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Review

JANE PLASTOW, *A History of East African Theatre, I: Horn of Africa*

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culture that is presented in *Black Land*. If anything, the two examples are only mentioned to highlight the need for careful reading of the histories of countries like Ethiopia, which as the author demonstrates, are prone to occupy mythical and ambiguous imaginative spaces internationally.

In sum, Nadia Nurhusein demonstrates how, by bringing Ethiopia and its history into dialogue with African American literary studies, one can unveil the complexities behind African American questions, opinions, beliefs about transcontinental racial solidarities and grander questions about the feasibility of building a race-based empire that has been the focus of works by famous African American literati.

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JANE PLASTOW, *A History of East African Theatre, I: Horn of Africa*, Transnational Theatre Histories (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). xvi, 305 pp. Price: €58.84. ISBN: 978-3-030-47271-9.

A History of East African Theatre, volume I, is part of a multi-volume project to document and write a history of theatre in the Horn of Africa. This first volume focuses on three theatre cultures, Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean. Subsequent volumes intend to cover six other East African countries (p. 2). In this volume, Jane Plastow presents the transnational links of these regions through theatre while providing the space to discuss events particular to each country. She argues that ‘theatre did not exist prior to the colonial period and that all current manifestations are hybrids’ (p. 5) and lays down this premise as the foundation for her discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century theatre in East Africa. The outcome presents a socio-politically contextualized and—within an East African context—internationally linked century in which theatre was introduced and developed in the region.

This volume is divided into three chapters and an introduction which lays out the purposes and the goals of the book. The three chapters present excerpts of selected plays alongside a politico-historical presentation of the country under discussion. The first chapter focuses on Somali theatre and the history of its development. Somali theatre is shown to have advanced a Somali linguistic trait—poetry and song—with it; *qaraami* and *belwo* (p. 62). It is also unique for its largely unscripted (especially until the 1970s) and improvised nature, whereby a play performed today will feature different conversations and dialogues in subsequent performances (p. 73). Plastow also shows how transnational the Somali play is as it could easily be reproduced in all parts of Eastern Africa where Somali was spoken, i.e. Djibouti, Aden, Somaliland, and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia

(p. 52). Another notable attribute of Somali theatre is its function in political commentary and resistance to power (pp. 110–116). She writes, ‘from the mid-twentieth century through to the civil war of 1990, Somali theatre was both a popular and a socio-political cultural force’ (p. 51).

Chapters two and three treat Ethiopian and Eritrean theatre. Plastow has researched both countries together and the chapters are only divided along time-periods, i.e. chapter two studies Ethiopian-Eritrean theatre from 1921–1974 and chapter three studies 1973–2016. Acknowledging the shared history of the two countries, Plastow embarks on a historical journey to discuss the introduction and growth of theatre in the two countries. From here, she discusses a host of selected playwrights and plays, and the different phases theatre underwent. She establishes how theatre was first used for didactic purposes, and that later, upon the return of students who had studied abroad (Mangəstu Läm̄ma and Säggaye Gäbräm̄adhən, among others), Ethiopian theatre was to experiment with absurdism, realism, dramatic play and so on.

Plastow credits emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase’s love of theatre and support of it—resulting in the building of theatres and schemes for sending students abroad to study theatre as the main reasons theatre persists in being urban Ethiopia’s most admired form of entertainment to the present day (pp. 190, 284). Subsequent rulers were compelled to take theatre into consideration upon taking power, either implementing theatre for their own propagandist purposes (Därg, r. 1974–1991) or censoring it for its role in promoting dissent (EPRDF, r. 1991–2019). In the third chapter Plastow discusses how slapstick comedy increasingly dominated the Ethiopian theatre scene, due to the audience’s overriding preference for comedy and as theatres are preoccupied with making money, they produce and promote the staging of comedy works to secure a large turnout.

Regarding Eritrean theatre, Plastow states how, similar to Ethiopia and Somalia, theatre was introduced and developed via European schools or individuals who had been educated in such schools. She informs the reader that after Italy’s defeat in World War II Eritrean theatre troupes used plays to voice their opinion in favour of Eritrea’s unification with Ethiopia. Later, with Ethiopia’s ‘annexation’ of Eritrea, Plastow shows how secessionists utilised theatre for propaganda, as a major tool of the liberation struggle. However, despite the varying historical trajectories, the book shows how the Orthodox church tradition and translations of works from Amharic to Təgrāñña form links between the two countries’ theatre traditions. In the end, with Eritrea’s liberation and the later war with Ethiopia over Badme, theatre was brought under strict surveillance by the tyrannical Isaias Afewerqi. Apparently Eritrean theatre producers still try to bring outside help to educate and develop Eritrean theatre but not much can be said in certainty about the state of the art today.

Plastow's personal experience as a theatre scholar, director, and professor combined with her connections to playwrights, actors, and directors of the region imbue authenticity and value to her research. Among the book's recurring themes (aside from the modernity vs tradition trope that is addressed in all three traditions) is her discussion of women actors and playwrights in the region. Her conversations and fieldwork data provide telling insight into what and how women in the field feel and think, society's perception of them, and the evolving place they occupy in the societies they perform and direct in. This evolution of acceptance is visible largely in Ethiopia where cinema acting provides a major source of wealth and its affluence extends to theatre workers who now enjoy some freedom in their professional choices.

Some comments need to be made on the sources and historical interpretations of the book. Aside from being a general comment about the editors of the volume who could have done more to support Plastow in the edition of the book, several theatre titles are wrongly translated or spelt, and some inaccuracies such as the introductory comment claiming the Ethiopian New Years falls in August when it is actually September. Of more prime importance are Plastow's sometimes questionable historical sources. Ryszard Kapuściński, for instance is not considered a credible historian of Ethiopia, but *The Emperor* is cited and appears to provide most of Plastow's understanding of Ethiopian history. On several occasions, Plastow writes of an alleged Amhara dominance in Ethiopian history which is a contested historical interpretation. Alarming, Ethiopians who speak Amharic are dubbed 'Amhara' and all plays in Amharic are categorically called 'Amhara plays'. This is a grave concern as contemporary Ethiopians are engulfed in debate on whether languages should determine one's ethnic identity. All this could and should be amended in a highly welcome and more precise second edition.

Nonetheless, these are but minor comments to a volume that is a great survey and starter for students of theatre in the Horn of Africa and for the generally curious reader. Plastow's discussion of the selected theatrical productions from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea serve as a useful record, illuminating an art form that had become, at one point or another, a main entertainment source for the region's people.

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