



Aethiopica 15 (2012)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

ABONEH ASHAGRIE, Addis Ababa University

Article

Children's Theatre in Ethiopia

Aethiopica 15 (2012), 105–117

ISSN: 2194–4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

Children's Theatre in Ethiopia

ABONEH ASHAGRIE, Addis Ababa University

Introduction

Since the beginning of theatre arts in Ethiopia in 1921, children had been performing plays merely for the satisfaction of adult audience for more than six decades. Although the Ethiopian theatre started to advance towards professionalism in early 1940s, for years it could not establish an institution that targeted the entertainment of children with the given form of the art. This situation, however, was reversed in the 1980s with a practical introduction to the nature of the art at Addis Ababa University, and the founding of Children's Entertainment and Enrichment Department by the Ministry of Culture and Sport, which later progressed to Children and Youth Theatre.

The Children and Youth Theatre in the last 22 years has undergone various developmental stages, while maintaining a professional standard and is nowadays considered one of the best children's art centre in Africa.

This article therefore, attempts to provide general information on the historical development of Ethiopian children's theatre to international theatre scholars, hoping that it will contribute to the total comprehension of Ethiopian theatre in particular, and African theatre in general.

Early Phase: Dramatic Elements in Children's Tradition

Children's theatre is a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. There was no a single permanent place allocated for the production of children's play until 1989.

This, however, does not mean that Ethiopian children have had no dramatic experience at all. The Ethiopian children, for centuries, have been involved in folk games that embodied dramatic elements in their content.

Children's games like ባል፣ እና፣ ሚስት (*Bal anna mist* "Husband and Wife"), ሌባ፣ እና፣ ፖሊስ (*Leba anna Polis* "Thief and Cop") are few examples that demonstrate to what extent dramatic element in the forms of story, role division, mimics, dialogue, costume and property have sufficiently existed in Ethiopia folk practice.

The Ethiopian tradition imposes social obligation on community elders to guide children to be considerate of their environment and is imbued with moral qualities which seems to have necessitated the formulation of dramatic elements in the folk media. Community elders and parents, under the pretext of entertainments used to transfer accumulated knowledge and ex-

perience to children by means of these dramatic elements. Stories and games are dramatized to children either under the shade of trees in late afternoons or around fire places in the evenings. Children's participation in the performance has always been highly encouraged. Such transfer of dramatic elements from generation to generation has guaranteed the sustainability of dramatic performance in crude forms.

The First Ethiopian Adult's Drama in Children's Style

Even when we look back 90 years from now and observe how the Aristotelian theatre was introduced in Ethiopia, we realize that it had a similarity with the motives and goals of our ancestors who worked hard to educate children through dramatic means.

The first Ethiopian play script written for an adult audience by Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklämaryam had its origin in *Fabula*, a folk tale the author had composed in verse in 1912 to appeal to the moral sense of Iyasu, who was chosen by Emperor Mənilək as the heir to the throne when he was still a child.¹

As a concerned member of the aristocracy, Täklä Ḥawaryat felt that the "Playboy manner and inordinate sexual appetite"² of the young prince would be rectified if approached through didactic literature that teaches moral lessons. It was the folk tales he had written for this specific purpose that Täklä Ḥawaryat transformed into a drama under the title **ፋብላ ፡ የአውሬዎች ፡ ኮሜዲያ** ፡ (*Fabula: Yä'awrewočč komediya*, "Fable. The Comedy of Animals") in 1920–21.³ This play was produced for the royal family and the aristocracy in *Cinema Terrasse* at *Hotel de France* in the presence of the then Crown Prince Täfäri Mäkönnən.⁴

The aristocracy, however, was not pleased with the production, for it was interpreted by the audience as satiric, and criticized the reign of Empress Zäwditu. The consequence was an immediate ban on this successful and pioneering play, and a temporal impediment to the growth of theatre in Ethiopia.⁵

Despite the childish nature of the form and content, the effect triggered by *Fabula: Yä'awrewočč komediya* on the adult audience was serious. The simplicity of almost all the dramatic elements and the use of animal characters, as well as the involvement of boys as actors in the stage production,⁶

¹ TÄKLÄ ḤAWARYAT TÄKLÄMARYAM 1913: 1–2.

² BAHRU ZEWDE 1991: 121.

³ KANE 1975: 7.

⁴ TÄKLÄ ḤAWARYAT TÄKLÄMARYAM 1998 [2006]: xxxvii.

⁵ GÉRARD 1971: 286.

⁶ ABONEH ASHAGRIE 2012: 1–2.

however, fairly put *Fabula: Yä'awrewočč komediya* under the category of children's play. Thus, we can safely say that the first European styled play staged in Ethiopia had the tendency of being children's art, though it was intended for adult audience.

Children in School Drama: Acting for Adult Audience

The development of formal education, particularly the founding of modern schools in early 20th century laid a fertile ground for Ethiopian children to engage in theatre experiences. The expatriate teaching staff, that had exposure to the theatre arts before they came to Ethiopia, introduced acting techniques to students, and then started staging plays mostly for the consumption of Crown Prince Täfäri Mäkönnən and members of the aristocracy.

Märsä'e Həzən⁷ remembers that the play productions shown in Amharic at the *Glaze Hotel* in front of the Crown Prince in April 1926, and the full-length drama that was staged in May 1926 to raise funds in order to educate freed slaves in a boarding school, were performed by children from Täfäri Mäkönnən School.

Likewise, students of Mənilək II Secondary School performed in plays directed by Yoftahe Nəguše and Mäl'aku Bəggosäw in July 1927 and 1928.

The steps taken by Emperor Həylä Šəllase's government in constructing halls in the Täfäri Mäkönnən School's compound in 1928,⁸ and the establishing of semi-professional theatre under the administration of Mənilək School in 1935⁹ were historical in initiating a strong relationship between children and the theatre arts. It is noteworthy to mention here that in 1928, children and expatriate teachers of Täfäri Mäkönnən and Mənilək II Secondary School advanced to producing dramas in English, French and Italian.

The incorporation of drama in Mənilək II Secondary School's curriculum also took theatre to the grass root level by involving children in all class rooms. Ladislas Farago¹⁰ who visited the school in 1935 states that "... Minilik School had a pleasant curriculum, starting with lesson and ending with acting." Such a trend obviously broadened the opportunity for Ethiopian children to familiarize themselves more with theatre arts, both as performers and audiences.

The advent of Italian aggression on Ethiopia during World War II was another factor that prompted the involvement of children in theatre activities.

⁷ MÄRSÄ'E HƏZÄN WÄLDÄQIRQOS 1999 [2007]: 305–308.

⁸ *Ibid.* 305–308.

⁹ FARAGO 1935: 170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 171.

Yoftahe Nəguše, Mäl'aku Bäggosäw, K. Nalvandian,¹¹ Kántiba Dästa and Haddis 'Alämayyāhu¹² on the eve of the Italian invasion in 1934 and 1935, continuously produced agitation plays with school children to enhance the feeling of Ethiopian national patriotism within the public.

After the victory over Italian Fascism in the early 1940s, Yoftahe continued to produce plays with children actors at schools for parents, and at the palace for the Royal family and members of the aristocracy. Emperor Həylä Šəllase, well aware of the value of theatre when he was in exile in England during the Italian invasion, began to encourage gifted child actors after attending performances on his birth and coronation days. He even went to the extent of instructing his grandchildren to show religious plays to the Royal family on Christmas.¹³

The contribution made by Sənəddu Gäbru in providing a unique opportunity for female students to participate in theatre production at the Empress Menen Girls Boarding School (ጅtege Mänän School), particularly between 1947 to 1950, was historical. Girls from this school used to perform both female and male characters on campus for parents; at the palace for the Emperor, the Royal family and members of the aristocracy, and occasionally at the *Cinema Ethiopia* for the general public.¹⁴

The publications of full-length plays in the mid 20th century by notable Ethiopian playwrights have also created a favorable condition for children to have an easy access to plays. This situation has motivated Boy Scout clubs and members of the Orthodox Christian Association in various schools to engage in drama production, with the intention of raising funds for their organizations. Through these objectives, the concept and the taste of the art has been disseminated to a considerable number of Ethiopian children.

Children in Political Play: Towards Martyrdom and Freedom

Such a participation of children in school productions developed over the years the awareness regarding the efficacy of the art, and enabled radical students to use drama as a weapon for their struggle against *Därg's* barrack-socialism in the early years of the Ethiopian Revolution. The clandestine youth-wing of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP) staged various *agitprop* plays in urban residential areas to mobilize the community to rise up against Mängəštu Həylä Maryam's dictatorial regime. In return, the regime brutally massacred the children who participated in such a

¹¹ MULUGETA SEYUM 1964 [1972]: 43–46.

¹² HADDIS ALĀMAYYĀHU 1985 [1993]: 33.

¹³ MINISTRY OF INFORMATION 1957 [1965]: 362.

¹⁴ SƏNEDDU GÄBRU 1949 [1957]: 17–20.

'counter revolutionary activity'. It is not to be forgotten that children performing an anti-government play in the vicinity of Märkato in 1977 had been gunned down right on the stage.

Likewise, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (later to be known as the Amhara National Democratic Movement), and Eritrean People's Liberation Front considered *agitprop* musical drama as the best instrument to mobilize the peasantry into the armed struggle against Mängəstu's dictatorial regime. The art troupes of these organizations performed musical dramas almost in all countrysides of their target regions, whereby drama, in its edutainment form was introduced to the rural children of Təgray, Amhara and Eritrea. Some members of these art troupes have paid with their life while accomplishing their mission.¹⁵

In the meantime, those children thrown into jail in 1977 and 1978, for opposing Mängəstu's dictatorial regime in urban areas used drama as a means to freedom. Due to the infiltration of EPRP sympathizers into Mängəstu's party, the government was deluded that 'counter revolutionary' children could be converted revolutionary through cadre's teaching. The children in custody were persuaded to denounce their previous political stand in public and prove with tangible evidence their loyalty to the government. The children used this to their advantage and engaged actively in producing fake 'pro-government' political poetry, music and drama to raise fund for *Yännat hagär tərri* ("Call of Mother Land"), the government's project to generate finance and material resource for war against freedom fighters in the northern and eastern part of the country. As a result, many children who had been accused of changing their political stance by the regime were released from jails.

The Beginning of proper Children's theatre

No proper children's theatre was staged in Ethiopia up until the 1980s. One of the reasons was lack of awareness of the technical demarcation between adult's and children's theatre. Children's drama, in its peculiar form and content was introduced in Ethiopia by Professor Robert McLaren and Professor Peter Harrop in the Theatre Arts Department at the Addis Ababa University in 1980, with the production of ተንኮሊንናው ካብኩሳ (*Tänkoläññaw Käbbädä* "Cunning Käbbädä"). The drama was later performed for St. Mary Elementary School children, where it was greeted with enthusiasm.

The success and the effect of the drama then motivated an insight to the theatre graduates to convince the Ministry of Culture and Sport that atten-

¹⁵ IYASU BÄRÄHE, interview 2007.

tion should be given to children's theatre production. As a result, the Ministry of Culture and Sport created *Yähəşannät Mäznäñña ənna Mabälşagya Wanna Kəfəl* ("Children's Entertainment and Enrichment Department") in 1982, and Altayyāwārq Zälläqä was assigned to find a means by which knowledge could be transferred from socialist countries to Ethiopia, a task which took her almost a year to accomplish.

Children's theatre in Adult's Play-houses

In accordance with the cultural agreement between Ethiopia and the Federal Democratic Republic of Germany, a German theatre director came to Addis Abäba in November 1983 with a German children's play-script. The play was translated into Amharic, and was produced at the Ethiopian National Theatre for children audiences. This production, called ኅበሌ (*Gobäze* "The Brave") became the first professional children's play, marking a turning point in the history of Ethiopian children's theatre.

Despite its technical and artistic quality, the production of *Gobäze* as witnessed by the writer of this paper was beyond the capacity of the child-audience's imagination and comprehension. The Bertolt Brecht methodology of the staging, in addition to the philosophical concept of class struggle in the story of the play, overshadowed the entertaining side of the drama. The didactic nature of *Gobäze* superseded its artistic value. It can be said that the production was more appealing to an adult audience than to children's mentality in the Ethiopian context.

The significance of *Gobäze* to the Ethiopian theatre was rather the experience it offered to the local artists in terms of capacity building towards self reliance. Those dramatists who participated in *Gobäze*'s production process indirectly acquired knowledge of how children's play could be written and directed.

A year later, Altayyāwārq Zälläqä, who assisted the German director, succeeded in producing ኃዳል (*Şädäl* "Light"), a Bulgarian children's play translated into Amharic, at the *Hagär Fəqər Tiyyatər. Şädäl's* interpretation fitted to the children's emotion because it was adapted and directed by an Ethiopian who was familiar with the psychology and environment of Ethiopian children.

The story of the play revolved around a destitute girl, who clashed with an egocentric daughter of a prosperous man. It was based on a type of class conflict which reached a climax with the victory of the poor over the rich girl.

In 1985, an Amharic version of a Bulgarian play, የተራራው ፣ ነፋስ (*Yätäraraw Näfas* "Wind of the Mountain"), was produced by Aləşu Mume at the Ras Theatre. The adventurous dramatic actions of a boy and wind

characters in the play generated suspense and surprise to capture the attention of child-audience throughout the performance.

In the same year, Gädlu Assäggädäw, who had exposure to theatre training in Germany, translated two German children's plays into Amharic. Both plays, ጥንቸል ፣ እና ፣ ጃርት (*ፕጥንቸል ግንባር ግልጽ* "Rabbit and Porcupine"), and አራት ፣ ሙዚቀኞች (*ፕጥንቸል ግንባር ግልጽ* "Four Musicians") were performed at the National Theatre. The productions were enriched by physical actions, going to the extent of narrowing the gap between performers and the audience by breaking the fourth-wall for children's interaction. *ፕጥንቸል ግንባር ግልጽ*, as a moral lesson warned children against the consequences of negligence, while *ፕጥንቸል ግንባር ግልጽ* advocated the reward for hard work and excellence.

A new dawn in the history of Ethiopian theatre occurred in 1986. The children's theatre production which had depended on translations from German and Bulgarian play scripts began to acquire its own Ethiopian originality. ሁለት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት emerged as the first Ethiopian author of original children's plays by producing አንበሳ (*አንበሳ* "The Lion") at the National Theatre. *አንበሳ* was a well made play with four beast characters. The production directed by Kəbābāw Mägārsa however, was overambitious in trying to reach its audience didactically by cramming minor themes such as jealousy, wickedness, laziness and diligence into it.

Between 1986 and 1989, with the exception of ዶሃ (*ዶሃ* "Fatty"), ሁለት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት ስድስት's second play staged at the Hagār Fəqər Tiyatər in 1988, children's drama reverted to translated plays. Gädlu Assäggädäw translated two German plays as ቲሚ (*ቲሚ* "[Mr] Timi") and ጎበዜ ፣ ልብ ፣ ሰፊ (*ጎበዜ ፣ ልብ ፣ ሰፊ* "The Brave Clothier") for the National Theatre and the Hagār Fəqər Tiyatər in 1987 and 1989 respectively. Two more translated plays staged at the National Theatre were 'Alāmayyāhu Gäbrä Həywät's ፈላስፋው (*ፈላስፋው* "The Philosopher"), directed by Getənnät Ənnəyāw in 1988, and Täšomä Bərhanu's ዲምቲ ፣ በከተማ (*ዲምቲ ፣ በከተማ* "Dimtu in the City") directed by Altayyāwārq Zälläqä in 1989. *ዲምቲ ፣ በከተማ* was considered unique for accommodating Muslim character in children's performances for the first time.

Revolution: Children and Youth Theatre as proper Children's theatre

In July 1989, a major development in Ethiopian children's theatre occurred with the decision of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, which by then had been rallying behind the slogan 'the Best for Children!'. The 200 seat hall on the former YMCA campus at Arat Kilo was designated a permanent art's centre for children. Miliyon Şəgäbe was appointed the Acting Manager of Children and Youth Theatre. The hall, though appropriate in size and location for Addis Abāba children theatre goers was given insufficient attention

to transform it into a convenient theatrical auditorium and stage. The chairs were also oversized for children, thereby obstructing their vision. Lack of manpower and budget were also obstacles to start production in the desired time at the Children and Youth Theatre.

The first production at this permanent children theatre once again fell under the influence of German Theatre. A German Play was translated into Amharic jointly by Gädlu Assəggədäw and Miliyon Şəgəbe as የዝናቡዋ፣ እመቤት (*Yəzənanabuwa Emmäbet* “Lady of Rain”), and was directed by a German theatre expert who brought make-up, properties and costumes with him for the production. That production was partially successful in its theatrical elements. Nevertheless, the exaggerated costume, the high pitched sound effects, and the highly matured subject matters were not comfortable for some of the child-audience, leading them to cry in horror.

In the same year, ‘Alämayyāhu Gäbrä Həywät’s የገንፎ፣ ተራራ (*Yägänfo Tārara* “Mountain of Porridge”) was directed by Addis Həzəqyas, who had acquired staging experience while performing in the previous German oriented production. Her production received better acceptance from children because she learned from the shortcomings of *Yəzənanabuwa Emmäbet* to work towards localizing the theatrical elements.

The translated play of Ḥaylä Maryam Säyfu, የእንቁላል፣ ወፍጮ (*Yä’anqulal Wäfčo* “Grinding Mill of Eggs”) was directed by Mossisa Qäğäla in 1991. The play did not run for more than a month due to political unrest at the climax of the armed struggle between EPRDF and government forces. The power vacuum between the downfall of the *Därg* and the emerging of EPRDF to power threw the play-house into the hands of looters. Video and audio equipment donated by the government of Japan were stolen, and stage-lights were broken into pieces. The police at last secured the gate of the play-house to avoid further looting.

Two years later in 1993, the Children and Youth Theatre was reopened in a better organized form with adequate funding and manpower allocated by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. Mossisa Qäğäla was appointed as the General Manager, and experts of theatre arts, music and painting were also assigned to the theatre. *Yä’anqulal Wäfčo* as a transitory production was revived in July 1993.

After four months, መለኮቲ (*Mäläkote* “The Pigeon”), an original play by Aboneh Ashagrie, which had been on rehearsal during the power vacuum, was staged by Abbäbä Käbbädä at the theatre. *Mäläkote* demonstrated the evil characters of dictatorship, and advocated power transfer through democratic means. The four characters: Pigeon, Lion, Jackal, and Oak were symbolically portrayed with hot dramatic actions, maintaining continuous verbal interactions with the children for a participatory effect.

A year later, Efrem Bäqqälä's **ጦጣ ፣ አባ ፣ መላ** (*Toṭa Abba Mäla* "The Wise Ape") was directed by Azeb Käbbädä. The story of the play revolved around a downsized ape that outsmarted a giant elephant. The play attempted to transmit a message that hypocrisy, pride and overconfidence would bring about the downfall of a person who bears them.

Youth Drama Program

At the beginning of 1994, the Children and Youth Theatre made a new attempt to live up to its mission by producing **ፊትና ፣ ጀርባ** (*Fitanna Ğärba* "Front and Back"), a romantic drama for children in the upper age category. The play was produced jointly by Abrəham Nəguse and Täsfay Bäqqälä. Despite a successive advertisement on the Ethiopian television, the number of young people attracted to the theatre was minimal. This was seen as a failure, and the theatre since then, has not targeted the youth as an independently classified audience.

In November 1995, Asfaw Aşmat directed Täsfaye Bäqqälä's **ሆድ ፣ አምላኩ** (*Hod Amlaku* "Stomach Worshipper"), which was geared to shape the mentality of children against selfishness, opportunism, dishonesty, and cynicism.

In January 1995, the Children and Youth Theatre took an innovative move by producing a play in a language which had never been a medium of children's drama production. *Yägänfo Tärara* was translated from Amharic into Təgrəñña by Azeb Käbbädä as **ታንቦክ ፣ አምባ** (*Tambuḵ Amba*), and it was staged for 250 Təgrəñña-speaking invited guests. The number of children in the auditorium however, was not more than a fifth of the total audience. *Tambuḵ Amba* was replaced by **ሁለት ፣ ወንድማማቾች** (*Hulätt Wändəmmamač čočč* "Two Brothers"), a Norwegian play translated by Mossisa Qäğäla.

አባ ፣ ጉጉ ፣ (*Abba Guggu* "The Monster", lit. "Father Guggu"), written by Aboneh Ashagrie, also caused an undesirable dramatic effect when it was directed by Azeb Käbbädä in 1995. The high pitched voice and the furious mask of the main actor were terrifying and made some of children cry and leave the auditorium before the end of the performance. The play, however, benefited from comments given by parents, and after immediate corrections, it ran once a week for almost a year until Mossisa Qäğäla's **ዋሻው** (*Wašaw* "The Cave"), evidently a moral play substituted it in June 1996.

ተንኮሉ (*Tänkolu* "The Mischievous"), written by Asfaw Aşmat, and directed by Azeb Käbbädä in October 1996, became controversial due to the different interpretations given to the content and the title of the play. It was misunderstood as a play that inclined to inculcate the mischievous behaviour of the adventurous character in children, that was portrayed in the play. The playwright argued that his reason for amplifying 'mischief' through the ill-mannered character and the title was to magnify the adverse

behaviour, so and warn children from evil deeds.¹⁶ The controversy in the newspapers about the play on the other hand, became a blessing in disguise to popularize the play and run full house for six months.

The Children and Youth Theatre, motivated by the then new constitution that emphasizes equality of religions, produced a play with Muslim characters and setting for the second time. The play was transliterated from a Norwegian children's play into Amharic by Mossisa Qäğäla as ግዕድጽ (*Ma'aruf*), and was directed by Asfaw Aşmat in March 1996.

Between 1997 and 2000, seven morality plays were staged at the Children and Youth Theatre. Three of them, ሮቦት (*Robot*), አንኮ (*Anko* “Chimpanzee”), and ብልጣብልጥ (*Bälṭabälṭ* “Cunning”) were written by Asfaw Aşmat; Därräsä Bälaynäh wrote የቀበሮ ፡ ባሕታዊ (*Yäqäbäro Bahätawi* “The Monk Fox”) and አዳኙ (*Addänu* “The Hunter”). Çällačew Aččame's ካኪ (*Zaki*), and Solomon Taddäsä's ግፋት ፡ ፍሬ (*Tafač Färe* “Sweet Fruit”) were also staged in those years. The plays were directed by Azeb Käbbädä, Bönyam Hıylä Şällase, Täsa Berhane, Asfaw Aşmat and Solomon Taddäsä respectively.

Puppetry Introduced to Ethiopian Theatre

The Theatre has all along been trying to keep abreast of international standard by developing links with European and North American children dramatists. As a result, the employees of the theatre have received training in the art of puppetry from German experts in the 1990s, and the Theatre has proven itself in this by producing three puppet shows of its own.

The puppet workshop was conducted by an artistic director of children theatre from Seattle (USA), for twelve days in Addis Abäba in 1998,¹⁷ and was also significant in raising the technical ability of the staff of Children and Youth Theatre in this regards.

Children's Drama for Parents' Awareness – Raising

In addition to entertaining plays, seven educational plays were staged by Asfaw Aşmat between 1994 and 1997 at the Ethiopian Children and Youth Theatre, with financial support from UNICEF, UNESCO and RADA BARNA. The plays: ጉንቀል (*G^wänq^wäl* “Extractor”), ደወል (*Däwäl* “Bell”), ባለጠመንጃው (*Balätämänğaw* “Gun Man”), የተስፋ ፡ ቀን (*Yätäsfa Qän* “Day of Hope”), እርገጫ (*Ergäte* “[Mr] Ergäte”), ራጃ (*Raği* “Amazing”), and የገላ ፡ ትፋፋት (*Yägäla Tärufat* “Treasure of Body”) were aimed at creating awareness for parent-audiences focusing on harmful traditional practices, child care and HIV/AIDS.

¹⁶ ASFAW AŞMAT, interview 1999.

¹⁷ USIS 1998.

Private Cultural and Arts Centres as Alternatives

In the last decade Children and Youth Theatre continued staging play-scripts written by the employees of the theatre with an almost identical style, already established as the norm, but was not able to entertain the growing demand of children for new and fresh plays. This fact then incited the Mega Arts Centre as well as Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre to consider children's play production as an area of business.

The Mega Arts Centre staged Därräsä Bälaynäh's የወፍ ፣ አፍ (*Yäwäf Af* "Beak") in 1998; and Aboneh Ashagrie's የሰማይ ፣ ሰው (*Yäsämayu Säw* "The Man from the Sky") in 1999 at the newly reconstructed ሰይጣን ፣ ቤት (*Säytan Bet* "House of Satan"),¹⁸ which was the oldest historical hall, where the first Ethiopian play was performed some 90 years ago. Mega Arts Centre, thereafter, pulled itself out of the business due to the fact that the high production costs and the low entrance fees did not justify the expenditure of the company.¹⁹

Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre launched a weekly program by staging ለምን ይሰቁብኛል (*Lämən Yəsəqubbəñal?* "Why do they laugh at me?"). In 2002 and 2003, ትንሹ ፣ ፈጣሪ (*Tənnəšu Fätari* "The Little Creator") and የፖም ፣ ከረጢት (*Yəpom Kärätit* "Sack of Apple") were produced successively by Ayalnäh Mulat, then the general manager of the centre. Ayalnäh Mulat, up until his departure from the centre in 2010, has produced ዲያብሎስና አሽከር (*Diyabəlosənnā Aškär* "Devil and Servant"), በራሪ ፣ አህያ (*Bärari Ahəya* "The Flying Donkey"), የርግብ ፣ ቀለበት (*Yärgəb Qäläbät* "The Ring of Pigeon"), አባ ፣ መሮ (*Abba Märo* "Father Märo"), የሳት ፣ ሌባ (*Yəsət Leba* "Thief of Fire"), የባሕር ፣ አውሬ (*Yäbahər Awre* "Beast of Sea"), ያይጦች ፣ ንግሥት (*Yaytočč Nəgəst* "Queen of Rats"), አልባሽ (*Albaş* "Dressing Maid"), and ዳለቻ ፣ ቀበሮ (*Daläčča Qäbäro* "Gray Fox"). Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre has now pulled out from producing children's drama, with an intention to focus more on promoting Russian culture in order to go in line with the name and objective of the institution.²⁰

Children's Drama in Movie Theatres

ጛጮጮ ለሰፊ, who directed Ayalnäh Mulat's *Lämən Yəsəqubbəñal*, *Tənnəšu Fätari* and *Yəpom Kärätit* at Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre, found a new venue for children's drama at private movie theatres. She produced ደክተር ፣

¹⁸ *Säytan Bet* ("House of Satan") was another name for Cinema Terrasse.

¹⁹ ጛጮጮ ለሰፊ, interview 2010.

²⁰ ለሰፊ ለሰፊ, interview 2011.

ብኦር (*Doktär Qäbäro* “Dr. Fox”), ወርቆ (*Wərrəyye* “Kitty”) at the Aläm Cinema in 2004, and revived the latter at the Aggona Cinema in 2006.

In addition to that, a group of theatre graduates who have organized themselves in 2011 to specialize in the production of children’s drama, have arranged with Ambassador Cinema to stage Aboneh Asagrie’s *Abba Guggu* on weekly bases.

School Tours

Those theatre graduates have also established the tradition of school tours by taking *Abba Guggu* to Gännät Public Elementary School and AYB Academy. The group members are Manyazwal Getaččäw, Betälehem Bərhanu, Mässälä Hāyly, Maʿrāg Mäkonnən, Säblä Lämmä and Mälaku Alämnäw.

Conclusion

The Ethiopian children’s theatre has undergone a quantitative and qualitative development in the last two decades, and has reached a professional standard at present. The art that was initiated in the 1980s by the Ministry of Culture and Sport without adequate planning and logistics has now grown up to a high standard with the basic assistance of German and American connoisseurs of children’s theatre. The introduction of *Children’s Theatre* as a course in the curriculum of the Theatre Arts Department at the Addis Ababa University in 2007 has also been a guarantee to the sustainability of the art.

In spite of such an accumulated knowledge and skills of the arts, children’s theatre still remains city bound, limited to the service of the Addis Abäba children. The vast majority of Ethiopian children are denied access to drama, for the simple reason that attention has not yet been given to the UN Convention on the Rights of Children which the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia signed in 1992. All regional states in Ethiopia, therefore must abide by the statements of the convention, and find a means by which the rich experience that has been accumulated at the Addis Ababa Children and Youth Theatre can be disseminated to the countrysides where the bulk of children reside.

Bibliography

- ABONEH ASHAGRIE 2012, “The Role of women on Ethiopian stage”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 24/1, pp. 1–8.
- BAHRU ZEWEDE 1991, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.
- FARAGO, L. 1935, *Abyssinia on the Eve*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons.
- GÉRARD, A. 1971, “Amharic Literature”, in: ID., *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Zoto, Zulu, Amharic*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 271–376.

- HADDIS ALÄMAYYÄHU 1985 [1993], *ትዝታ* (*Təzzata*, “Memoir”), Addis Abāba: Kurraz Publisher.
- KANE, T.L. 1975, *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- MÄRSƏ'E HAZÄN WÄLDÄQIRQOS 1999 [2007], *የዘመን ፡ ታሪክ ፡ ትዝታዬ ፡ ካየሁትና ፡ ከሰማሁት* (*Yäzämän Tarik Təzzataye Kayyābutanna Käsämmabut*, “My Memoirs of the History of the Century from what I Saw and Heard”), Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.
- MINISTRY OF INFORMATION 1957 [1965], *የልማት ፡ እድገት ፡ በኢትዮጵያ ፡ 1933–1956* (*Yä Ləmat İdgät bə'İtyopya 1933–1956*, “Development Growth in Ethiopia 1941–1964”), Addis Abāba: Commercial Printing Press.
- MULUGETA SEYUM 1964 [1972], *የቀኝ ጌታ ፡ የፍታህ ፡ ንጉሤ ፡ የሕይወት ፡ ታሪክ* (*Yä Qāñ Geta Yoftabe Nəguše Yä Həywät Tarik*, “Biography of Yoftahe Nəguše”), Addis Abāba: B.A Thesis, Haile Sellasie I University.
- SƏNƏDDU GÄBRU 1949 [1957], *የእቴጌ ፡ መነን ፡ ትምህርት ፡ ቤት ፡ አጭር ፡ ታሪክ 1924-1949* (*Yä'İtege Mänän Təmhərt Bet Aččər Tarik 1924–1949*, “Short History of Empress Mänän School 1932–1957”): Addis Abāba: Artistic Printing.
- TÄKLÄ HAWARYAT TÄKLÄMARYAM 2013, *ፋብላ ፡ የእውሬዎች ፡ ተረት* (*Fabula: Yä'awrewočč Tärät*, “Fable: the Story of Animals”), Addis Abāba [mimeographed].
- 1921, *ፋብላ ፡ የእውሬዎች ፡ ኮሜዲያ* (*Fabula: Yä'awrewočč komediya*, “Fable: The Comedy of Animals”), Addis Abāba [mimeographed].
- 1998 [2006], *ኦታባዮግራፊ የሕይወቴ ፡ ታሪክ* (*Otabayografi Yähəywäte Tarik*, “Autobiography My Life History”), Addis Abāba: Addis Ababa University Press.
- USIS, *Special Report*, Addis Ababa: May 1998.

Interviews

- ASFAW AŞMAT 1999, Playwright and Director at Children and Youth Theatre, interview held at the Addis Abāba Region's Culture and Information Bureau, March 1999.
- AYALNÄH MULAT 2011, Executive Director of Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre, interview conducted in Addis Abāba: Pushkin Russian Cultural Centre, April 2011.
- ƏQUBAY BÄRÄHE 2010, General Manager of Mega Arts Centre, interview conducted in Addis Abāba: Mega Arts Centre, February 2010.
- İYASU BÄRÄHE 2007, TPLF's veteran fighter, singer and dramatist, Interview conducted in Addis Abāba: Addis Ababa University Cultural Centre.

Summary

When theatre arts emerged in Ethiopia 90 years ago, all characters in the pioneering play were performed solely by children in front of the Crown Prince Täfäri Mäk'ännən, and members of the aristocracy. The tradition of considering children as a main force of stage production, and the tendency of showing dramatic performance by students to the benefit of adult audience, likewise, continued up until the establishment of the first professional public theatre in 1942. It was late in early 1980s that a change in perspective occurred to urge the indispensability of producing plays for children's consumption. Such a new insight, within a few years, led to the establishment of the Children and Youth Theatre in Addis Abāba. This article chronologically portrays the history and development of Ethiopian children's theatre and will hopefully add knowledge to the account of African theatre in particular and the world theatre in general.