a performative art, a combined art-form,” Oma-Pius says. “In African stories, there is no fourth wall. You, the listener, are a performer as well.”

Before the pandemic, the theater company was rolling out an ambitious and innovative project called Speaking without Voice, to “research, identify, record and present



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four Nigerian precolonial nonverbal communication systems”: the ideographic symbols of Nsibidi (one of the vivid cultural markers featured in the film *Black Panther*); the aesthetic cultural practice *Uli*; the semiotic code of *Aroko* objects; and the tonal ‘language’ of the talking drum.

The project was inspired by a chance encounter with a group of young men in east London. “I was at a church event, and I saw a group of young Nigerian boys beatboxing, but replicating the talking drum,” says Oma-Pius. “I asked if they knew the meaning of the sounds. They didn’t, and that set me thinking. So we created a new music theater piece to share the learning about the research we had done, in a theatrical form. It’s mainly about heritage, but also an indirect way to explore generation gap issues about how we Africans have abandoned our culture.”

Oma-Pius says the pandemic has hit the company hard, and that 95% of confirmed bookings in the UK have been cancelled, including the intensive programming attached to Britain’s Black History Month celebrations in October. In response, he says they are now pivoting to supply the demand for IROKO online content. The long-lived Iroko tree has deep, irrepressible roots. “On the whole, we are still confident,” he says.

The Sheffield-based Utopia Theatre company “aims to produce high-quality cross-cultural content that enhances the value of the African community, and promotes its recognition and its integration.” Its founder and artistic director is Moji Elufowoju, whose experience at drama school in Britain led to an epiphany about where her own directing career might lead.

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Nigeria and was exposed to Nigerian theater traditions, so when I first went to drama school here, I noticed the difference in the way stories are told in the western context,” she says. “I realized the only way I will be able to add something to the industry is to actually bring something of my own. I started spending more time going to Africa, seeing more theater. What you see in Nigeria is people rehearsing on the street. I’ve never read

about a painter that waits around and says, 'until I get a commission I'm not going to start painting'. If you're an artist, you're an artist. And that's the way I started my career. I didn't wait around for funding."

Utopia Theatre was registered in 2015, and developed a fruitful collaborative relationship with Sheffield Theatres, who provided the company with rehearsal space and opportunities to perform.

It aims at "dispelling stereotypes and encouraging authentic voices from the African diaspora", in a synthesis of African and western performing traditions.

"A lot of the stories of black people on stage are quite stereotypical," Elufowoju says. "Stories of slavery, or about knife crime, deprivation. What the company tries to focus on is the positive aspects of the lives of black people. That is why Sheffield Theatres have supported us, because they know we can also change some of the perceptions of who the audiences are that come in to that building. Theater is for all. It's about ensuring the work that we make is for regular theater-goers, but at the same time opens up a whole avenue for a different audience."

Elufowoju's latest production is *Here's What She Said to Me*, a semi-autobiographical, inter-generational story of "that complex relationship that mothers and daughters have," she says. "But it's also about the journey of these women's lives, the story of migration, and all the different challenges these women have faced."

Sadly, the indomitable challenge of the coronavirus saw Utopia lose its rehearsal space, and the production is now on indefinite hold. But through its online Creative Hub, which runs until the end of the year, the company has reached out to the creative community in robust and valuable new ways. "We have been able to create paid opportunities for over 50 freelance African theater industry practitioners," Elufowoju says, "who are delivering masterclasses, workshops, and mentorship projects. The Hub has been accessed by participants from all over the world, averaging 18,000 viewed minutes per publicly available session."

There are also wider, systemic challenges faced by black and African-Caribbean theater practitioners which go beyond the devastating effects of the pandemic in the global arts sector. Sophia A Jackson is the founder of *afriidiziak.com*, an online publication celebrating African-Caribbean theater. A former listings editor for the black British newspaper *New Nation*, Jackson says that while there are now a greater number of black theater actors and directors, there is still enormous under-representation in the sector as a whole (the 2018 *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* report estimates representation of people of color in the industry to be as low as 7%).

"What you want is the people in lighting, set design, stage production, because obviously that's more consistent work," Jackson says. "And that's hugely lacking in diversity; there are definitely more directors and producers than there were, but in terms of those technical roles it's an area that needs developing."

She says the media-popular, catch-all term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) is unhelpful in discussions about arts diversity – she prefers 'Black theater' or 'African-Caribbean theater' – and that more still needs to be done to encourage an increase in black



Utopia Theatre's production
'Here's What She Said To Me'

audiences; her website offers discounted tickets to her members when theaters make these available.

"But that doesn't happen with every show and it doesn't happen with every theater," she says. "Some theaters care about the demographic of their audience. And some theaters don't."

Jackson is encouraged by the fact that several mainstream theaters in the British capital now have black artistic directors, and believes black theater will continue heading in a positive direction when we emerge into the world of the 'new normal', whatever that comes to mean for the theater industry.

"We're there to make important decisions about the narrative of theater in London," she says, "and that's ground-breaking, really. There's hope now as theaters reopen. I'm excited again, and looking forward to seeing how the sector adapts."

That mighty Iroko tree, albeit worn and weathered, remains rooted. "I know in my heart we're a long way off from theater going back to how it used to be," Jackson says. "But in some ways – such as in the Black Lives Matter movement – maybe that's a good thing." **F**