

THE AFRICAN GRIOT

Issue no. 2 | August 2025

REVIEW

CURTAINS

*Farewell to
Theatre Legend
Athol Fugard*

PRO WRESTLING

*Shakespeare for
the Masses?*

ECHOES OF WAR

*The Play That Shook a
Nation!*

MUSICALS

*Is Africa Hitting the
Right Notes?*

ATHOL FUGARD

(1932–2025)

MADD, MADD WORLD!

*Exclusive Interview With
Paul Kelemba*

BROADWAY

Art, Race & Money

PLUS:

POETRY

| FICTION

| NEWS

| OPPORTUNITIES

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EDITORIAL

What a bumper issue we've got for you this time around! The theme is 'Theatre' and there's plenty of info-tainment in these pages.

I have always felt that Theatre, as a literary form, is underrated in Africa. Hopefully, this issue hints at the wonders that await those who wish to partake of the ancient and noble art form.

The main story is the demise of South African playwright, actor and producer Athol Fugard. We have laid out his life story for our readers – and what a story it is!

On Page 12, we have an exclusive interview with Paul 'Maddo' Kelemba, who wrote the script of the nostalgia-inducing musical play *African Twist*.

On Page 17, we take a critical look at Broadway, the mecca of the theatre business, and see what African thespians can learn from this famous district.

And, speaking of learning, the good and the bad of African musicals is examined in *Failing Forward*.

Next, we chronicle the rise of professional wrestling from carnival sideshow to mainstream entertainment.

In addition, we are blessed to have a short story (on a sensitive but important topic) and some endearing poems from two authors who, coincidentally, are both based in the United States.

The News section is jam-packed with the latest dramas – and we do mean 'drama' – in the performance art sector; including how a high-school play in Kenya turned into a war between police and thespians!

All the regulars are intact, including Reviews, Quotes, and Opportunities. We've even added a new regular section just for Memes. This is a magazine that keeps up with the times!

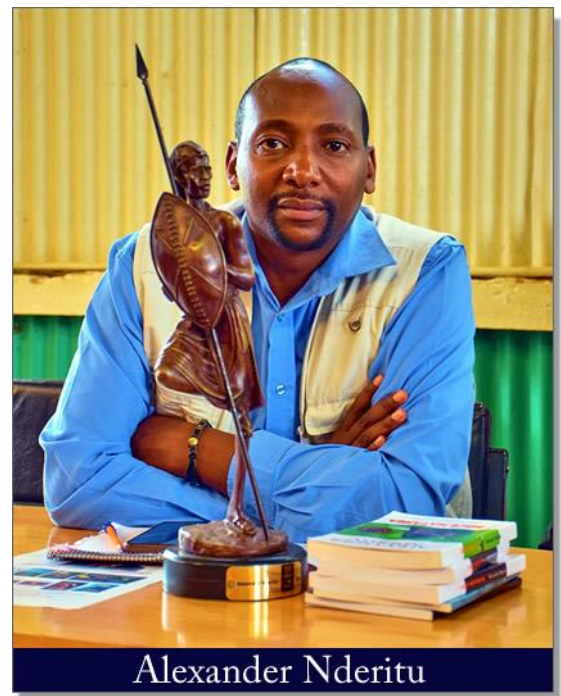
In the coming months, some new columnists and editors will be joining the team, from all over the world, so keep checking TheAfricanGriot.com every month for new issues.

As always, we are happy to receive feedback from our readers, and we'll try to respond to as many e-mails as we possibly can.

We're also open to receiving content from you, pertaining to arts and culture in Africa and her Diaspora. You may send in **articles, poems, artwork, photographs, short stories** or **press releases** addressed to The Editor.

And with that said, let me now exit – stage left – and let the magazine content take centre stage.

- Alexander Nderitu,
Editor-in-Chief



COVER STORY

CURTAINS: Farewell to Athol Fugard



Some of the Athol Fugard stage plays that were performed American theatres.

(Photo: Playbill.com)

Even though he was 92 at the time of his death, the news still sent shockwaves around the theatre world. Athol Fugard was a mainstay in the theatre scene, not just in South Africa but also in Europe and the United States. In 1985, *Time* magazine described him as 'the greatest active playwright in the English-speaking world'. He had achieved the rare feat of having had not one but several of his stage plays staged in Broadway's hallowed theatres. In addition to being the playwright, he sometimes also acted in or directed his works. Five plays he either scripted or co-scripted were nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play. In 2011, he was awarded a Special Tony Award Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre. A novel he wrote, titled *Tsotsi*, was turned into a movie that won an Academy Award in 2005. That same year, he received the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver from the government of South Africa in 2005 'for his excellent contribution and achievements in the theatre'. During an appearance on the American TV talk show *Charlie Rose* – which aired on 3/1/2012 – the host said of Fugard: 'His powerful dramatizations of life under apartheid have led many to call him the conscience of his country...He remains a powerful voice for freedom, equality and artistic expression.'

Athol Fugard was the closest thing Africa had to Nobel Prize Winner **Samuel Beckett**. Indeed, Fugard himself openly admitted that he considered himself an apprentice of Beckett in his early career.

Fugard was born Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard, in Middelburg, Cape Province, South Africa on 11 June 1932. His father, also named Harold Fugard, was of French, English and Irish descent while his mother, Marrie, was an Afrikaner (a South African of Dutch descent). Harold Fugard Sr was a cripple, having slid and fallen on a gangplank, far from medical help. Due to his disability, the musically-inclined Fugard senior had become disillusioned and was a heavy drinker. Athol's mother run several businesses in order to support the family, including a general store, a lodging house and a tea café.

By 1935, Athol's family moved to Port Elizabeth, where Athol attended Marist Brothers College. He studied philosophy and social anthropology at the University of Cape Town, but dropped out before graduating. In a documentary titled *Inside the Mind of Athol Fugard – A Master Playwright's Journey*, Athol said of his childhood:

‘I really spent my childhood and my adolescence, and my early manhood, growing up in Port Elizabeth. And circumstances were difficult for the Fugards. My father was an invalid - a cripple - so my mother was the breadwinner in the family...The experience of hard times in my own life have helped me understand the equivalent in other lives. I don’t regret any of those hard times. They, in fact, became my capital as a writer. And certainly provided me with a code, as a I say; with a *key* to understanding the type of people that I write about. Because if you look at my plays, my concern has always been with the destitute, the poor, the dispossessed. I am not conscious of that ever having been a choice on my side. It’s just as if I migrated naturally into a focus on desperate people in desperate circumstances.’

Athol attended Port Elizabeth Technical College for his secondary education from 1946 to 1950, then studied philosophy and social anthropology at the University of Cape Town on a scholarship. However, he dropped out of the university in 1953. In 1956, he married Sheila Meiring, a University of Cape Town Drama School alumni. Ironically, Athol initially wanted to be a prose writer. However, when he discovered the world of drama, he took to it ‘like a fish to water.’ His wife also became a writer. In *Inside the Mind of Athol Fugard*, Athol said:

‘Sheila asked me: “Why plays? Why not prose? Why not something else? Why is it always the theatre that attracts you?” And I suppose the truth of the matter is that *dialogue* – the *spoken word* – is something that I have a special feeling for. I have an ear for it. And I prefer to tell stories through spoken language rather than through written language...The fact that I can capture, fairly accurately, the vernacular, the idioms and rhythms of the various types of characters; that I can locate them so accurately in their milieu by way of the language that I use comes from the fact that I have a gift in that direction... It’s a question also of listening to language almost the way one listens to music. I have an enormous debt, as a writer, to music.’

In 1958, Athol and Sheila moved to Johannesburg, where Fugard worked as a clerk in a Native

Commissioners’ Court. That same year, organized ‘a multiracial theatre for which he wrote, directed, and acted’, writing and producing several plays for it, including *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959), in which he performed alongside black South African actor **Zakes Mokae**, performed. Athol would later say:

‘Those plays were a pure response to the vitality and the urgency of the life in the Black townships that Sheila and I discovered when we left Cape Town in the first year of our marriage and moved up to Johannesburg, and through a series of fortunate little accidents, we gained entry into the townships and into Sophiatown... Sheila and I were fortunate enough to become part of the life of Sophiatown. And it was an unbelievably exciting period because it was a watershed in Black literature – but certainly a watershed in my writing career and in Sheila’s writing career. But it was a watershed in terms of Black writing in South Africa because, at that time in Sophiatown, there was Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, there was Can Themba, there was Nat Nakasa. It was an incredibly vibrant, exciting period. The township racketeers were at their strongest, ANC (political party) was fighting for survival, young political movements were flexing their muscles. It was just vibrant. Terribly alive. And it was out of a response to that world – and the discovery of that world - that I wrote (the plays) *No Good Friday* and *Nongogo*.’

As is the case with almost all artistes, Athol initially struggled to find any commercial or critical success. To make matters worse, this was during Apartheid; a government system that required Whites and Blacks to live separately (“apart”). Athol refused to perform who ‘White audiences only’. In 1961, Athol debuted his first Fugard-style, *The Blood Knot*, at two-hander that examined the relationship between two brothers, one of whom was light-skinned enough to pass for white. Athol and Mokae starred as the brothers, Morris and Zachariah. Athol would later reminisce:

‘There is a moment in a writer’s life that you hear and discover your own voice for the first time...With *Blood Knot*... I realized that I was doing something suddenly with language. *No Good Friday* and *Nongogo* are both plays with fairly large casts. In the course of writing *The Blood Knot* – I can still remember the excitement still very vividly and I’m talking about a writing exercise of over thirty years ago – I can remember the excitement when I realized that I was finding a way of speaking in theatre that was unique to myself.’

Also in 1961, a group of anxious Black South African men turned up at Athol’s residence and requested him to help them get a theatre project going. They felt he had, ‘the know-how theatrically—the tricks, how to use the stage, movements, everything.’ Initially reluctant, Athol eventually too to the idea. The resulting collaboration would not only change Athol’s own writing style but change the face of South African drama forever!

Thus, the Serpent Players was formed. The name was inspired by their first venue, former snake pit at the Port Elizabeth Museum. The new theatre group including **Winston Ntshona** and **John Kani**, two actors who would go on to co-create and perform plays with Athol from South to the United States. While Serpent Players was indeed revolutionary, it wasn’t the only anti-apartheid platform for thespians. According to Athol:

‘The Space Theatre was South Africa’s first alternative theatre. If there had been no Space Theatre, there would have been no Market Theatre. The Space Theatre was the role model for all those courageous attempts at alternative theatre that have gone on to take place over the years...We must give (founders) Yvonne Bryceland and Brain Astbury credit for that. It was in the Space Theatre that Serpent Players got its first opportunity to showcase. The first performances of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* and *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* were done in the context of the Space Theatre in Cape Town.’

According to Loren Kruger, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago, ‘the Serpent Players used Brecht’s elucidation of gestic acting, dis-illusion, and social critique, as well as their own experience of the satiric comic routines of urban African vaudeville, to explore the theatrical force of Brecht’s techniques, as well as the immediate political relevance of a play about land distribution...’

The usual process of staging a performance usually begins with the playwright producing a script. For *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, two of Athol’s most famous works, the process was very different. Winston Ntshona, John Kani and Athol Fugard exchanged ideas and workshopped them, thus being all co-creators. Both plays bear Athol’s trademark minimalist style (usually only two performers) and dialogues/situations that spoke to the goings-on in South Africa at the time. Arguably, everything Athol wrote was inspired by specific happenings or observations in the world around him. For instance, his play *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* was inspired by a newspaper article that he read about a man and woman who were arrested for having interracial sexual intercourse. The fact that the apartheid regime could legislate such private matters seemed ridiculous to Athol. Another example of the playwright drawing from his real life is the play, ‘*Master Harold*’...*And The Boys* features a young white boy and two Black men who work in his mother’s restaurant. The play was ‘nakedly biographical’ and was inspired by the staff who worked at his mother’s tea place. It’s important to note that the White character (‘Master’) is a schoolboy while the workers are adults. The play’s world premiere was performed by **Danny Glover**, Željko Ivanek and Zakes Mokae, at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, in March 1982. In addition, *A Place With the Pigs* (1987) was inspired by the true story of World War II Soviet deserter who lived amongst his pigs for decades, to evade arrest. Similarly, *The Road to Mecca*, about an elderly recluse in a small South African town who has spends 15 years on an obsessive artistic project, was inspired a real-life artist called artist Helen Martins.



Athol Fugard in the "St. George's Park Tea Room", same setting as *"Master Harold"...And The Boys*.

(Image: Portrait by Martha Swope, 1985)

Criticism of Athol and his work was inevitable, given his skin colour and political stances, including publicly supporting the call of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain for an international boycott of racially segregated South African theatres. Both Whites and Blacks could find a reason to attack him. One criticism was that, as a descendant of White settlers, he had no mandate to write about Black people and issues. His response:

'I don't see that getting into the skin of another person whose colour happens to be different to mine is any more of a challenge than getting into the skin of another human being whose sex happens to be different to mine. I mean, to comprehend a *woman's* reality, as far as I'm concerned, requires as huge an imaginative leap as it does to comprehend what it means to be a Black man. And this is something that I always like to point out overseas when I am accused of a certain impertinence in writing about the Black people of South Africa because, after all, "How can you as a White person remotely understand what a Black man's reality is?" And I say to them, "By the same token, you must take away the right from me to write about women. You must ultimately take away from me the right to write about anybody other than myself!" My job, as an artist, is to exercise and to

keep my imagination strong enough to make those *leaps* out of my reality and into other realities...For me, it's a facility you have to have if you're going to be a writer.'

However, the more serious issues at the time was the tense social, political and economic situation brought about the minority-controlled Apartheid government. The Serpent Players crowd was often intimidated and spied on by government agents. In *Inside the Mind of Athol Fugard*, Athol said:

'At one point in South Africa I was... I suppose the best way of describing it would be to say *persona non grata* with the authorities. And getting plays represented a lot of problems. I mean, those early years of Serpent Players, for example, were plays where we were put under enormous pressure by the security police. My passport was taken away. I can remember any number of productions when we lost actors - on the eve of our first performances - by way of detentions. They were detained by the security police and ended up on Robben Island (Prison). There was a joke in Serpent Players at one stage that Robben Island was a suburb of New Brighton (in Porth Elizabeth) because New Brighton had lost so many of its people to "the island" by way of detention and trials and imprisonment...Making theatre under those circumstances was very, very difficult. In America, none of those situations prevailed and it was relatively easy to get a play onto the stage, by comparison.'

Owing to the difficulties of working in his home country, Athol took more and more of his stage productions and book publishing abroad. In the 1990s, Athol moved to the United States where he taught as an at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). In the academic year 2000–2001, he taught at Indiana University. He also gave lectures in numerous colleges around the world. He received honorary degrees from Yale University, Wittenberg University, University of the Witwatersrand, Brown University, Princeton University, and the University of Stellenbosch. In 2015, Athol and novelist Sheila Fugard divorced. In 2016, Athol married Paula Fourie, a writer and academic. In total, he had three children. Athol died at his home in Stellenbosch, Western Cape, South Africa, on 8 March 2025. 

ATHOL FUGARD'S BIBLIOGRAPHY

(In chronological order of first production and/or publication)

Klaas and the Devil (1956)
The Cell (1957)
No-Good Friday (1958)
Nongogo (1959)
The Blood Knot (1961); later revised and entitled Blood Knot (1987)
Hello and Goodbye (1965)
The Coat (1966)
People Are Living There (1968)
The Last Bus (1969)
Boesman and Lena (1969)
Friday's Bread on Monday (1970)
Sizwe Banzi Is Dead (1972) (developed with John Kani, and Winston Ntshona)
The Island (1972) (developed with John Kani, and Winston Ntshona)
Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act (1972)
Dimetos (1975)
Orestes (1978)
A Lesson from Aloes (1978)
The Drummer (1980)
"Master Harold"...and the Boys (1982)
The Road to Mecca (1984)
A Place with the Pigs (1987)
My Children! My Africa! (1989)
My Life (1992)
Playland (1993)
Valley Song (1996)
The Captain's Tiger: a memoir for the stage (1997)
Sorrows and Rejoicings (2001)
Exits and Entrances (2004)
Booitjie and the Oubaas (2006)
Victory (2007)
Coming Home (2009)
Have You Seen Us (2009)
The Train Driver (2010)
The Shadow of the Hummingbird (2014)
The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek (2016)
Concerning the Life of Babyboy Kleintjies (2022) (co-written with Paula Fourie)

Statement on the Passing of Global Great Athol Fugard

Issued by the South African Ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture

09-Mar-2025

It is with great sadness that the Minister of Sport, Arts, and Culture, Gayton McKenzie, extends his heartfelt condolences to the family, friends and the local and worldwide community of fans of legendary playwright, author and anti-apartheid activist Athol Fugard.

“South Africa has lost one of its greatest literary and theatrical icons, whose work shaped the cultural and social landscape of our nation. In a world divided by race, Fugard nurtured the careers of acting legends like Dr John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and was one of the founding fathers of the Market Theatre, which is today owned by government through the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture,” said the Minister.

The Minister added: “He sacrificed so many of his privileges to tell the story of South African pain under apartheid with honesty and bravery.”

Born Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard on 11 June 1932 in Middelburg, Eastern Cape, Fugard grew up in Port Elizabeth. Of Huguenot and Irish descent, he began his career as a freelance writer for the Evening Post before joining the SABC as a reporter.

*Initially drawn to acting, Fugard soon discovered his passion for writing and theatre. His first theatrical work, *The Rehearsal Room*, boldly rejected the segregationist policies of the time, featuring a multiracial cast at a time when apartheid laws sought to divide South Africans. This defiant stance led to many of his works being censored and banned by the government.*

*In 1958, he produced *No Good Friday*, starring alongside the esteemed Zakes Mokae, followed by *Nongogo (Prostitute)* in 1959. Returning to Port Elizabeth in the 1960s, he collaborated with *The Serpent Players*, an innovative theatre group that performed in unconventional spaces, including an abandoned zoo snake pit. It was with this group that he wrote *The Blood Knot* (1961), his first internationally acclaimed play.*

*By the mid-1960s, Fugard had pioneered a workshop-style approach to playwriting, co-creating some of South Africa’s most powerful theatrical works, including *The Coat* (1966), *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972), and *The Island* (1973). His 1969 play *Boesman and Lena*, in which he performed alongside Yvonne Bryceland, was a direct challenge to the apartheid regime, resulting in the revocation of his passport. However, when restrictions were later eased, he travelled to England to direct the play.*

Tsotsi, his only novel, was published in 1980 but written some time earlier, was the basis of the 2005 film of the same name, which won an Oscar for Best International Feature Film.

*Throughout the 1980s, Fugard’s influence expanded internationally, with his works widely studied and performed in Europe and the United States. His 1980 play, *A Lesson from Aloes*, won the prestigious New York Critics Circle Award. During this time, he also collaborated with John Kani and Winston Ntshona on *The Statement Plays* and portrayed Jan Smuts in the acclaimed film *Gandhi* (1982). His most renowned play, *Master Harold ... and the Boys* (1982), remains one of the greatest works of the 20th century, earning multiple international awards, including the Drama Desk Award and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Play.*

*After more than a decade without a South African premiere, Fugard’s *My Children! My Africa!* (1989) marked his return to the country’s theatre scene. In the 1990s, he continued producing thought-provoking works such as *Playland* (1992) and *My Life* (1994), which addressed South Africa’s transition to democracy. His later works included *The Captain’s Tiger* (1999) and *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2001). In 2012, he embraced Afrikaans theatre, co-writing *Die Laaste Karretjiegraf* (2013), and saw many of his works translated into various languages, including Spanish.*

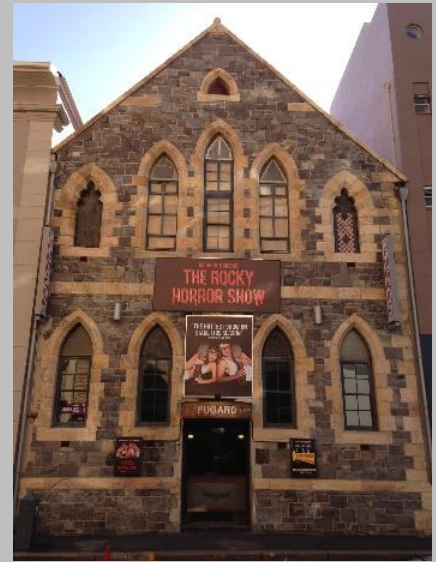
He was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 2001 and received South Africa's Order of Ikhamanga in Silver in 2005 for his outstanding contributions to theatre. His legacy was further cemented with the opening of The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town in 2010, a venue dedicated to producing and hosting world-class performances.

Throughout his lifetime, Fugard received numerous accolades, including multiple Tony Awards, the Fleur du Cap Lifetime Achievement Award (2000), and the South African Vita Award for Lifetime Achievement (1998). He was a fellow of the British Royal Society of Literature and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

"Athol Fugard was a fearless storyteller who laid bare the harsh realities of apartheid through his plays, giving a voice to those silenced by oppression. His impact on South African theatre and the global stage is immeasurable, and his legacy will continue to resonate for generations," said Minister McKenzie.

"We were cursed with apartheid, but blessed with great artists who shone a light on its impact and helped to guide us out of it. We owe a huge debt to this late, wonderful man."

The Minister added that Fugard's death should be used as an opportunity for all South Africans to be reminded of his enormous contribution through the arts, to reflect on the insights, tragedy, humanity and tenderness of his works, and to be united in the call to keep building a better, more cohesive country in freedom together.



Athol Fugard in his later years (left) and The Fugard Theatre in District Six, Cape Town.

(Photos: The Fugard Theatre)

FEATURE ARTICLES

MADD, MADD WORLD! Exclusive Interview With Paul Kelemba



*A scene from 'African Twist', written by Paul Kelemba, produced by Tabu Osusa and directed by Martin Kigundu.
(Photo: Steenie Njoroge)*

Paul Kelemba writes and illustrates the 35-year-old weekly full-page composite cartoon feature *It's a Madd, Madd World* under the penname of **Maddo**. It is a satirical look at politics, society, culture and the arts in *The Saturday Standard* of Kenya. Born in Nairobi in 1962, he has worked for various publications as a cartoonist and illustrator, including *The Daily Nation*, along with several other publications and periodicals. He generates IEC materials for UN agencies' reforms programs, civil society organizations as well as short, themed comics on behalf of Cartoon Movement, among others. He wrote and illustrated *Miguel Sede*, a popular action hero comic strip for *The Sunday Standard* in the 1990s. The compilation, *It's a Madd Madd World 2007-2011; The Hot Years* was published in 2012. He is a founding member of Ketebul Music which researches, documents and archives East African music genres. He also sits on the board at Buni Media Limited, a television content producer, and has hosted the retrospective music program Maddo's Goldies on KBC Radio's English Service.

The artist has received several awards, among them: Kenya@50 Heroes Award: Outstanding Contribution to Kenya's History (Kenyatta University, 2013), The CNN Multichoice African Journalist Awards (GE Energy & Infrastructure Category, 2015), The Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Order of the Knight of Arts and

Letters, French Government, 2022) and The Lifetime Contribution in Journalism Award (Media Council of Kenya, 2022). He is a Bellagio Center Residency alumnus.

The African Griot Review caught up with him on Opening Day of his hit musical play, *African Twist*, and secured the following interview...

African Griot Review: What, or whom, inspired you to start drawing cartoons?

Paul Kelemba: My art is inborn, coming from a family of creatives. However, of course, one needs the guidance of established artists to cultivate their own style. I read lots of kids' comics from the Global North, along with what was available from the development of our region's comics and still art which was pretty nascent in my youth.

The comics included *Beano*, *Dandy*, *Topper*, *Richie Rich* and others. They were supplied by my father and older siblings, all fervent consumers of comics. What really captured my attention was *Mad Magazine of New York* - whose print run has sadly come to an end after decades, though publication continues online. Another comic that nurtured my art was *Modesty Blaise* written by Peter O'Donnell and illustrated by the Spanish artist Romero. I also owe a lot to the creator of the character Lance Spearman of the 1970s South African photo-comics series *Film*. His name was Jim Bailey. Locally, I admired the comic strip *Juba Kalulu* by Edward Gitau. The artist who was to help develop my skills in production of editorial cartoons was Terry Hirst who was behind the *Hirst on Friday* cartoon and Picha Hadithi Comics series.

I started off developing comics – not exactly cartoons - my characters were real life before switching to cartoons thanks to former Fleet Street journalist Brian Tetley who also encouraged me to use a pen name (hence Maddo).

AGR: Can you remember the first cartoon you drew and how old you were at the time?

PK: I wouldn't really remember my first cartoon. I drew throughout my early school years (much to the chagrin of some teachers). But I recall one cartoon – or illustration as it were – depicting a man in deep thought. I sent it to the children's magazine *Rainbow* which was edited by Fleur Ngweni, wife to *Weekly Review* publisher Hilary Ngweni. She published it and I gained early 'celeb' status in school; the year was 1977. I was 14 and in Form One.

AGR: Your body of work as a cartoonist is impressive and your style very unique. I can tell a Maddo cartoon in a newspaper just by looking at it. Did you get any formal education in fine arts or illustrations at any point of your career?

PK: No. As I've mentioned, my endowment is congenital. But that alone won't turn one into an accomplished artist without influence from the world. Education in fine arts refines one. Unfortunately for me, all the schools I attended, beside kindergarten and lower primary, did not offer art classes. In my self-training, I studied the work of various artists in order to develop my own and eventually foster a distinct, individual style. Let me mention that, we early African media artists, heavily influenced by characters from the West, tended to lean towards Caucasian features in the characters we generated. It was a struggle to wean ourselves off that and appreciate African values in our artwork.

I work today with many young artists who have graduated from institutions offering art. One can observe that, despite natural creativity, school enhances one's discipline in one's career. Somehow, along with a good number of others, I escaped that avenue to gain eventual recognition. Actually, there are countless artists who are self-taught strewn across history.

AGR: At one point you had a graphic-novel-esque series called *Miguel Sede* in a local newspaper. What happened to this initiative or is it continuing in a comic book somewhere?

PK: *Miguel Sede* was an action hero that I developed with stimulation from Modesty Blaise and her partner in fighting crime, Willy Garvin. I am a story teller, really, and did try my hand at writing fiction in my teenage. The values that I hold in life helped build the Sede character – an investigative journalist who went beyond filing reports on corruption and crime to physically dismantling evil networks. He was a retired military man and a combat specialist.

The comic feature was published throughout the 1990s by *The Standard* newspaper. It was discontinued in 2001 for reasons I can only disclose in my biography. You must pardon me. I intend to publish the series someday soon especially that, with today's digital spaces, publishing is a lot simpler than it was a couple of decades ago. And, yes, we did make an attempt to have Sede make a comeback, written by Edward Gakuya and illustrated by Maurice Odede. A later-day version that would appeal to the current audiences.

AGR: You've had a very long career. Apart from newspapers, where else has your work appeared, locally or abroad?

PK: Well, yes, it's been a stretch. My composite cartoon feature *It's a Madd, Madd World* is entering its 36th year. My career spans four decades. My work has been exhibited in Finland, Germany and Tanzania. I have attended forums by virtue of my work in Japan, Italy, Estonia, Tanzania and elsewhere. Besides producing cartoons for print media, I am a board member at Buni Media - this is a television content provider. I belong to the music research outfit Ketebul Music as well.

AGR: In 2025, you made a surprise entry into the world of theatre as the playwright behind *African Twist: The Soundtrack of Kenya's Independence*. How did this musical project come about and what was your role in it?

PK: As I've indicated, I did try my hand at writing as young dude. I have always aspired to write some fiction account, either a book or a stage play, but drawing cartoons became my mainstay. I should stress that I can never compare myself to accomplished playwrights. But I have had a tremendous interest in theatre – in fact many close friends of mine belong to this trade. I have been able to watch countless plays giving me the opportunity to study their composition and delivery.

I joined Ketebul Music at its inception in 2007. The institution carries out research on indigenous music genres of Eastern Africa and we have published a number of documentaries and books. One of the areas of our study is Kenya's early music development. As such, under its founder, music producer Tabu Osusa, we have examined the lives, careers, music styles and inspirations of various musicians, music producers, audiences and mediums.

With the rapidly evolving social scene in Kenya, young people are beginning to raise questions about their history with answers that are not forthcoming from their political leaders, teachers and parents. The young generation – the now famous GenZ – are known for impatience in consumption of historical information, preferring brief, exciting, yet explanatory narratives, to devour historical data.

Tabu and I thought it would be a great service to present an aspect of Kenya's sociopolitical history through visuals. Having produced documentaries, text articles and even hosted live music concerts with specific themes, we settled on a play, drawing from the vast research and archive we have built. Tabu is an author in his own right but we elected that I generate the script based on my knowledge in storyboarding comics which involve a series of speech balloons – an outright dialogue progression not commonly thought of as such. We wanted a unique storyline as

well. We write music stuff, but this wouldn't be enough. So, we tossed in politics, crime and romance against the background of a young, emerging nation full of hope after colonization. The spine was, of course, twist music. Our director, Martin Kigundu, played a huge role in the overall presentation.

It is this combination that, perhaps, drew curious audiences. The young came to find out what exactly this twist thing was, what story could be told about the 'ancient' dance style and how it resonated with their present trends. The old came for purely nostalgic purposes. We sought to employ the area we are strong in; live music. We incorporated three professional instrumentalists to back the cast. It was a young cast that corresponded with the average age of the real-life individuals we were featuring. We were at pains to remind reviewers that this was not a musical (which we couldn't have managed at the time) but rather just a play... with live music.



A scene from 'African Twist' which debuted at the Alliance Française de Nairobi. (Photo: Steenie Njoroge)

AGR: The attendance and reviews for *African Twist*, during its premier at the Alliance Française de Nairobi were great. Are there any plans to showcase the play in other parts of the country or even abroad?

PK: We were honestly, pleasantly surprised by the turnout. After the premiere night, which was in tandem with a diplomatic event, the show registered house full runs with video stream overflows. Yes, Ketebul Music is looking at the possibilities of a re-run or two, in Nairobi and a down or upcountry town. Abroad? No... not now. That's something many dream of. Perhaps, when we have proven ourselves and enhanced the presentation, we could begin to imagine that. I wouldn't rule it out. Right now, we shall play within our league.

AGR: Do you intend to continue writing plays, or being otherwise involved in live theatre?

PK: It's not a bad idea. The subject of music, politics and society is vast with fathomless aspects of potentially awesome, dramatized chronicles. Yes, I intend to write another play with a not too dissimilar theme. Live theatre will remain traditional for a very long time as other sectors in art and culture take on different paths.

AGR: As the title of your long-running graphic journalism column suggests, "It's a Madd, Madd World", what are some of the craziest reactions or threats you have received for your caricatures over the years?

PK: Well, that's quite a long story. In a cocoon, there have been several incidents of intimidation in this perilous work in a country with successive regimes hostile to and bent on muzzling freedom of speech, media space, dissent and critics. I did my part in the journey to Kenya's Second Liberation in the early 1990s through my cartoon commentary and work with civil society. Phone calls were made, direct threats were issued and later email was used to deliver messages from those not happy with what I was doing. I came out rattled but unscathed.

The promise of the law being upheld and the right to publish divergent opinions respected, as offered by the 2010 Constitution, is now evidently short lived. The country is experiencing a slide back to the era of a system that does not believe in anything outside itself. This is a package that consists of a ruthless leader who desires absolute power and parroting lieutenants. In recent times, the horizon is beginning to look even gloomier with government intolerance to social media.

There have been lots of awesome moments as well in my career. A number of my cartoons have been well received with wide acclaim.

AGR: Artificial Intelligence is where it is at nowadays. Have you paid any attention to its encroachment in your field of graphics and cartoons, and do you think it's going to be a blessing or a curse in your profession?

PK: I and my colleagues have welcomed this new stride in how images are generated and disseminated. AI is a powerful tool that we must embrace just like we have done every step in technological advances over the past century. Employed well, it works well. It has lessened the work load we have. Remember, drawing pictures is a laborious process. Even PhotoShop was regarded as a threat by 'traditionalists' but eventually accepted.

The downside of Artificial Intelligence is the laziness it has introduced in creativity. I always contend that digital tools should supplement our output and not take over our ability to think, ability to create. The other negative is, of course, one's ability today to generate misleading images and context. With traditional tools, it was an uphill task to mold a fake that would fool audiences. Right now, it is almost impossible to distinguish between faux and vérité. However, the human brain has survived millennia of scientific innovation and is not about to fade away. 

'How does one describe drama? Drama is life with the dull bits cut out.'
- Alfred Hitchcock, 1960 BBC TV interview

BROADWAY: Art, Race & Money



A screengrab from the inter-racial Broadway play 'Stick Fly'

'Broadway' refers to a community of about 40 theatres all located near each other in New York City. It is the unofficial 'capital' of commercial theatre not only in America but the world over. The highest honour a thespian can win on Broadway (and therefore the world) is a Tony Award. New York is itself a very artistic city: it is also a publishing powerhouse (think *The New York Times* Bestseller List) and one of the four fashion capitals of the world (alongside London, Paris and Milan). The productions on Broadway reflect the artistry and cosmopolitanism of this world-famous city.

Star Power

Getting a play on Broadway is no mean feat and at the very least, it will cost a small fortune. To aid success, it helps if you have established lead actors or, in the case of a musical, hit songs or famous singers (eg. Green Day, Abba, Motown). For instance, a biographical musical on the life of late Nigerian musician **Fela Kuti** made it to Broadway after Black entertainers **Jay-Z**, **Will Smith** and **Jada Pinkett** gave it their backing. Titled *Fela!*, the play is set in a replica of Fela Kuti's Shrine nightclub in Lagos and seeks to chronicle

the controversial artiste's physical and spiritual sojourns. The often-bare-chested Fela Kuti (best known for the Afro-beat song *Beng Beng Beng*) was at one time at the pinnacle of African music. The play, of course, features Fela's hit songs, some of which are very entertaining but others which I personally just wanted to end. The performances are very energetic and one online reviewer wondered how the performers are able to keep it up for over two hours, every night. However, there has been some criticism to the effect that *Fela!* doesn't truly reveal Kuti's true colours, especially in regards to women. While in the play he acknowledges his obsession with sex and other 'sweet' things, the true extent of his hedonism is not revealed. A man of controversy, Fela Kuti shunned condoms and was once married to twenty-seven women at once (before 'settling' with twelve). He died of AIDS in 1996 and his Shrine nightclub was closed. *Fela!*, the musical, garnered largely positive reviews in America.

Process

The path to Broadway usually starts with an idea – the more unique the better. Sometimes, an idea sounds crazy

but it works. For example, in the documentary *Showbusiness: The Road to Broadway*, one can see a circle of New York critics disparaging the upcoming *Avenue Q* show, a comic musical that involves hand puppets: 'Who is the audience for this?' they ask. (The creators of the show perceived it as a kind of 'Sesame Street for adults'). When the show finally premiered, it was an immediate success and not only floored critic-favoured heavyweights like *Wicked* (co-starring Broadway's sweetheart Kristen Chenoweth) but won the most coveted Broadway trophy: Best Musical.

After the initial concept, the team is assembled. For example, if the show is a musical, then the creators will ask who are the best lyricists and composers they can lure (on the strength of the idea, the creator's credentials etc). The same goes for the cast: do we hold auditions, lure a star performer etc? Once the basic team is identified (including stars who have only indicated willingness to join the project eg. if the funding is secured, or the timing doesn't conflict with other projects), then the backing of a very important person (or very important persons) is sought. This entity is The Producer. Broadway shows are so expensive that without a serious investor/producer/benefactor, it's very unlikely that you will achieve your goal.

The show then goes into workshop. Here the script is worked on, songs are composed or altered, dance sequences are created or rehearsed and so on. The various aspects of the production are 'worked out': the stage design, costumes, lead actors, understudies, backup singers/dancers (aka 'the ensemble') etc. Potential investors/producers may be invited to the final rehearsals get an idea of what the show is about.

The shows then go into 'previews'. They are shown to a limited audience (either paying or invited). This is very important. Like I said, Broadway shows are usually big budget productions and it is a good idea to sample public opinion before wasting a fortune on a 'turkey' (flop). In marketing, a 'preview' would be called a 'focus group'. A show can have multiple previews before the 'real thing' official opens. A fan watching a preview need not fear that he is pre-empting the real thing.

So many things are likely to be changed/added/removed due to feedback that the final show will most likely be much better than the preview. Some shows/tours have been cancelled due to negative reaction to the previews (Why throw money away on something with poor odds of succeeding?) You can see an example of this in the documentary, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*. In it, the then 75-year-old comedian and TV host is planning to stage a one-woman Broadway show based on her long career in showbiz. After previews of her show, *Joan Rivers: A Work in Progress from a Life in Progress*, get lukewarm reviews in the UK, she abandons the idea of a New York run. (In her youth, she had once participated in a Broadway show that tanked and she wanted very badly to avoid that experience again!)

Race

'Mike Tyson had a one man show / Let's give the man a hand...' sung Neil Patrick Harris in the 2013 Tony Awards opening performance. The one-man show referenced was *Undisputed Truth*, a soul-searching self-narrative by former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson, directed (for stage) by famed Black film director **Spike Lee** (*Malcolm X*, *Do The Right Thing*, *He Got Game*). Bearing in mind that African Americans are a minority in the US, it is safe to say that there has been a healthy number of Black-oriented and Black-led shows on Broadway, as well as Black Tony Award nominees and winners over the decades. Well-known Broadway shows with all-Black or mostly-Black casts have included:

- *Ain't Misbehavin'* (musical)
- *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* (musical)
- *Cabin in the Sky* (musical)
- *The Colour Purple*
- *Dreamgirls* (musical)
- *Eclipsed*
- *Fences*
- *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues* (musical)
- *Porgy and Bess*
- *Sarafina!* (musical)
- *A Raisin in the Sun*
- *Timbuktu!* (musical)
- *Voodoo Macbeth*

- *The Wiz*
- *Jelly's Last Jam* (musical)
- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuff* ('choreopoem')

More recent shows include:

- *Radio Golf* (which grossed USD \$1.8 million in an eleven-week run)
- *Gem of the Ocean* (A play by August Wilson)
- *Fela!* (A musical based on the life of Nigerian singer Fela Kuti)
- *Undisputed Truth* (A biographical one-man show performed by former pugilist Mike Tyson)
- *Stick Fly* (Produced by R&B singer Alicia Keys)
- *The Mountaintop* (A fictionalized account of Martin Luther King Jr's last evening alive)

Business

Below is an example of the kind of box office business that Broadway does. The list shows the gross earnings of some Broadway plays for a single week, in US dollars, compiled by Michael Mellini for Broadway.com:

1. *The Lion King* (\$1,870,584)
2. *Wicked* (\$1,776,282)
3. *The Book of Mormon* (\$1,742,062)
4. *Motown* (\$1,354,876)
5. *Lucky Guy* (\$1,343,042)
6. *Rock of Ages* (\$377,408)
7. *The Assembled Parties* (\$373,576)
8. *Macbeth* (\$287,116)
9. *The Big Knife* (\$256,480)
10. *Ann* (\$195,459)

According to a *Black Enterprise* magazine article titled 'The Business of Broadway', written by Carolyn M. Brown, about 76% of all Broadway theatre-goers are White, the rest being 'people of colour.' Black patronage peaked at 6.7% in 2007 during a season that included *The Colour Purple*. In 2009, Black theatre-goers accounted for a paltry 2.6% of that year's 12.2 million ticket buyers.

'A salesman has got to dream - it goes with the territory.'

- Broadway producer Paul Nichols, accepting a Tony Award for the revival of *Death of a Salesman*

Seeing how little the Black community contributes to the bottom line, it would be unfair to describe Broadway of racism. In fact, Broadway is arguably a model of inclusion. Apart from Blacks and other minority (sub)races in America, Broadway has also shown admirable tolerance for other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ community.

Lessons

Finally, what can African theatre stakeholders learn from Broadway? Hosting Broadway performances at the White House, then US President **Barack Obama** once said:

'Over the years, musicals have also been at the front of our social consciousness, challenging stereotypes, shaping our opinions about race and religion, death and disease, power and politics. But perhaps the most important part of this truly American art form is its optimism. Broadway music calls us to see the best in ourselves and in the world around us. To believe that no matter how hopeless things may seem, the nice guy can still get the girl, the hero can still triumph over evil and a brighter day can be waiting just around the bend.'

We should borrow a leaf (or the whole book) from Broadway if we truly desire to stage productions that can generate substantial revenue and thus create employment for the thousands of creative people out there (especially youths) who crave an artistic outlet, in spite of whatever else they might be doing (school, work etc). And the time is now. In the words of **Tyler Perry** (who started out in theatre before branching off into films and TV series:

'We don't have to wait for someone to green light our (Black people's) projects, we can create our own intersection.'

And on writing:

'I don't really think in terms of racial experiences any more. Even though I'm a Black man writing plays and movies with Black people in them, the themes are universal.'



Tyler Perry at the Tony Awards

Certainly, there's a lot we can glean from 'The Great White Way' - as Broadway is sometimes referred to owing to all the lights and neon signs that illuminate the street. (Which, incidentally, was originally a Native American trail that ran the length of Manhattan.) It is the Mecca of the theatre world. As British actress and writer **Cush Jumbo** put it: 'If your church is the theatre, New York means a lot - it's a pilgrimage you want to make.'

'I wasn't trying to start a revolution or anything. It was just the way I did it, and I didn't go around insisting this is the way it should be done. I just go, "This is me and that's you, and I like your play and the way you did it, that's cool, but this is the way I do it." So many people said I couldn't do it that way, but I just persisted.

Like I say, it turned out good. It didn't have to turn out that way, but people saw a value in it.'

- August Wilson, American playwright and poet with a Broadway theatre named after him.

(Considered by some to be 'the American William Shakespeare'.)

'One thing I don't need is any more apologies. I got sorry greeting me at my front door, you can keep yours. I don't know what to do with them. They don't open doors or bring the sun back; they don't make me happy or get a morning paper.' — From Ntozake Shange's, 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf'

A photograph of an African man with long dreadlocks, wearing a green and yellow garment, looking upwards with a contemplative expression.

Been to a great music concert, stage play, fashion show or other cultural event and you'd like to write a review about it?

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FAILING FORWARD: Musical Theatre in Kenya



A scene from a Nairobi Performance Arts Studio production of 'Sarafina!' (Photo: NPAS)

Indigenous Kenyan musicals are so rare that a few of them, coming out in the last two decades, have each claimed to be 'the first Kenyan musical.' However, the musical most widely acknowledged to be the local pioneer is *Ondieki the Fisherman* which was written by Francis Chandler, a teacher at Limuru Girls' High School, in the early seventies. *Ondieki* tells the tragic story of a foolish fisherman living along the shores of Lake Victoria, who ultimately drowns as a result of not mending his nets. Commenting on a revival celebrating the show's 40th anniversary, theatre critic Anne Manyara made the following remarks in the *The East African* newspaper:

'The music is melodic and pleasant to listen to, even for an audience that is not well acquainted with opera, perhaps because it has more arias ("proper" songs) and choruses than recitatives (singing that sounds more like speaking).'

A more successful and famous indigenous musical is *Mo Faya: The Musical*, written and composed by afro-fusion artiste Eric Wainaina. Originally titled *Lwanda - Man of Stone*, *Mo Faya* was widely performed in Kenya and was also staged at the New York Theatre Festival in 2008. It tells the story of the neglected people of a fictional slum called Kwa Maji and the valiant efforts of a DJ named Lwanda to uplift the community. The cast included musicians Carol Atemi, Dan 'Chizi' Aceda, Tusker Project Fame winner Valerie Kimani and Eric Wainaina himself, playing the lead role of DJ Lwanda. The production earned him a Sundance Institute fellowship.

Eric Wainaina has also been at the helm of another successful musical: *Tinga Tinga Tales*. Evidently aimed at a young audience, *Tinga Tinga Tales* features animal characters that live in a colourful world imbued with music and dance. Wainaina is the music director and composer, and played the lead role of Monkey.

Other notable cast members have included diminutive singer Phy Ng'etich, veteran thespian John Sibi-Okumu, soul diva Atemi Oyungu, and mellow-voiced singer Tetu Shani. The choreography was done by Mkamzee Mwatela. The musical was staged in Kenya as well as New Victory Theater in New York City, USA. During the American run, Eric Wainaina stirred some controversy by chiding the Brand Kenya board for lack of support. In a video shared via his Twitter handle, he asked 'Our musical is showing in New York City. Brand Kenya, what have you done?' and the crowd around him replied, 'Nothing!' The show did, however, have some corporate backing, with Safaricom Ltd and Dalbit Petroleum sponsoring it to the tune of Ksh 10,000,000 and Kshs 8,000,000 respectively.



A screengrab from 'Tinga Tinga Tales'

Musicals have been performed in Kenya for decades but these have been mainly foreign productions like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Annie*, *Les Miserables*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It is probably due to the lack of local musical productions that the form is yet to be understood, leave alone perfected. For example, in an article titled, 'The Musical That Never Was', Anne Manyara, a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics, gave the following stinging critique concerning a so-called musical staged at the now-defunct Phoenix Theatre in Nairobi:

'Musical theatre combines music, drama and dance in equal measure while the Phoenix production was simply a concert that would have been better suited for any of the Jamhuri Day parties that we are just recovering from. The quote "Let's sing our way out of this," attributed to Mexican poet Isabel Fraire, could have inspired "Kenya at 50", Phoenix Players' end-of-year musical, which I watched on December 4. The performance, described on the poster as an original musical, is supposed to be a musical

history of Kenya from the days "before there was a flag" to the present day. It is performed by talented and energetic artists — who would probably have a thriving career in the music industry — but it is not musical theatre...'

My own gripe concerning musicals staged in Kenya is that virtually every single one is an importation. For example, the popular South Africa apartheid-era musical drama *Sarafina!* was first staged in Kenya in 2003 and has been severally revived. In 2010, brothers Peter and Paul Oyier of Sterling Entertainment Productions stages *Sarafina!* in Kenya (with a local cast) and even brought SA actress Leleti Khumalo (who starred in the movie version alongside Whoopie Goldberg) to the premiere. In 2018, the Nairobi Performance Arts Studio, helmed by Briton Stuart Nash, staged *Sarafina!* at the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi. The cast included educator Hellen Mtawali (best known for her coaching role in the *Tusker Project Fame* reality show), diplomat-turned-musician Gilad Millo and popular actress Brenda Wairimu. It was directed by Stuart Nash.

Another musical that NPAS has brought to the Kenya National Theatre is *Jesus Christ Superstar*, directed by Nash and starring Dan 'Chizi' Aceda, Makamzee Mwatela and Mugambi Thiga, among others. Like *Sarafina!*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* has been performed locally before. I deliberately avoided watching both of the revivals because, despite the heavy marketing attendant to them, they failed to spark my interest, either as a playwright or a critic. I already know what happens in every scene. I can sing most of the songs in *Jesus Christ Superstar* off-head. And as for *Sarafina!*, it's not like anything is going to have changed the umpteenth time you watch it. Sarafina will not be transformed into a Kenyan schoolgirl fighting against gov't oppression in the schools and streets of Nairobi. Such changes would be illegal. Other foreign musicals that have been recently performed here include *Aladdin* by Hoodwink9, *Grease the Musical* by Nairobi Performance Arts Studio, *Cinderella the Musical* by Aperture Africa Productions, *The Sound of Music* by Silver Stage Musicals under the banner of Sterling Quality Entertainment, *Robin Hood the Musical* by Aperture Africa Productions, *Annie the Musical* by Nairobi Performance Arts Studio, *Simba* by Hoodwink9, *Robin Hood* by Aperture Africa Productions, and *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Nairobi Performance Arts Studio.

While I understand the entertainment value of the foreign shows named above, and appreciate the Herculean efforts it took each one to be staged in East Africa, I have to question their relevance to local audiences, and their contribution to our culture. Of what relevance, for instance, is *Grease* to 'Wanjiku'? Sure, *Grease* – an American show that debuted in Chicago in 1971 – may be quite entertaining, and the inclusion of names such as 'Kaz' Lucas, Nice Githingi, Nick Ndeda and Elsaphan Njora might convince Nairobi theatre-goers to give it a try, but aren't we missing an opportunity here by promoting foreign lifestyles? I would argue that *Obama the Musical*, which was staged here by Tone Theatre Productions, was far more relevant and deserving of promotion. Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, has Kenyan roots and presenting his story to live audiences would undoubtedly inspire young children to dream big; to believe that they, too, can make it. What would *Grease* inspire our school-going children to do? Put more oil in their hair? Engage in teenage rebellion? Wear shiny black biker jackets? In a January 2018 article titled 'Year of the Musical', journalist George Orido reported that Aperture Africa's production of *Robin Hood*, which was staged at the Visa Oshwal Centre, cost a whopping Kshs 5,000,000. The same year that *Robin Hood* was staged, an indigenous musical titled *Kwe Kaliet* debuted at the Aga Khan Hall in Kisumu City. *Kwe Kaliet* is a re-telling of the popular legend of Lwanda Magere and it incorporates Dholuo and Kalenjin languages. How's that for cultural relevance? Why couldn't the 5 million that was sunk into *Robin Hood* have gone to *Kwe Kaliet*? Why do we invest so much in foreign material?

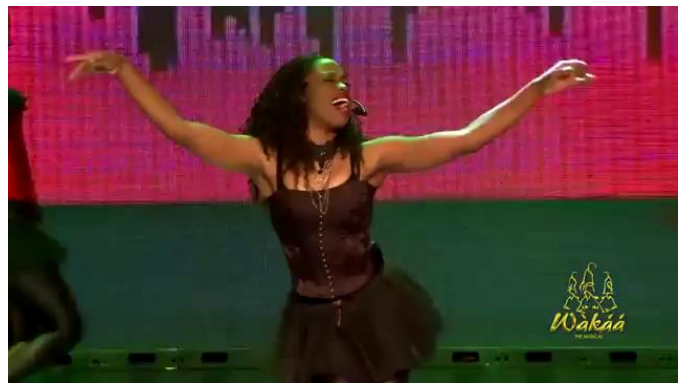
Some might argue that home-grown productions have no chance of competing on the global stage. I beg to differ. We have several examples of African musicals that earned global recognition. These include *Winnie the Opera*, *Wakaa the Musical* and *Fela!*. *Winnie the Opera* is about Nelson Mandela's estranged wife, Winnie Madikezela-Mandela. The show premiered in 2011 and starred Tsakane Maswanganyi as Winnie. The production had a 65-piece orchestra and songs in English and Xhosa.

It was produced by Mfundli Vundla (creator of SA's popular *Generations* soap opera) and the composer was Bongani Ndodana-Breen. Rather than dwell on Winnie's

famous husband, the blockbuster play instead focused on her own inner and outer struggles.

Wakaa the Musical is a vibrant Nigerian production that was staged both in Nigeria and at the Shaw Theatre in London's West End. In an interview with Silverbird TV, the show's producer, Bolanle Austen-Peters said:

'We want to start celebrating ourselves, and telling our stories to the outside world. And I think another important point is that we want people to see the level of creativity we have in Nigeria.'



A screengrab from a video of 'Wakaa the Musical'

Fela!, a musical on the life of Nigerian 'Afrobeats' pioneer Fela Kuti, which was a hit on Broadway. In an interview on TV's *The JSO Interview*, Kenyan thespian, comedian and radio personality Daniel 'Churchill' Ndambuki made the following remarks concerning *Fela!*:

'I went to watch *Fela!* on Broadway...That's a Nigerian play...For me even to get the ticket to watch the play was such a difficult task. Eventually, I got in...The audience was comprised (sic) of "wazungus", White people. Nigerians were very few. And the play had a lot of Nigerian, Igbo stuff, even the singing. And I kept asking myself, is it that we (Kenyans) don't have African stories that we can share with the rest of the world? Why can't we have a Kikuyu play come up here? We can put a little bit of English here and there. Why can't we do it here?... I think we have better stories to share – just like Nigeria with the Fela story...When I came back to Kenya, I asked myself, why can't we move from where we are? The slapstick stuff is great. I am part of it. But how do you move to the next level?...

Theatre is an experience. You're coming to get an experience. It's not a by-the-way. People have rehearsed for two months for you to come and enjoy for two-and-a-half hours.'



Thespians John Sibi-Okumu (left) and 'Churchill' Ndambuki on TV's 'The JSO Interview'

Which brings me to my recommendations. Rather than import stories from the West, what we should do - moving forward - is invest in our own stories; create our own musicals. Only then can we use this art form to promote our culture and counter negative stereotypes. We are a country that exports raw coffee beans and imports packed coffee at outrageous prices. We export pyrethrum and import insect sprays. We don't process our own raw materials and export the finished products, and that's part of the reason why youth unemployment is so astronomically high. Theatre, and the performance arts in general, can employ many talented and enthusiastic youths, and promote our national brand at the same time.

Since musicals are an American invention, we clearly have a long way to go before we can reach Broadway standards. But the way to go is not to borrow shows wholesale and then force-feed them to locals: it's **to learn the art of the musical and then apply those lessons to our own stories.** One musical I would highly recommend as an object of study for Kenyan thespians in pursuit of musicals is *Barnum*; a stage production based on the life of showman P. T. Barnum.

The script was written by Mark Bramble, lyrics by Michael Stewart, and music by Cy Coleman. The production combines elements of traditional musical theatre with the spectacle of the circus. The characters include jugglers, trapeze artists and clowns, as well as representations such as real-life personalities as Joice Heth (once 'the oldest woman alive') and General Tom Thumb (once 'the smallest living adult man'). **The musical performances are the heart and soul of the production.** The characters' thoughts, ambitions, arguments, philosophies and emotions are all played out in song. To cut out the songs from the show would be to miss the whole bus (A parallel can be drawn with *Evita*, where the music is really where fun is at.) Right off the bat, there are three things about the songs that are admirable:

1. They are all relevant to the given situation and true to the real-life of Phineas T. Barnum eg. The first song, *There is a Sucker Born Ev'ry Minute*, is a famous quote attributed to Barnum.
2. They 'stand alone' - each song has its own tempo, beat and 'colour'. Some are funny (*Thank God I'm Old*), some are thoughtful (*The Colors of My Life*) and so on (A parallel can be drawn with *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, where one song is a Calypso, another one a ballad etc).
3. They push the story along, eliminating the need for dialogues, soliloquies or narrations.



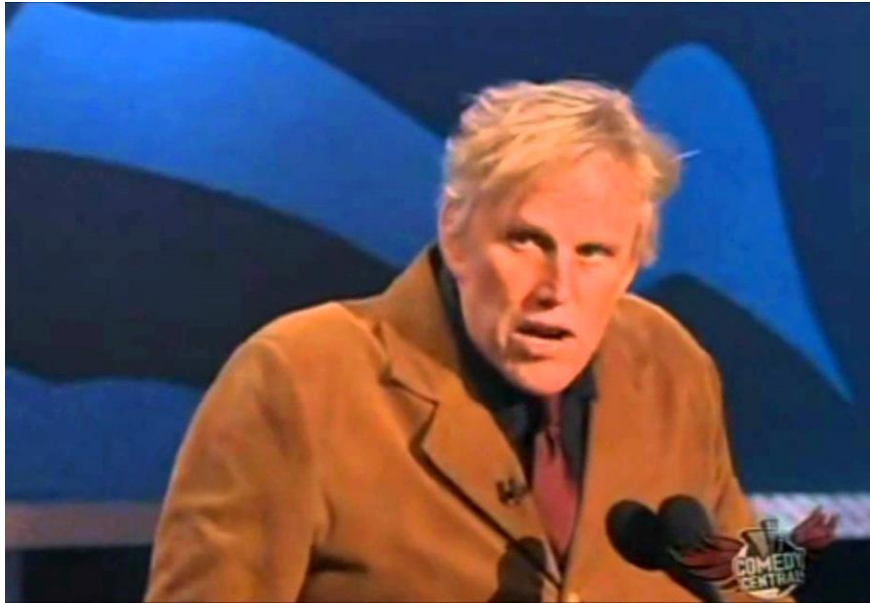
A scene from the London run of 'Barnum'

The original Broadway show ran for 854 performances and was followed by a London production. *Barnum* was nominated for ten Tony Awards, winning five (including Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical).

In conclusion, I look forward to the time when home-grown musicals will burst upon the stage in a profusion of song and dance, pomp and colour. A time when Spellcast Media's *Mekatilili the Musical* will eclipse *Aladdin* in local popularity. A time when *Mo Faya the Musical* will set fire to the theatre sector. A time when *Ondieki the Fisherman* will net a rich catch of happy ticket buyers.



'The word "theatre" comes from the Greeks. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation.' – Stella Adler, American actress and acting coach



'You have devoted your life to bringing laughter to the masses, including me. Yet, to the educated, you are the pre-eminent post-modern humourist. Your act has hints of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett – "Theatre of the Absurd"; shifting between the surreal and the slapstick. It stands on the vanguard of the deep-fried Dada Movement. That's where you live. That's your address.' – Actor Gary Busey
in *The Comedy Central Roast of Larry the Cable Guy*

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING: Shakespeare For the Masses?

In his documentary, *Beyond the Mat*, Barry W. Blaustein narrates:

‘I look at (pro) wrestling as theatre at its most base. And guess what – so do most of the fans. The way I see it, the critics have it all wrong: It’s not about fighting, it’s about spectacle.’

While promoting his book, *A Lion’s Tale: Around the World in Spandex*, Canadian wrestler Chris Jericho made an even bolder claim:

‘If Shakespeare was alive today, he’d be writing wrestling shows.’

It’s not surprising that Jeff Jarrett, a second-generation wrestler and a former promoter, would concur with Jericho. In the documentary *Jeff Jarrett: King of the Mountain*, he confidently asserts:

‘Wrestling has always been, and always will be, Shakespeare to the masses. People can live vicariously through us (wrestlers). They can enjoy it; it’s an outlet, it’s very entertaining...It’s incredible the connection you can have with people.’

So, is modern pro wrestling something that The Bard would have approved of or even participated in were he here today? Let’s take a closer look at this so-called ‘sports entertainment’ spectacle...

Wrestling, in its raw form, has been practiced since the dawn of man. Depictions of wrestling have been found in everything from cave walls to Egyptian hieroglyphs. It also appears in ancient stories and texts like the Bible (apparently even angels wrestle). In ancient Greece and Rome, it has been practiced as a sport for centuries. We still have Greco-Roman wrestling in the Olympics and in colleges around the world. In Africa, wrestling was mainly employed for entertainment but was serious competition for the participants (young males) for it was a test of strength and the winner gained village glory. In Sudan, wrestling was used in actual warfare; during ‘hand-to-hand combat.’



Donald Trump (left) and promoter Vince McMahon (in grey suit) face off ahead of their ‘Battle of the Billionaires’ WrestleMania encounter, as ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin (centre) looks on.

Professional wrestling – a form of entertainment that simulates actual wrestling but is in fact just a show – has been around for a much shorter time and has gone through many innovations. It is widely believed that pro wrestling began just after the American Civil War. During the war, some US servicemen passed long hours of boredom by engaging in wrestling exhibitions before their comrades. Wrestling was a useful pastime, because it’s about combat but at the same time, they didn’t want to hurt their comrades in a time of war. After the hostilities, some soldiers had a hard time adjusting to civilian life (as is often the case). Getting jobs was especially difficult. Some former soldiers decided to make money by giving wrestling exhibitions in town. America’s fabled President **Abraham Lincoln** was a man who wore many hats (literally and figuratively). One of his pre-politics activities was being a professional wrestler. He is said to have participated in over three hundred matches!

Origins

Professional wrestling as practiced today is believed to have been invented by **P. T. Barnum** of the Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Circus fame. Barnum ran a grand, multi-ringed circus where the featured ‘curiosities’ were in the main tent and lesser ‘attractions’ were in surrounding tents (ie. they were side-shows).

Wrestling made a great side-show. To spice things up, Barnum (a genius in marketing and the inspiration for Robert Ripley among other greats) gave his wrestlers outlandish costumes and fake bios/back-stories/legends (now called 'gimmicks'). Even then, audiences suspected that the action wasn't real so the wrestling team often included someone called a 'hooker'. A hooker was a real wrestler who would challenge any man in the crowd to a fight. The hooker's chief method of subduing the fan, without causing much harm, was to lock him in a submission maneuver (a pretzel hold, full nelson, choke hold etc) until he gave up (Hence the name 'hooker', from 'hooking' the opponent).

In the last century, pro wrestling has become very entertainment-oriented. In the words of one documentary, there's 'no semblance of a sport' anymore. The current P. T. Barnum of wrestling, **Vince McMahon** of WWE fame, refers to the modern, televised product as 'sports entertainment.'

Popularity

Pro wrestling is popular all over the world but more so in North America, Mexico, Southern Africa, Australia, Western Europe and Japan. Pro wrestling differs from 'amateur' wrestling in that its outcomes are predetermined and the performers are paid like any other job. In 'amateur wrestling', you win titles, medals or other considerations, but it is not a commercial venture. Due to the popularity of such pro wrestling companies as WWE, AEW, AAA, New Japan Pro Wrestling and global stardom of such performers as Roman Reigns, Cody Rhodes, Mercedes Moné, Rhea Ripley, Hulk Hogan (recently deceased), The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin, John Cena, The Undertaker, Sting, El Santo, Rey Mysterio, Big Daddy, and others, more and more wrestling companies are springing up all over the world. One popular promotion based in Uganda does shows in a mud square surrounded by sisal ropes as opposed to a traditional ring with an elevated wood-and-canvas floor.

'It was at the turn of the 20th Century that wrestling was first added to the bottom of the music hall bill. By 1904, it was the most talked-about sport in Britain.' – *When Wrestling Was Golden*, BBC Documentary

Lingo

To participate in - or fully comprehend - pro wrestling, one must first acquaint themselves with the basic lingo. Here is some of the most common industry jargon:

Promotion /Federation/Fed – A wrestling company.

Face/Babyface – The 'good guy' / 'hero', especially the promotion's top star eg. 'Cena needs to **put someone over**, he's been the babyface for too long!'

Heel – 'Bad guy'; opposite of 'babyface' eg. The wrestling world shook to its foundations when Hulk Hogan turned heel (ie. went from good guy to bad) and joined WCW's New World Order clique (It was the equivalent of the comic book Superman character deciding to become a villain).

Tweener – A performer who is neither heel nor face but somewhere in between eg. Stone Cold Steve Austin who was initially supposed to be heel but became a fan favourite.

Promoter – The person running the fed eg. In one British fed, wrestlers complained that top face Big Daddy (Shirley Crabtree) was always **booked** to win. The promoter was Big Daddy's brother, and the young girl who often accompanied him to the ring was his daughter. Bloodlines are common in promotions.

Booker – The person who decides who will win or lose a match; usually the promoter. Making a match, which requires creativity, is called **booking** and involves deciding which two wrestlers or tandems will make the most money for the **promotion**.

Zebra – Referee.

Gate – The money collected at the entrance to a venue. WWE's annual WrestleMania extravaganza has the largest gates in the wrestling world.

Gorilla – The area just behind the curtain through which the wrestlers enter the arena eg. 'Tell those guys to stay clear of the Gorilla position!'

André shot – A low angle camera shot, designed to make a wrestler look even larger than they actual are. Named for André the Giant.

Feud – A series of matches between two wrestlers. Kurt Angle and Stone Cold Steve Austin had the longest pay-per-view feud: nine PPV matches.

Gimmick – Persona/character. Wrestlers often create/suggest their own gimmicks. Also, a gimmick can be completely different from a performer's real personality.

Storyline – A pre-conceived series of events, usually leading up to a match or **feud**.

Kayfabe – ‘Be fake’; making believe that a gimmick, **storyline** or rivalry is real; it was espoused when people thought that wrestling was real, especially when it was a carnival side-show. It is still used nowadays but never stressed eg. WWE and TNA have staged many kayfabe weddings in the ring.

Over – Popular (with fans).

Manager/valet – A person, usu. female, who escorts a wrestler to the ring.

Sell – (*verb*) Fake an injury eg. A booker/writer may tell a **face**, ‘You’ll call him out while facing the ring entrance but he (the **heel**) will sneak up from behind you and whack you in the back of the head with a chair. Sell the head and keep selling it until he runs away through the crowd.’

Job – (*verb*) Lose a match.

Jobber/Jabroni/Enhancement Talent – A wrestler who is perennially booked to lose a match in order to get his opponent **over** eg. WWE’s Brooklyn Brawler lost over 1000 matches.

Shoot – (*verb*) Break **Kayfabe**/character; either accidentally or for personal reasons (eg. frustration with promoters).

Card – The list of matches to take place on a given event

The Boys – The people in a promotion who actually wrestle as opposed to writers, bookers, ring technicians, accountants and other non-wrestling staff.

Bump – (*noun*) Any wrestling move performed on an opponent eg. ‘Being a **valet** is the closest you can get to the ring without taking a bump.’

Lucha Libre – Mexican-style pro wrestling, famous for acrobatic action and use of masks.



LUCHA LIBRE: A scene from the movie ‘Nacho Libre’

Screwjob – A situation (**kayfabe** or not) in which a wrestler unfairly loses a match. Canada’s Bret Hart lost his last WWE title in an infamous incident dubbed ‘[The Montreal Screwjob](#)’

Foreign object – (*jocular*: **International object**) Any unsanctioned item that might give unfair advantage to its user. It is usually used by a **heel** and its use could lead to a **screwjob**. When WCW was owned by CNN founder Ted Turner, a directive went round that the word ‘foreign’ was to be replaced by ‘international’ across Turner broadcasting networks, with the result even wrestlers were forced to call foreign objects ‘international objects’ which made no sense but was good for laughs!

Street fight – A no-disqualification match in which normal restrictions, such as fighting within the ring, are lifted. Pinfalls count anywhere.

Hardcore match – An extreme no-disqualification match in which the use of foreign objects is actually encouraged. Pinfalls count anywhere.

Dark match – A match that is not televised (despite that capability), usually because the performers are still in training.

Promo – An interview before a match. In one infamous viral YouTube video, Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson is seen reading notes on his wrist during a promo!

Heat – Audience reaction esp. towards the **heel** eg. In the behind-the-scenes documentary, *Beyond the Mat*, The Rock says, ‘I’m banking on there being a ton of heat on me,’ referring to his upcoming title match with **hardcore** legend Mankind at the ‘[Royal Rumble](#)’. Heels will sometimes insult fans or the town they are in, just to draw **cheap heat**.

Shoulder block (UK: **Body Check**) – Hitting an opponent with your shoulder (usually after a run). This can happen several times before one wrestler hits the ground.

Drop kick – A kick delivered by leaping and planting both feet into the opponent.

Superkick – A kick delivered sideways with the executor’s head lowered.

Suicide dive – A leap from inside the ring to an opponent on the outside. Considered a high-risk maneuver.

Go home – (*instruction*) End the match eg. If the crowd is not into a match or one performer is nursing an injury, the referee might whisper to the wrestlers, ‘Go home in two (minutes)’.

Juice/blade/geek – (*verb*) To cut yourself in order to bleed (by means of a hidden blade). Rarely used nowadays and banned in some promotions eg. ‘Look - Ric Flair is blading!’

Seatviction – Yanking someone from their chair so that it can be used as a weapon.

Vignette/Gorilla segment – A TV spot that is filmed away from the ring, usually to advance a **storyline**.

Body-Slamming Quotes

‘We’re part talk show, we’re part action-adventure, we’re part...comedy, maybe I should say, humour. As compared to what many people would think: two men in their underwear in a squared circle somewhere.’ - WWE chairman/promoter Vince McMahon, *Stone Cold Steve Austin - Lord of the Ring* documentary

‘That Ted Turner (World Wrestling Championship promoter) is a genius...He has taken what used to be a carnival side show and turned it into a gold mine. Yes - wrestling has become prime time for the masses. He’s making these giant men into millionaires with movie star status.’ - Samantha Bar, TV’s Channel 5 Sports (*Sting: Moment of Truth* DVD)

‘Prince Philip and Her Majesty the Queen used to come to the Albert Hall every month to see the wrestling, regular as clockwork. Great fans. Er, the Beatles and (wrestler) Mick McManus were great buddies.’ - Frank Rimer, pro wrestler (UK), *When Wrestling Was Golden*, BBC documentary

‘I am a showman by profession . . . and all the gilding shall make nothing else of me.’ - P. T. Barnum

‘Fighting in pairs was an innovation Joint Promotions had introduced to the UK, where wrestling stars were put together and given their own team name.’ - *When Wrestling Was Golden*, BBC Documentary

‘New Jack (a hardcore African-American ECW performer) had everyone so mad at the Gangstas (his tag team), Hitler could have walked through the curtain and he would have been a **baby face**.’ - D-Lo Brown, pro wrestler - *Dark Side of the Ring: The Life and Crimes of New Jack* (a documentary by Vice Media)



BABY FACE: ‘Big Daddy’ on British TV

‘People loved (British pro wrestler) **Big Daddy**. Can’t overstate enough how popular Big Daddy was. He was one of the big figures of the 1980’s. He was everywhere. He was on kids’ telly. He was in *Buster* comics... Big Daddy had a cartoon strip in there. He had an “annual” – same as *Spiderman* and *Superman* and *Dennis the Menace*. He wasn’t so much a bloke, he was a real-life superhero. A living cartoon character...Kids loved him.’ - *When Wrestling Was Golden*, BBC Documentary

‘In this business, when you’re in the ring, the bad guy always leads the match. It’s almost like a man leading a woman in a dance. The bad guy set the tempo: he listens with his heart, with his ears. He gets his instinct from the crowd - what to do to do, what not do, how to create emotion, bring them to the edge of their seats, really get them mad at you; and then have them cheer and scream, for the hero.’ - Terry Bollea, *Adrenalin Rush: Hulk Hogan* TV’s *Biography* channel

‘The fans didn’t care in the end that it was fixed. It was like seeing a good play. You know that they are actors but you suspend your disbelief.’ - *When Wrestling Was Golden*, BBC Documentary

‘We’re teaching a lesson, you know: the good guys win, and if you cheat - you take shortcuts - you lose. Such is life.’ - Terry Bollea, *Hulk Hogan: American Made* documentary

So, bearing this knowledge, does pro wrestling qualify as a form of theatre? The verdict is yours! Don’t be a heel, let the African Griot Review Editor know your opinion via: editorial@theafricangriot.com 🐘

FICTION

The Doctor's Visit

by Reginald T. Jackson

The sun peeked her head over the horizon in Somalia, Northeast Africa and another day at the *Al-Nisa* township began. The children ran around barefoot preparing themselves for school. The schoolhouse was a half built tin shelter with no electricity, no blackboards and no textbooks or general supplies. The children, including little Ayanna, one of the seven girls and six boys in the class loved to attend Ms. Jordan's class. Ayanna always sat next to Maryam, her best friend. They were thick as thieves, even though Maryam was only nine and Ayanna, having just made her birthday, was now ten. She loved being a child and playing games with Maryam after chores were done.

Ms. Jordan was particularly pale today Ayanna thought, like the flour she used to make dough for bread. She spoke of the Wars in a tone that suggested she had been there herself. Ayanna liked Ms. Jordan a lot because she called on her a lot to read. Ayanna loved sitting in the front of the room with all eyes on her. A school teacher was something Ayanna thought she might want to be herself, if not a doctor, since *Al-Nisa* didn't have a regular doctor, only a visiting one once a month. Today Ayanna had a doctor's visit although she couldn't figure out why. She felt fine and told her mother many times so only to get the response: You must see the doctor child, it's your time.

After school Maryam and Ayanna raced home, which was only small one room tin shelters that barely weather rainstorms. Ayanna hated rainstorms. They frightened her and she had to hide almost underneath her mother to get the shakes to stop. Her mother, Khadijah is a tall woman with a shaven head, broad hips and ample breasts, good for child rearing, if only she had the children to rear. Ayanna hoped she would also be as tall and healthy as her mother with nice big hips and a straight head to carry laundry from the creek to the house.

Her mother could hold laundry on her head while Ayanna's little brother Jabril squirmed under one arm and a basket of fruit balanced in on the other arm. Ayanna thought of having ten children so that her family would be the biggest and most honored in the entire township. Ayanna's mother only had two that survived out of six. That's what drove Ayanna's father away it is rumored. Ayanna never knew her father only stories told to her by her mother and some of the older women of the township. She missed him, especially since most other girls and boys had fathers to play with and protect them. Ayanna's mother was her only protector.

Ayanna took in the laundry and swept the shelter as she did each day. Her mother was busy with the older women of the township. Something important was about to happen, Ayanna thought. Whenever the elder women talked as they did today something important happened like a death or birth. Before Ayanna could finish her chores Maryam was at her shelter trying to coax her to play house. 'Today, I can't Maryam. I have a doctor's visit with my mom.' 'What's wrong? Are you sick Ayanna?' asked Maryam kind of confused. 'Now, but my mother says it is my time to see the doctor, so I will see him. Maybe he will give me some candy. If he does, I'll save some for you.' Said Ayanna. Just then Khadijah arrived at the shelter with two older women from the township dressed in ceremonial robes. All of them had serious looks on their faces which usually meant Ayanna was in trouble. This scared both Maryam and Ayanna.

Ayanna waved goodbye to Maryam as her mother quickly pulled her down the road to the doctor's shelter. There were no words spoken by any of the women as they walked, and this also seemed strange to Ayanna. The older women loved to chat it up all day. They had missing teeth, faces like old leather bags and black and grey hair. Ayanna sometimes thought they could do magic. They told such tales of the Gods and the supernatural.

Ayanna began to fear the silence and the seriousness of whatever was about to happen to her at the doctor's. When they arrived, Dr. Sunday Naar was waiting for them at the door of the shelter. She was a small, porky woman with deep ritual markings in her cheeks. She looks like a nice enough lady, Ayanna thought. She smiled and ushered them in: 'Go sit on the bed, child, I need to speak to the adults for a minute.'

Ayanna sat in the shelter and took in the sights. Though it was a makeshift hospital shelter, it didn't have running water, or much medicine and only two beds. Many surgeries were done without the aid of body numbing drugs.

Ayanna watched as Sunday and her mother and the old women talked furiously about her, she assumed. They turned to her every once and a while. Khadijah came over to Ayanna and tried to explain what was to happen to her. She said that it was time to protect Ayanna's womanhood from boys so she could find an honorable husband when it was time. To do this she needed to undergo some minor surgery to assure her husband she was a virgin and would be faithful to him during the marriage. Ayanna didn't understand what was before her but trusting in her mother she agreed.

'Lay back on the bed,' said Sunday. The older women surrounded the bed and Khadijah took a seat at its foot. Sunday began taking out some tools, a knife and a needle and thread. She also had a pan of water. She made a movement of her head and the older women grabbed Ayanna and held her down. One braced Ayanna on the chest, pinning her so she could not move. The other held her arms tightly to her side. Her mother grabbed Ayanna's boney legs and pried them open and held them tight. 'Don't fight, don't fight. It will go faster if you cooperate,' said Sunday.

Ayanna began to sweat like a trapped animal in the forest. She called out to her mother but there was no answer. Sunday grabbed a cloth and dipped it in the water and wiped Ayanna's private parts really hard so as to clean away the dirt and dust of the day. She then said, 'hold her tight.'

With the knife in one hand and a gauze in the other Sunday closed in on Ayanna's Clitoris and wedged it between the blade of the knife and the gauze. With one stroke of the knife, she cut Ayanna's clitoris off and grabbed it in the gauze. Ayanna gave a blood-curdling scream as tears flooded her eyes and made a pool on the side of the bed and the area began to throb with pain. She called out to her mother and begged her to make him stop but Khadijah didn't answer her.

'Be still child the worst is over,' said Sunday. 'Now I must sew you up and it will be done. Be still.'

The older women began to chant some kind of song that was to accompany this ritual. Khadijah joined in. Ayanna continued to cry and bleed between her legs.

Sunday threaded the needle and wet it in the pan of water. She then began to sew up Ayanna's vagina like a rip in two pieces of cloth. Again, Ayanna cried out with each stick of the needle in the vaginal lip. Hurricane-like tremors shocked. Ayanna underneath the old women's grip. Her body jerked and shook as much as possible while pinned to the bed. Ayanna begged her mother for it to stop. She pleaded that she would be good, do her chores and study harder. Khadijah said nothing.

After it was done, Sunday grabbed the softness between Ayanna's legs with gauze and taped it up tight. She said in a jovial manner, 'Now young lady you are a woman now. Good luck.'

Ayanna, dizzy with pain and tears and confusion, couldn't move off the bed. Her mother and the older women wrapped her in a blanket and carried her back home. Her doctor's visit was done.

When Ayanna reached home, she was so tired she just passed out from the pain and the tears. Her mother, Khadijah, moved about the tin shelter as if nothing had happened. She cooked a simple but savory meal for Ayanna and her brother. She sang a tribal song that brought her joy.

After several hours, Ayanna awoke to the little feast before her. What were they celebrating, she thought. The pain was an ever-constant presence in her little body and it controlled her movements and ability to complete her chores. When school time came the next day, Ayanna did not go. She was too hurt inside and out. She was worried her peers would find out what happened to her. It was a fear that stole her joy of attending school.

After school, Maryam comes over and wants to play with Ayanna. Ayanna is doing her chores with deliberate focus. She saw Maryam and knew what she wanted to do, play. However, Ayanna had lost her pleasure in playing house with Maryam. She lost her desire to play period.

As the weeks passed Ayanna did the same thing each day. No more school or playing house with Maryam. Something burned in her heart and mind. The thought of why they did this to her and what would happen next. She waited until her mother was not busy with housework or cooking. She went up to her mother and looked her in the eyes.

‘What child? Why do you look at me like that?’ said Khadijah. ‘What will happen to me next? If I am a woman now, does that mean I have to leave and find my own shelter?’ said Ayanna. ‘No child!! Don’t be silly. You will stay with me until the elder women find a suitable husband for you. He will pledge to marry you when you turn 12 years old. Until then you will learn from me and the elder women how to be a proper wife for your new husband.’ Said Khadijah. ‘What if I do not like him?’ asked Ayanna. ‘It is not your job to like him child! You are to build a family with him. As many children as you can give him. You will also serve him like a happy, young, wife is supposed to.’

‘I can’t have children with my body sewn up like this.’ said Ayanna. ‘Don’t worry about that child. When it is time to make babies, you will be changed by your husband,’ said Khadijah. She told her young daughter the ways of the rest of her life. On her wedding night, her husband would take a sharp blade and cut open her Vagina. The thread assures her new husband that she was a virgin. Then he would make love to you night after night until she is heavy with child. You must make your husband very, very, happy or he might leave you like your father has left me. I am doing the best I can to set you up with a wealthy man. A man that can give you things and take you places. You might even be able to go back to school and learn how to read. I know how much joy that brought you.

She told her to be a good girl and listen and learn for her future. Ayanna was even more confused than before, but she was not one to quarrel with her mother or the elder women of the Township. Ayanna became a sponge and soaked up all she could learn. She never wanted to let her mother down. After all, she was a good girl, and her mother not only loved her but knew what was best.



Reginald T. Jackson's literary works have appeared in the anthology *Brother to Brother*, edited by Essex Hemphill on Alyson Publications, the anthology *Flesh and The Word 2*, edited by John Preston on Plume Books, *BlackOut Magazine* edited by Angela Bowen on Boston Towne Press, the anthology *Sojourner* edited and published by OTHER COUNTRIES, *BGM Magazine* edited by Sidney Brinkley on Blacklight Press, *OUTWEEK Magazine* edited by Sarah Pettit, *American Writing Magazine*. He was a contributing writer for both *CLICK Magazine* and *FLAVALIFE Magazine*. He has work in the anthologies: *Fish, Collard Greens and Cornbread*, *Black Gay Erotica* and *Black Gay Genius*. His play *Dee's Dilemma* was produced in Houston, Texas, by the Fade to Black Festival in June 2024.

NON-FICTION

The Dancer in a Banana Skirt

Like boxer Mohammad Ali later in the 20th century, entertainer Josephine Baker 'shook the world' in the first half of the 1900s. Born and raised in a racially segregated America, Josephine started dancing professionally as a teenager. Her entry into the showbiz world coincided with the 'Harlem Renaissance', and at eighteen she got the opportunity to tour Europe with a troupe of Black performers. In Paris, France, where she gained instant celebrity, a new show was devised specifically for her: the 'Dancer in a Banana Skirt' (and little else). She became an overnight sensation, instantly recognizable and highly paid. There was nothing like her in the world. According to *Time*, a Hungarian cavalry officer and an Italian count once fought a duel in her name in Budapest, in 1928. The sword-fight took place in a cemetery, in her presence.



*Josephine Baker dancing in the Folies Bergère production
"Un Vent de Folie" (1927)*

Unlike the US, France had no Jim Crow laws and 'madame la Baker' did not face overt racism. She could live anywhere and patronize posh eateries, for example. She made Paris her home and would later lose her American citizenship (although she visited America severally and participated in the Civil Rights marches of the 1960s). In France - where she branched out into singing and acting as well - she became a fashionista and socialite. Several French magazines offered her fashion columns to write. Her super-shiny hair, that stuck to her head like a coat of jet-black paint, was a major point of interest. In neighbouring Germany, the now-famous Black female dancer created a sensation - and stirred controversy - after a series of performances in post-World War I Berlin. She reportedly received 40,000 love letters and 2,000 marriage proposals! She was eventually ejected from the Berlin nightclub circuit by socialist moralists who were offended by her highly sexualized stage act. During World War II, she zealously aided France's war effort. After the war, Baker was awarded the Resistance Medal by the French Committee of National Liberation, the Croix de Guerre by the French military, and was named a Chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur* by General Charles de Gaulle. She proudly wore her French military uniform in peacetime, even while visiting America in the latter half of the 20th century. She also, finally, managed to get moderate success and acclaim in the US, in her old age, performing in extravagant costumes at the hallowed Carnegie Hall. In the documentary *Josephine Baker: The First Black Superstar*, US author Darryl Pinckney asserts:

'You have to think of Josephine Baker as a symbol that the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance could share. That in some way the White and the Black wings of this artistic movement that we could call 'Modernism' could sort of meet in her, as a symbol.'

Michael Eboda, editor of *New Nation*:

'She (Josephine Baker) exported the Harlem Renaissance to Europe. And for her to do that at that time, and do it so quickly! She moved to Paris and two years later, she was the highest-paid (female entertainer) and most photographed woman in the world. That's amazing.'

As a Black woman, it always bothered her in America, she was always judged her by her skin colour first. In one incident, a young woman spat at her as she walked up the stairs to a building. In contrast, she was warmly received whenever she returned to her adopted country. After one triumphant return to France, she gushed:

'How can I forget it (receiving a hero's welcome in France)? They made me forget the colour of my skin. All of my good friends. They were White!'

As with most artistes – especially women – old age was not kind to her. No longer the mesmerizing, sexy, exotic entertainer she had once been, her income dropped drastically. In 1968, lost she her beloved château - in which she had been raising a multiracial clan of twelve adopted children - due to mounting debts.

On April 8, 1975, Baker stepped on stage for the very last time. The show was a retrospective revue celebrating her fifty years in show business. Titled 'Joséphine à Bobino 1975' and held in Paris, the revue was reportedly financed by Prince Rainier, Princess Grace, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Audience members on opening night included actress Sophia Loren, rocker Mick Jagger, singer Shirley Bassey, diva Diana Ross and thespian Liza Minnelli. The show garnered rave reviews, but it was Baker's last hurrah. Just four days later, she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and went into a coma. She was taken to Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital where she breathed her last on April 12, 1975, aged 68. 🐘

THEATRE LIGHT BULB JOKES

How many actors does it take to change a light bulb?

Three. One to actually do it, and two more to discuss how they would have done it better.

How many directors does it take to change a light bulb?

"Interesting... why does it want to change? What's its motivation?"

How many playwrights does it take to change a light bulb?

"I'm not changing anything!"

How many producers does it take to change a light bulb?

"Why do we need another light bulb?"

How many theatre publishers does it take to change a light bulb?

We don't actually change light bulbs. We just tell you how someone else did it earlier.

How many stage managers does it -

"Done."



POETRY

Three Poems by MC Crosby

Quarantine XVII

I have made friends
With the lamppost
Out my window
She winks at me
From afar
As she safeguards the park
She warbles top of the mornin!
And other catchphrases
In a jolly lolly tone
When I requested her name
She proclaimed
Petunia!
But my friends call me Tuni
So I call her Tuni too
It felt like the right thing to do
Now Tuni and I
Spend most of our days together
(At a distance of course)
We smile at runners in the park
And bark slow down!
To the crisscross crosswalk cyclists
When I wave
Tuni bows her head to greet me
And I shine my face back at her
We start each chat with the weather
Or I read her a poem
And she sings to me about flowers
While we pass away the hours
We are quite the pair
She stationary
And I, striving to stand still too
Both donning our best black
Because we know that fashion
Never fades
Tuni declares
A good friend
Is like a good dress
Classy yet sassy
With unique curves and spins
One embraces
But never brags about
As they light up the dance floor

A true friend
Always waits for you
Even when
You don't have the strength
To turn the light on
Just like you Tuni, I remark
And she spangles her spark
In agreement
Just like us
She gleams

Women

Like a blazer's razor collar
We cut umbilical cords
Break babes from our breast
Create careers instead of kids if we care to
Fight back when you catcall back
Live on less
And out of it, make so much more
We are everywhere
So wear us
Instead of wearing us down
Because we are a fashion of fortitude
That never goes out of style

Plant Yourself

Growing
Growing is hard
First, you have to start
You have to choose to start
And that may be
The hardest part
Then your seed
Your shell
You have to break through
The armor
The prison
That you
You
Put around you
You have to chip away
Or burst
Whichever comes first
And by now
You should be done
But you've only
Only just begun
There's the dirt
The hurt
The dark
With no air
For a spark
So you have to fight
Push
Make a mess
And make the most of it

Pretend you're clean
When you don't even
Want to be seen
Through rocks
And wreckage
Rot and dread
Those soiled voices
Inside your head
But one day
Someday
You'll push through
Thrust to surface
With a purpose
And it's worth it
Those worms
And worries
Look harmless
From above
And now with self-care
And self-love
You can grow a spine
A stem
New limbs
A new life

MC Crosby (USA) is a playwright, educator, and activist. Official website: <https://mccrosby.com>

To submit your own poems for consideration,

e-mail: submissions@theafricangriot.com

Entries may be on any subject must not exceed 40 lines in length. Also include your short bio and (optionally) a passport-style photo. Contributors retain copyright over their works.

REGULARS

NEWS

Transition: Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o speaking at the Library of Congress in 2019

Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was a Kenyan novelist, playwright, academic and memoirist. He died in the United States, where he spent most of his adult life, on 28th May 2025. One of the world's most recognized writers, he was a frequent bet to win the Nobel Prize in Literature although - like Nigeria's Chinua Achebe - he passed on without it. Besides his bibliography which includes such titles as "Weep Not, Child", "The River Between", "A Grain of Wheat" and "Petals of Blood", Ngugi was world-renowned as a promoter of indigenous languages and anti-colonialism. His powerful arguments on these two subjects made him Kenya's leading intellectual (even though he spent much of his life in self-exile) and one of academia's most sought-after speakers. He received dozens of awards and honours for his body of work, including: the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature, Premi International de Catalunya Award, Grand Prix des Mécènes of the GPLA, Park Kyong-ni Prize, Nicolás Guillén Lifetime Achievement Award for Philosophical Literature, the W.E.B. Du Bois Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, Africa Channel Literary Achievement Award, the Order of the Elder of Burning Spear (Kenya), Aspen Prize for Literature, The Fonlon-Nichols Prize, The Zora Neale Hurston-Paul Robeson Award, The Lotus Prize for Literature, the UNESCO

First Prize for his debut novel (*Weep Not Child*) and The East Africa Novel Prize. *Murogi wa Kagogo* (*The Wizard of the Crow*), one of his latter novels, garnered more than ten different honours, including being the Gold medal winner in Fiction for the 2007 California Book Awards.

Prof. Ngũgĩ was born in Limuru, Kenya, on 5th January 1938, and baptized James Ngugi. He attended Alliance High School, and later Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda (aka 'the Harvard of East Africa'). His debut novel, *Weep Not, Child*, was published in May 1964. It would later become a popular 'set book' in the Kenyan educational system. He won a scholarship to the University of Leeds, England, to pursue an MA later the same year. While there, his second novel, *The River Between*, was published (in 1965), and would also become an East African classic.

In 1976, Prof. Ngũgĩ co-founded The Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in his hometown of Limuru, with theatre as one of the mainstays. In 1977, he published the politically charged novel *Petals of Blood* and the vernacular stage play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), co-written with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii. He was swiftly arrested by the Kenyan government and sent to Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, without a trial, for nearly a year. He would later write: 'The compound used to be for the mentally deranged convicts before it was put to better use as a cage for "the politically deranged".'

While in incarceration, with other 'political prisoners', Ngugi penned his first novel in Gikũyũ (his native language) on toilet paper! It was called, *Caitani Mũtharaba-Inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*).

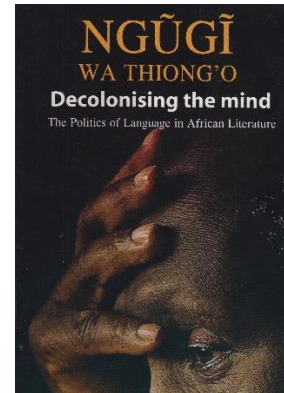
In 2017, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, now a distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and English at the University of California, Irvine (USA) received his 12th honorary degree, this time from no less than Yale University. Bestowing the honour upon him, during Yale University's 316th Commencement, Yale President Peter

Salovey said:

“Author, playwright, activist, and scholar, you have shown us the power of words to change the world. You have written in English and in your Kenyan language, Gikũyũ; you have worked in prison cells and in exile; and you have survived assassination attempts — all to bring attention to the plight of ordinary people in Kenya and around the world. Brave wordsmith, for breaking down barriers, for showing us the potential of literature to incite change and promote justice, for helping us decolonize our minds and open them to new ideas, we are privileged to award you this degree of Doctor of Letters.”

*In honour of the late Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, **The African Griot Review** will issue a Special Edition dedicated solely to the man, his work and legacy. The issue will include tributes, photos, illustrations, poetry, reviews and essays.*

'If you learn to speak the languages of the world and cannot speak the language from your culture, that's enslavement. But if you learn the language of your culture and then learn the languages of the world, then that's empowerment.'
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



Farewell to Margaretta Gacheru

The Kenyan theatre fraternity suffered another loss this year, with the demise of the art sector's most devoted chronicler, Margaretta wa Gacheru.

Born in Illinois, United States, **Margaretta wa Gacheru** lived most of her life in Kenya where, as a journalist, she started covering the arts scene in the 1970s. For the next four decades, she covered arts events and artists of all descriptions for Nation Media Group (most recently their *Business Daily* newspaper). She also taught and was herself an avid student, crowning her education with a Ph.D from Loyola University Chicago.

May she rest in peace.



Margaretta wa Gacheru (standing) at an Arterial Arts Network event in Nairobi.

Chanel Sutherland Wins 2025 Commonwealth Short Story Prize



Chanel Sutherland, overall winner
(Photo: commonwealthfoundation.com)

Canada-based **Chanel Sutherland** is the overall winner of this year's Commonwealth Short Story Prize. Chanel's entry, 'Descend', beat out 7,920 entrants worldwide to scoop the prestigious £5,000 prize. Based in the UK, the Commonwealth Short Story Prize is an annual international writing contest that is open to all Commonwealth citizens aged 18 and above. Five 'regional' winners are named and then an 'overall' winner is declared. This year's Regional Winners were:

- **Africa:** 'Mothers Not Appearing in Search' by Joshua Lubwama (Uganda)
- **Asia:** 'An Eye and a Leg' by Faria Basher (Bangladesh)
- **Canada/Europe:** 'Descend' by Chanel Sutherland (Canada/Saint Vincent and the Grenadines)
- **Caribbean:** 'Margot's Run' by Subraj Singh (Guyana)
- **Pacific:** 'Crab Sticks and Lobster Rolls' by Kathleen Ridgwell (Australia)

The long-running literary magazine *Granta* has published all the regional winning stories.

Alexander Nderitu Prize Winner Feted

Haliru Ali Musa, the winner of the inaugural Alexander Nderitu Prize for World Literature, has been steadily earning recognition ever since his victory. Ikeja Electric, where the young engineer works, put out a post on social media, congratulating the laureate. On 7 May 2025, in a message posted on Facebook, IE said:

"Today, we proudly spotlight Haliru Ali Musa, a participant in our Young Engineers Program (YEP). Haliru has etched his name on the global literary map by winning the 2024 Alexander Nderitu Prize for World Literature, awarded by The African Griot Review. His short story, "The Pregnant Ghost," rose above 71 international entries, captivating minds and earning critical acclaim for its originality and depth. This is more than a personal win. It's a celebration of the vibrant, multidimensional talent within Ikeja Electric. Congratulations, Haliru—you've not only lived the brand; you've literarily illuminated it."

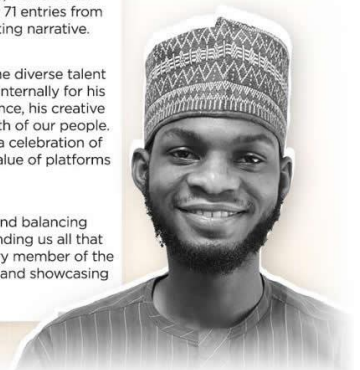
In an article for the [Nigerian Tribune](#), **Kingsley Alumona** wrote: 'Musa's short fiction story, "The Pregnant Ghost", beat the 71 entries submitted to the prize to emerge as the winner. He said he owed his victory to God and the small, consistent effort he put into his writing. "It still feels surreal, being called an award-winning writer, especially when I think about how I have often approached writing like a game. The young engineer cum writer appreciated *The African Griot* and the founder of the award, Alexander Nderitu, "For seeing something worthy in my story. May this be just the beginning."'

IE's Haliru Ali Musa Wins Global Literary Award

Ikeja Electric proudly celebrates one of its own, Haliru Ali Musa, a participant in the Young Engineers Program (YEP), who has brought global recognition to our organization by winning the 2024 Alexander Nderitu Prize for World Literature. Announced on April 4th, 2025 by The African Griot Review, Haliru's short story, "The Pregnant Ghost," stood out among 71 entries from across the world for its originality and captivating narrative.

Haliru's achievement is a shining example of the diverse talent we nurture at Ikeja Electric. While he's known internally for his engineering potential and professional excellence, his creative brilliance reveals the multi-dimensional strength of our people. His success is not just a literary milestone but a celebration of the power of young Nigerian voices and the value of platforms like the YEP.

Haliru embodies what it means to Live the Brand balancing technical skill with personal passion, and reminding us all that excellence has no limits. His story inspires every member of the IE team to keep dreaming big, striving harder, and showcasing the best of who we are on every stage.

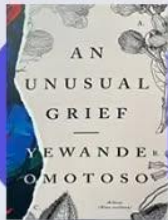


2025 Longlist for the Nigeria Prize for Literature



The Nigeria Prize for Literature 2025 The Longlist of 11

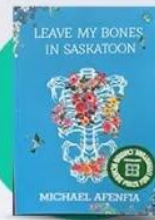
- Prose Fiction -



An Unusual Grief
by Yewande Omotoso



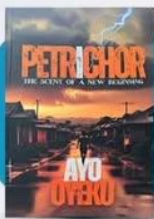
Fine Dreams
by Linda Masi



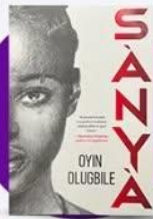
**Leave my Bones
in Saskatoon**
by Michael Afenfia



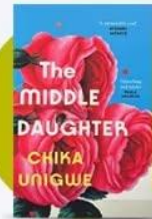
New York My Village
by Uwem Akpan



**Petrichor The Scent
of a New Beginning**
by Ayo Oyeku



Sanya
by Oyin Ologbile



The Middle Daughter
by Chika Unigwe



**The Road
to the Country**
by Chigozie Obioma



This Motherless Land
by Nikki May



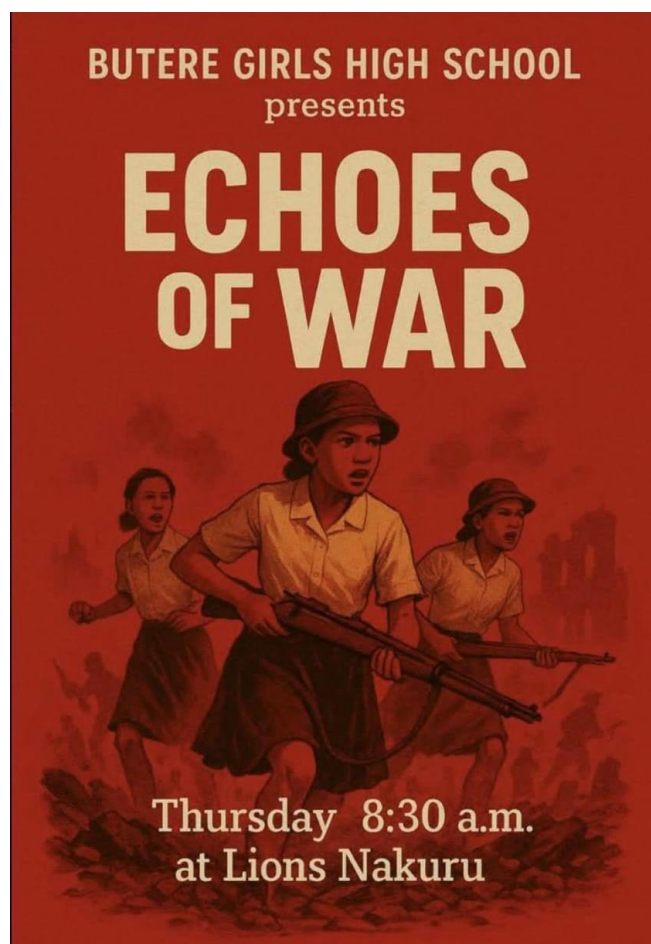
Water Baby
by Chioma Okereke



When We Were Fireflies
by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim

#TheNigeriaPrizeForLiteratureLonglistOf11

The Play That Shook a Nation!



'Drama unfolded' is a common opener for journalistic articles in the Kenyan press. But the phrase applied in more ways than one when *Echoes of War*, a popular stage play written for Butere Girls High School by politician and playwright **Cleophas Malala** reached the final level of competition.

Traditionally, the winning play is performed in the presence of the president. However, *Echoes of War* was seen by some as a tacit critique of the government (although it is set in a fictional place) and had youth activism as one of its themes. To make matters worse, the First Lady is herself an alumni Butere Girls. This made the show potentially embarrassing to the first family, should it have won, which was almost a given judging by its exemplary performance up till then.

The day before 63rd National Drama and Film Festivals would commence, the scriptwriter was prevented from accessing rehearsals by an estimated fifty police officers, and taken into police custody without a charge.

On April 9th 20025, Kenya Television Network (KTN) news reported that journalists were teargassed during a live broadcast in Nakuru while covering the blockage of Cleophas Malala by armed officers from accessing Butere Girls cast. On 10th April, KTN reported that 'students from Butere Girls High School have staged a walkout, minutes after arriving at the Melvin Jones Academy in Nakuru City for the 63rd National Drama and Film Festivals.'

Meanwhile, Malala posted the following message on social media:

'As I continue being held incommunicado at the Eldama Ravine Police Station, the drama team doing my play, ECHOES OF WAR is being forced to stage without costumes, soundtracks, or even a proper stage set. This is not just an attack on a play but a blow to the soul of the creative spirit. What a devastating day for the art!'

More teargas and police presence was evidenced on the material day of the festival, to prevent disgruntled students and agitated members of the public from coalescing into groups. The security overkill made *Echoes of War* go viral. It became the talk of the morning TV and radio shows and a trending on X, along with 'Cleophas Malala'. But was the heavy-handed response justified? **Nelson Rambez**, a human rights defender, posted this opinion on Facebook:

'Butere Girls Play, *Echoes of War*, is a masterpiece that depicts the best that art can offer. It mirrors our society as is currently and as such, this play deserves its rightful place and honour. To ban it now, despite its meritable performance right from the zonal to the regional finals is the highest level of brutality against children who have worked hard to earn their rightful spot at the National stage. The government cannot be so careless that it makes these kinds of mistakes every now and then. What is so big in a play that would cause a whole ministry to shake in fear and trepidation? Who told these officials that artistic work should only be validated when it mirrors the government in good light? Art, at its simplest core is the mirror of the society. We cannot allow a few people to meddle with the freedoms that are well enshrined and protected in our constitution.'

Opposition politicians also waded into the controversy. Standard Digital reported that KANU Party Chairman **Gideon Moi** had condemned attempts to stop Butere Girls from staging *Echoes of War* play, and intimidation of scriptwriter Malala, terming the move a ‘worrying’ trend of silencing dissent through extra-judicial means.

On Nation Television #FixingTheNation show, DAP-K Party leader **Eugene Wamalwa** described the government as being ‘afraid of its own children.’

The Kenya Times online media quoted former Deputy President **Rigathi Gachagua** as saying:

‘It is a shame of unimaginable proportion that dozens of DCI detectives in five vehicles have been dispatched to arrest and intimidate (former) Senator Cleophas Malala for writing a script that has won its way to the National Drama festival in Nakuru. The satirical play - *Echoes of War* - that strongly captures the lying culture of this administration, is innocent in itself in the literary universe, just to explain to those who feel threatened.’

Following his release from police custody, Malala said:

‘I have instructed my lawyer to get an order for *Echoes of War* be performed at State House.’

On Citizen TV’s #CitizenSundayLive, with journalists **Jeff Koinange** and **Olive Burrows**, Malala added:

‘I am a playwright. Before I became a politician, I was a playwright. I started writing plays twenty-five years ago. This *Echoes of War* is my 82nd play to do. From this perspective, I am an artist, a playwright and a director. We are going to perform the play using an adult cast and I want to assure Kenyans that *Echoes of War* can never be stopped.’

This was not the first time Malala had written up a storm. He is also the author of *Shackles of Doom*, another controversial satirical play staged during the **Uhuru Kenyatta** administration.

Fatma: A war against the religious leaders who chain our modern minds refusing to let us explore the possibilities of a new world.

Lennah: This is our war. A war against everyone who stands against us

Jamal: Comrades, we must liberate our generation. No matter the cost.

Fatma: Guys, we must rise against this tyranny. Anifa, what do we do?

Anifa: Relax, we shall stretch them beyond the elasticity limit. By the click of a single button, I will stir the pot just enough to make flames rise. Have a look. Enough content to trigger public anger. Everything has gone viral.

Lennah: The nation will bulge with fury.

Fatma: The streets will swell with unrest.

Malik: Walls of patience will collapse!

Anifa: This will definitely rattle the sultan.

Layla: Anifa, you are a genius! This will salvage Mustafa.

Anifa: Comrades, to the control room!

(At the palace)

Sultan: Mustafa, say your last words.

Mustafa: I have nothing to say.

Servant1: At the count of three...

Sultan: We shall end the era of errors. This will be a significant turning point in the history of our

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A sample page of the script, posted on social media.



Cleophas Malala

Poeticblood Publishers to Administer Asian Prizes in Africa



Dr. Pusetso Lame

Poeticblood Publishers (Botswana) has been granted the exclusive rights to organize and administer The Asian Prizes Regional Awards for Africa. The franchise rights were granted by The Asian Group of Literature in collaboration with Trogon Global. They authorize Poeticblood Publishers to organize, promote, and present The Asian Prizes Regional Awards for Africa across all 54 African nations. The franchise term runs from June 24, 2025, to June 24, 2030.

Commenting on the milestone, Dr. Lame Pusetso, Managing Director of Poeticblood Publishers, said:

‘We invite all talented writers, poets, and artists from across Africa to participate and showcase their extraordinary skills on this esteemed platform.’

Dr. Lame Pusetso is also a judge in the 2025 Asian Prize for Literature Poetry Category.

Cynthia Erivo Ruffles Feathers

Multi-talented British-based performer **Cynthia Erivo** has caused a major stir across the theatre world with her portrayal of the Jesus character in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The star’s cue-ball-bald head and long fake nails have singled her out for criticism. The idea of a female actress playing Jesus of Nazareth has also not gone down well with some conservative audiences. The fact that Cynthia Erivo recently played ‘the wicked witch of the West’ in a major revival of *Wicked* has only added fuel to the fire of controversy.

Actor **Kevin Sorbo** posted a clip of Cynthia as Jesus on X, with the caption: ‘This is demonic.’ On the same platform, **Kristan Hawkins**, a podcaster and president of Students for Life of America, commented:

‘LGBTQ+ actress Cynthia Erivo is playing Jesus in “Jesus Christ Superstar”. It’s no surprise she looks exactly like how demons have always been portrayed. And let’s be real...if you dress like a demon, act like a demon, and mock God like a demon...don’t be shocked when people call it what it is. This is intentional blasphemy from Hollywood.’ Despite the controversy, the long-running musical’s creator, Andrew Lloyd Webber, has defended Cynthia.

Cynthia Erivo is a Grammy-, Emmy-, and Tony-award-winning actress, singer, author, and producer.



Promotional artwork for Cynthia’s new single, ‘Replay’

Nordic Theatre Group Celebrates Milestone



Michael Omoke (left) in a scene from 'Miss Julie'
(Photo: M. Omoke)

ACT: New Nordic Voices, a Copenhagen-based theatre group, is celebrated their tenth anniversary this year. The troupe was founded by **Michael Omoke** between 26th June 2014 - 29th March 2015 in collaboration with thirty artists from twenty-one different nationalities. According to their website, thespians.dk, 'the original intent behind the creation of ACT/ New Nordic Voices is to aesthetically embrace & reflect cultural diversification.'

Marking the milestone, Omoke posted on Facebook:

'What began as a shared dream with no production to show—only belief—has grown into a cultural force and the pioneers of addressing diversity in performing arts in Denmark. This wasn't just the start of a theatre company—it was the beginning of a movement. One that would go on to redefine Nordic theatre, creating space for New Nordic Voices.'

Omoke was arguably the first thespian to stage Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* in the Nordic countries. This groundbreaking production came forty-four years after the play's original Broadway debut. This project marked the inaugural installment of the 'New Nordic Voices' series. The production premiered in Helsinki on International Women's Day and later toured Denmark and Stockholm, Sweden. Following the success of *for colored girls*, Michael, in collaboration with the company's Management Board, chose to rebrand the company as ACT: New Nordic Voices to accentuate the commitment to showcasing diverse voices and narratives from the Nordic region and beyond.

Other shows that the ensemble has thus far staged include:

Silenced No More - In partnership with the Royal Danish Embassy in Nairobi and the European Union.

The Merchant of Copenhagen - An Adaptation Of William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* by George Mungai.

An Enemy of The People – The play by Henrik Ibsen Adapted by Arthur Miller.

Miss Julie's Happy Valley - By Michael Omoke; reimagined from August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*

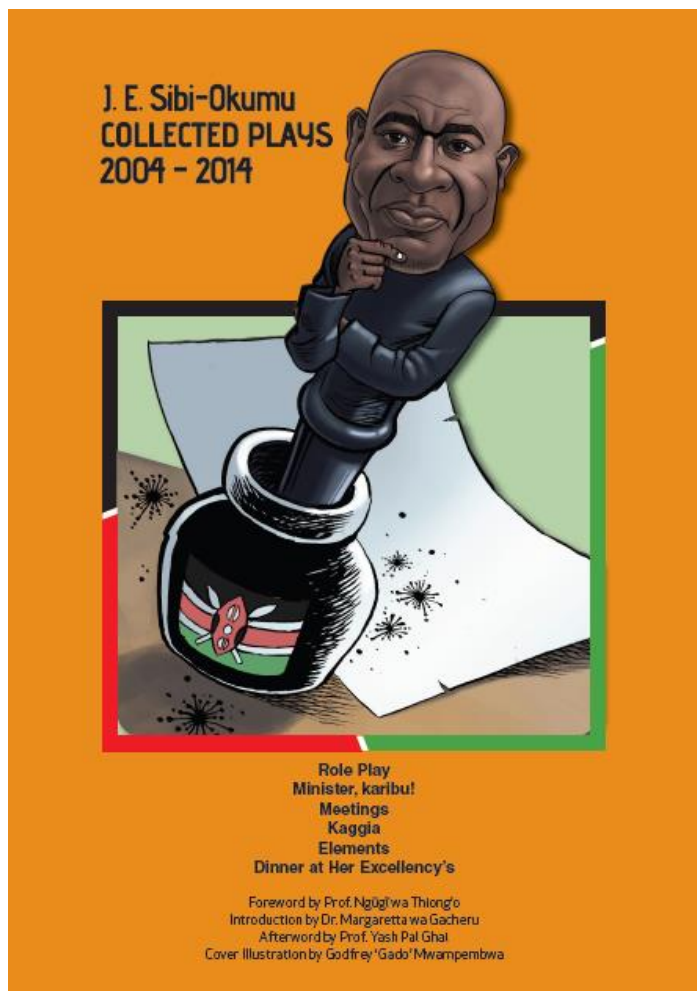


A scene from 'for colored girls' (Photo: M. Omoke)

'As the Artistic Director, I am committed to leading our vision of seeing multiple cultures share a stage and embracing the richness of perspectives. I curate a season of thought-provoking plays, hand-pick talented actors and directors, and bring captivating artistic concepts to life on stage. My passion for theatre extends beyond the creative process as I am always seeking potential venues, forging partnerships, and raising funds to ensure the success of each production...I am committed to bridging the gaps between different cultures and creating a safe space where all voices are heard and celebrated.' – Michael Omoke, Founder and Artistic Director of ACT: Nordic Voices

REVIEWS

John Sibi-Okumu's Collected Plays



Collected Plays (2004-2014) is a compilation of six original plays (or 'books', as they're known in the West) by veteran actor/director/playwright John Sibi-Okumu. There's a foreword by novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, an introduction by theatre reviewer Margaretta Wa Gacheru, and an afterword by constitutional affairs expert Prof. Yash Pal Ghai. Scripted over a decade and covering a wide range of themes, the works 'stand alone' and can be read in any order. I personally started with *Kaggia*, because it's the best-known one. I approached the work in a two-pronged manner: from a literary point of view, and from a stage performance point of view (imagining how the pieces would play out on a stage). The plays are not in the Standard Stage Play format but

As Shakespeare once wrote, 'The play is the thing'. So let's get right to the heart of the matter...

'Kaggia'

This is a biographical story of one of Kenya's national heroes – Bildad Kaggia. He was one of the notorious 'Kapenguria Six' British colonial-era prisoners, which included future Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta. Kaggia's story is unique in that he appeared to shun the limelight and died unsung and, some might say, destitute. In this piece, the playwright attempts to give the audience a closer look at Kaggia, the man, so that we may better understand his sacrifices and life choices. He does this, rather shrewdly, by introducing two characters – Stacey and Xan – who are making a movie about the leftist political leader. Through their conversations and planning, we get to learn the highlights of Kaggia's life - from circa 1921 to his death in 2005 - and legacy. Early in the story, filmmaker Stacy says:

'At one point I did see us shooting "scenes of breathtaking natural beauty" by bringing in Kaggia's childhood in 1920s Kenya. But if we then take him to Egypt, as a soldier then to the Holy Land and then to post-war England, before he starts his political career, we'd have a mega production...I am particularly interested in Kaggia's relationship with his wife. It's clearly a love story but not in the standard, Hollywood style: that's what I see as the pillar of our story.'

'Minister, Karibu'

This is the only comedy in the bunch. Like virtually everything else in the book, it was inspired by actual events. It is set during a fervent electioneering period. With the General Elections just a few months away, a host of big-name politicians converge in a hotel to hammer out a coalition deal. Meanwhile, two conmen - 'Chief' and his friend 'Macho' - hatch a plan that sets the stage for a *Government Inspector*-like farce. Chief reckons he resembles a powerful ex-minister called W. C.

are quite 'readable'.

called Hippo Dudi. The two decide to use their similarities with the public figures to rip off unsuspecting businesspeople and politicians in the heat of the campaigns. 'This is what I call an F.F.P,' Chief proclaims. 'A foolproof plan! What can possibly go wrong?'

It's not hard to see why this play was a success. The wit is as sharp as serpent's tooth. *Minister, Karibu!* was performed in English in 2012 and in Gikuyu in 2018. The English version was staged at the now-defunct Phoenix Theatre and directed by George Mungai. The Gikuyu version was performed at the Ukumbi Mdogo hall, Kenya National Theatre, and directed by Tash Mitambo. The plot could use some further tightening. For example, why would crooks bother to attempt a mobile airtime con while at the same engineering an armed robbery for a large amount of cash (that would be much more valuable and easier to utilize)?

Dinner at Her Excellency's

Unlike the others, *Dinner at Her Excellency's* was written for radio, not the stage. In it, the Ambassador of an unnamed European country invites several professionals to dinner at her official residence. The objective is to pick their brains on the mood in Kenya, as the country hurtles towards a referendum on constitutional change. Like the food described in it, *Dinner at Her Excellency's* is tantalizing. However, as pointed out by Prof. Ghai in the Afterword, it could have dug deeper into the issues it addresses. It also needs more SFX (sound effects) and Stage Directions as we cannot see the players at all.

Meetings

Meetings is clearly warning against Post-Elect Violence (PEV), as witnessed in Kenya in 2007/2008. In it, several groups of people hold series of enlightening discussions in the run-up to a wedding between 'Zeke' and 'Faoulata'. On the surface, it looks like the young lovebirds' engagement would be a natural fit, but their families' history and 'baggage' cannot be ignored.

This inter-generational play returns us to ancient oral traditions without being a 'period piece'. It's a brilliant way to teach history without being pedantic. Covering

Matumbato while Macho could pass for a youth leader

arguably the most complex and sombre. Unfortunately, it suffers the same loose copy-editing and over-punctuation as the others. Take a line like:

FAOULATA (Pause.): Zeke, do you think I'm a gold digger?

Why do you need the full stop after the word 'Pause'? It's not even a sentence. On Pg 97, we find the line, '**Your father and his friends were caught and to Nyayo House, which is the yellowish building across the road.**' Perhaps that should have been '...caught and **whisked/taken** to Nyayo House'? I can visualize an actor reading that line and furrowing his brow. What's interesting is that this book had two text editors. Perhaps for his next collection of plays, the author should hire *three* editors!

Role Play

Here, we get different views of contemporary Kenya, from the perspectives of diverse characters: an ageing man, a poetically-inclined house help, a young Black lady, a Kenyan-Indian, a White expatriate (or Kenyan Cowboys/Cowgirls, are they are colloquially referred to), and so on. Historical Kenyan events (such as the 1982 coup attempt) and race dynamics are expertly brought to the fore. It's as if the author is subtly inviting dialogue on those matters, as opposed to stereotypes, conspiracies and occasional violence. I expected this to be the weakest piece in the book (because it's the oldest one) but it turned out to be probably the most skillfully written and thought-provoking.

Role Play was first staged at The Courtyard Theatre on 3rd June 2004. It featured a multi-racial cast. Most actors played more than one role in the show, as the title suggests. In 2005, the show was reprised at the Alliance Francaise de Nairobi. Looking at the black-and-white photos of the past performances (contained in the book) will bring a tinge of nostalgia and emotion to many who are familiar with the local theatre scene. Two beautiful and talented actors therein are no longer with us. Janet Kanini (who was Black) played the roles of 'Dudu Smith' (a White expatriate) and 'Trupti Shah' (a South Asian) in the original production. Lorna Irungu played those roles in the reprise. May both their souls rest in

43 pages, it's the longest arrow in the quiver, and

Elements'

Originally written and performed in French, this is an engaging monologue spiced up by impressions of various world accents. The protagonist, a 50-year-old female writer, has a diverse cultural heritage which makes her ethnicity difficult for people to pin down when she's travelling around the world. It's a relatively short piece in which the solo performer gives us an insight into her inner and outer worlds. I wouldn't call it 'short and sweet' because it's not *sweet*. It's realistic – and reality is not 'sweet'. Behind glamorous facades and admirable families, we see, are a litany of secrets and heartbreaks.

I am not sure about the relevance of the title, although it probably makes more sense in the original French. It has the same editing issues as the rest of the book eg. 'gradmother' instead of 'grandmother' (Pg. 161). All told, *Elements* is a shattering drama.

The book

This collection of plays was published in 2021 by Jahazi Press (Nairobi). It was officially launched at the Alliance Française de Nairobi during the inaugural NYrobi Fest. Textual editing was done by Andrew Maina and Stanley Kiio. The cover illustration is by famed cartoonist 'Gado' (Godfrey Mwampembwa). The book has a matte cover and an interior consisting of 186 pages of art paper. The book is enriched by precious black-and-white photos of the actual works on stage (save for *Dinner at Her Excellency's*). The photos are made more poignant by the fact that some of the actors are no longer among the quick.

Collected Plays (2004-2014) has well-drawn characters, colloquial dialogue, and relatable themes. What we have here is a major playwright at work, probably our generation's August Wilson. In the Foreword, **Ngugi wa Thiong'o** describes the author as 'a many sided intellectual' and remarks that 'it is on stage that Sibio-Okumu's various gifts have shone the most brightly.'

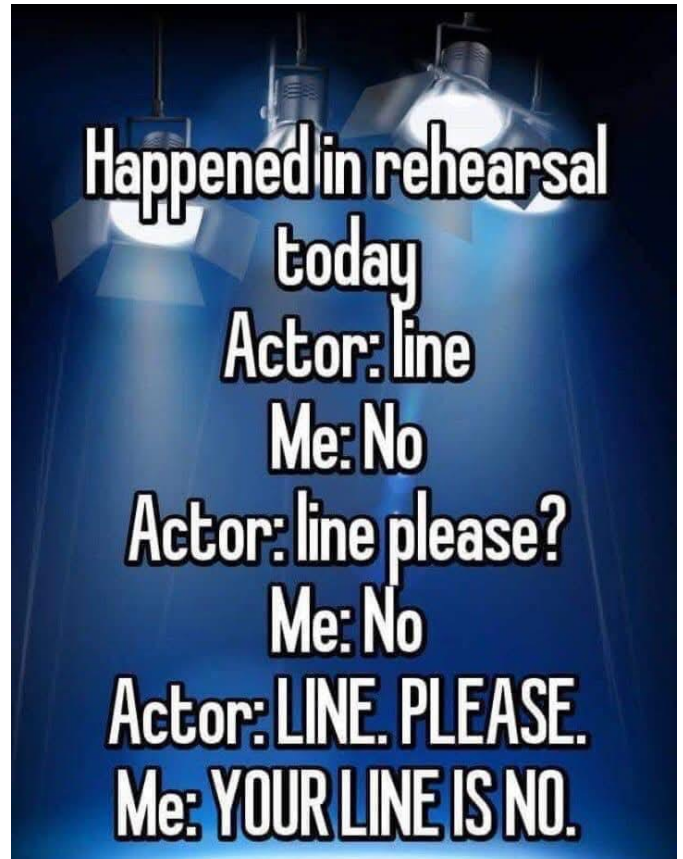
The editing could have been tighter. What was the rush? Some sentences go on for three or four lines, broken only by commas. That can't be good for speech.

eternal peace.

(A TV anchor might throw a fit if they had to read such run-on sentences on live television.) Typos exist, eg. '...inferno is egulfling', instead of 'engulfing' (Pg. 75). Luckily, for the author/publisher, if the plays are staged in future, the audience won't see the typos!

Reading this bibliography of relatable plays makes one wonder why some theatre troupes *still* insist on (illegally) adapting foreign fare, especially farces. As the late Prof. Chris Wanjala would have said, we already have a plentiful 'harvest of plays' right here in our own country. And they cover a wide range of themes. Let us not be like the villainous/gullible 'baddies' in this collection. JSO has held up a mirror to our society. Do we fancy the reflection? To borrow the late politician Kenneth Matiba's catchphrase: 'Let the people decide!'

Collected Plays (2004-2014) is available at Prestige Bookshop for Kshs 1,500 (USD\$ 11).



OPPORTUNITIES

The 2025 Alexander Nderitu Prize for World Literature



The African Griot Review is proud to announce the return of the Alexander Nderitu World Literature Prize! The 2025 Edition will honour original, one-act stage plays from anywhere in the world. A single winner will be chosen by the founder of the prize, Kenyan-born writer and critic Alexander Nderitu. The longlist will be announced in December 2025. The shortlist will be announced in February 2026 and the eventual winner will be unveiled at a literary event in April 2026. The winning playwright will walk away with a cash prize of Kshs 50,000, a one-year online promotion campaign by IT firm Websoft Interactive and grace the cover of *The African Griot Review* magazine. The 2024 winner of the prize was Nigeria's **Haliru Ali Musa**, for his short story, *The Pregnant Ghost*. There is no entry fee.

ELIGIBILITY AND RULES

Territories: The contest is open to writers anywhere in the world, aged over 18.

Language: All entries must be in English. Translations and adaptations are not eligible.

Work: The entry must not be optioned, commissioned, performed or been previously published anywhere, including online. Simultaneous submissions are fine but please inform us if your work is published or staged elsewhere during the judging process. We're looking for a play that is roughly 10 – 15 minutes long. A minute of dialogue is roughly one page of script. The playwright's name must not appear anywhere on the submitted document. One may submit up to three different plays. Each play must have only one writer, no collaborators. While not essential, the Standard Stage Play format is recommended. Plagiarism and assistance from Artificial Intelligence (AI) writing tools are grounds for instant disqualification.

Entry fee: None

Submissions: All entries are to be submitted in Adobe PDF format to: [submissions\(at\)theafricangriot.com](mailto:submissions(at)theafricangriot.com). In the subject tab, type: '2025 Alexander Nderitu Prize for World Literature Submission'. In the body of the e-mail furnish the following information:

- **Title of your play**
- **Your full name (or pen name used)**
- **Your nationality**
- **Your age**
- **Your daytime telephone number**
- **Your preferred email address**
- **A brief bio (300 words max)**

Add your short play as a PDF attachment. (Remember not to include any identifiers in the attachment.) The Judge's decision is final. The winning entry will be published in *The African Griot Review*.

Judging: This year's contest will be judged by award-winning writer and critic [Alexander Nderitu](#). Apart from penning his own stage plays, he has also authored two non-fiction books on the theatre business - *Kenyan Theatre: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* and *This Time With Feeling*.

Dates: The contest opens on 15 August 2025 and closes on **15 November 2025**.

For any inquiries regarding the Prize, please email: [admin\(at\)theafricangriot.com](mailto:admin(at)theafricangriot.com)

▪ **The 2026 Commonwealth Short Story Prize**

Prize: GBP £5,000 for the overall winner and GBP £2,500 each for five regional winners.

Deadline: 1 November 2025

Apply: <https://commonwealthfoundation.com/short-story-prize/>

▪ **7th Beeta Playwright Competition (2025): A Platform for Nigerian Playwrights**

Prize: Cash, a publishing deal, and a workshop opportunity.

Deadline: 30 August 2025 (Submission Workshop), 30 September 2025 (Final plays)

Apply: <https://www.creativewritingnews.com/the-beeta-playwright-competition/>

▪ **Sharjah Art Foundation Publishing Grant**

Prize: USD 15,000

Deadline: 17 August 2025

Apply: <https://forms.sharjahart.org/Open-Call-Publishing-Grant-En-link>

▪ **JIAS Creative Writing Workshop 2025**

Prize: Six-week, fully funded residency is designed for emerging African writers working in poetry or short fiction

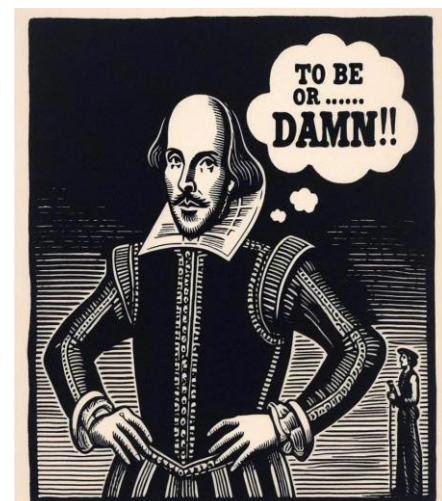
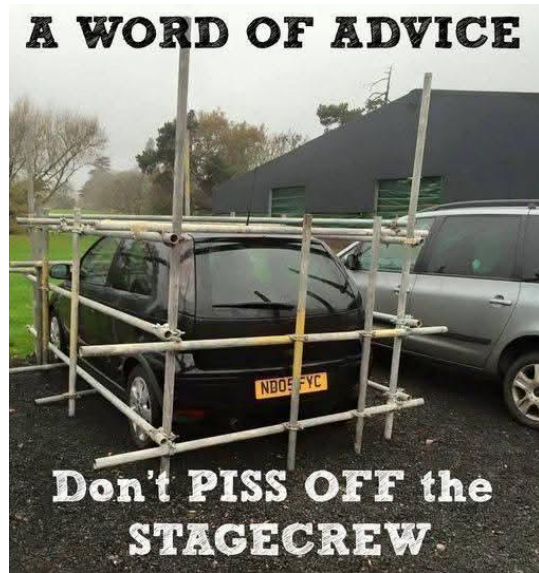
Deadline: 30 July 2025

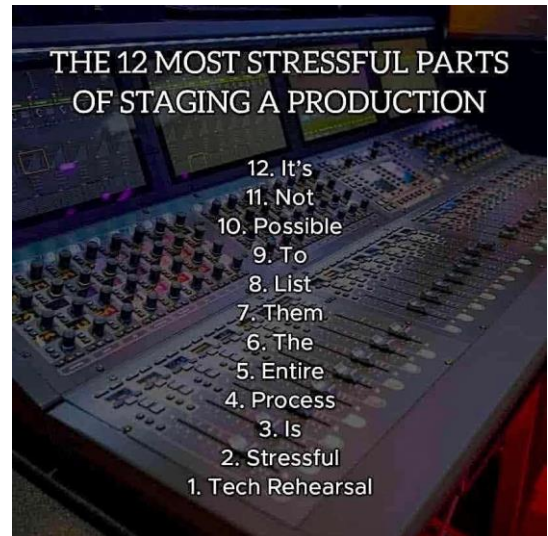
Residency Dates: 15 September – 31 October 2025

Eligibility: Emerging writers based on the African continent

Apply: https://linktr.ee/JIAS_UJ

MEMES OF THE MONTH





"So I guess what I'm trying to say is...if you learn the song before coming to rehearsal, we'll be much more productive."



WISDOM OF THE ELDERS

'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.' - Peter Brook

'The word "playwright" is spelled that way for a very good reason. Shipwrights build ships, wheelwrights fashion wheels, and playwrights construct plays.' - Oscar-winning actor David Niven,
The Moon's a Balloon (memoir)

'I consider myself a storyteller. I don't know any other way...I have a lot of stories to tell and what I write about are human experiences.' - Tyler Perry, thespian and media mogul

'I do believe that there are African Americans who have thick accents. My mom has a thick accent; my relatives have thick accents. But sometimes you have to adjust when you go into the world of film, TV, theatre, in order to make it accessible to people.'
- Viola Davis, American actress

'Some years ago, I was invited to speak in Houston, Texas. They said I was a founder of "postmodern theatre". So I said to my office, "This is ridiculous, for me to go and speak about postmodern theatre when I don't know what it means, but... they're paying me a lot of money, so I'll go".' - Robert Wilson

'This is the true joy in life, being recognized by yourself as a mighty one, being a force of nature instead of a feverish clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for a moment. I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.' - George Bernard Shaw, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

'In *The Government Inspector*, I tried to gather in one heap all that was bad in Russia. I wished to turn it all into ridicule. The real impression produced was that of fear. Through the laughter that I have never laughed more loudly, the spectator feels my bitterness and sorrow.'
- Nikolai Gogol

'Actors kind of fall into two categories for me: human puppets who are very good at puppeteering themselves (and) actors who are lost in it and actually feel what their characters are feeling.'
- Four-time Oscar nominee Jason Reitman

'In the end I think theatre has only one subject: justice.'
- Edward Bond

'I respect the art. I get mad when I hear about these actors that get paid twenty million dollars a movie to act - and the key word is "act" - but they pay these (monies) to dudes that never *act*...Pay that to the dudes that deserve it, like Pacino, De Niro, Denzel - those are some *actors*, man.'
- Aries Spears, US comedian

'It (live theatre) is a way of escaping. It provides some place where you can go and, for two or three hours, be transformed into a place where all of your day-to-day worries disappear...It just gives you a window of

something you may not have a chance, independently, to see on your own. And it's not all happy. Theatre encompasses drama, it encompasses comedy.'

- Rich Wilson (USA), director of *Don't Drink the Water* (stage play)

'Acting is really very simple. All you have to do is tell the truth. And if you can fake that, you've got it made.'

- George Burns, US entertainer

'It is insane to be in competition with others. Work out a method where you are able to support your friends, your peers, and those with whom you live, while at the same time working very hard to mind your own business and tend to the most important task you have: To improve yourself and use yourself in the best way to earn your place on land. The world will always try to make you think about how you're doing against the others, but ignore this. You need to do--and have to do--the work you were put here to do.'

- Arthur Miller, famous American playwright

'So, I began writing when I was at drama school trying to be an actor. And it was a drama school where we were encouraged to create our own theatre. And so I began to write then. And I discovered a real love of writing; baby steps I was taking all those years ago. And when I left theatre school, I founded a theatre company called Theatre Black Women, which was Britain's first such Black theatre company. We formed it because we wanted to get work. There was no work for us. People wouldn't employ Black women, really.

And also, we wanted to be at the helm of our own creative process and productivity. So we formed the theatre company and wrote plays for the theatre company. So I then wrote plays for the company. And then I left theatre behind, eventually. By the end of my twenties, I wasn't in theatre but I was continuing to write. And my first book was published in 1994. So writing came to me, really, through theatre.'

- Booker Prize winner Bernadine Evaristo on 'The Process of Writing and Getting Published' (Louisiana Channel/YouTube)

'I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.'

- Thornton Wilder

'Great theatre is about challenging how we think and encouraging us to fantasize about a world we aspire to.'

- Willem Dafoe

'That's the magic of art and the magic of theatre: it has the power to transform an audience, an individual, or en masse, to transform them and give them an epiphanal experience that changes their life, opens their hearts and their minds and the way they think.'

- Brian Stokes Mitchell

'Make them laugh, make them cry, and hack to laughter. What do people go to the theatre for? An emotional exercise. I am a servant of the people. I have never forgotten that.'

- Mary Pickford

'Unless the theatre can ennoble you, make you a better person, you should flee from it.'

- Constantin Stanislavski

'To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. "Theatre" is fake... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. "Performance" is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.'

- Marina Abramovic

‘The theatre is your pulpit - it is your church - and you want to be a priest in your church, and that’s what I believe in.’ - Steven Berkoff

‘A theatre, a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance.’
- Dario Fo

‘The monologue is one of the most difficult and interesting forms of theatre for an actor to learn.’
- Pratik Gandhi

‘I temporarily became a surgeon for *Memory of Love*. I spent two weeks in an operating theatre, watching amputations, and I loved it.’ - Aminatta Forna

‘My parents would always take me to the theatre, and I was bored a lot of the time. Loads of Shakespeare, and I didn’t know what the hell was going on. And then, when I was 13, we went to see *The Cherry Orchard*, and it changed everything for me.’ - Vanessa Kirby

‘Had I not done Shakespeare, Pinter, Moliere and things such as *Godspell* - I played Judas in a hugely successful production before I did *Elm Street* - I’d probably be on a psychiatrist’s couch saying: “Freddy ruined me”. But I’d already done thirteen movies and years of non-stop theatre.’ - Robert Englund

‘The biggest difference between the two is how intimate the theatre is. Film is so different because, when you’re on set, even if a joke lands, no one is going to laugh, because nobody wants to mess up a take.’
- Renee Rapp

‘The duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them.’
- George Bernard Shaw

‘Like The Bard once said, all the world’s a stage – and Charlie has been booed off them all!’
– Mike Tyson making fun of Charlie Sheen on TV’s *The Comedy Central Roast of Charlie Sheen*

‘This above all: to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.’
- From William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*



ATTENTION, THEATRE GROUPS WORLDWIDE!



Performance rights for every Alexander Nderitu stage play, including 'The Talking of Trees' and 'Hannah and the Angel', now available!

Contact admin@theafricangriot.com for details.

