

Ola Rotimi, **Hopes Of The Living Dead A Drama Of Struggle**
Ibadan: Spectrum, 1988.

If Rotimi were a sculptor, he would work on a grand scale and celebrate individual and communal achievements. If he were a painter, he would use bright colours, strong contrasts and large canvases. If he were a musician, he would delight in the contrasting sounds of instruments, in crescendos and in startling changes of mood.

As it is he is primarily a dramatist and a producer, and his penchant is for ambitious, large-scale melodramas. Those who come to his relatively new play, **HOPES OF THE LIVING DEAD**, familiar with his earlier work will find several characteristic features: the concern with leadership, the delight in proverbs and bold effects of language, the reliance on broad comic effects, and the inclusion of scenes of violent action, of music, singing, and dancing in what he calls a 'convoluting concourse of juxtaposed variegated happenings'.

The ideological thrust of **HOPES OF THE LIVING FEAD** is apparent from the structure: it opens with a group of lepers singing in a hospital ward under the direction of their choirmaster, Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, and it ends with the same Harcourt Whyte exhorting more or less the same group to go forward together, turn 'troubles into blessing', to find strength in themselves, to engage in a new struggle. The final stage direction indicates that the afflicted who have triumphed over an armed incursion, over despair and deception set out to work together. They are still singing, and they have learned the strengths which come from unity and discipline.

Sub-titled 'a drama of struggle', the play was first produced during 1985 and published last year by Spectrum Books of Ibadan in rather unlikely association with 'Safari Books (export)' Limited of Jersey. It is dedicated to Michael Imoudu, Aminu Kano, Tai Solarin and Harcourt Whyte himself, who, a Profile informs the reader, was born in 1905, suffered from leprosy from the age of about 14 and at 19 went to the Port Harcourt General Hospital where a 'mad Scotsman' was working on a cure for leprosy.

Rotimi's play provides a version of what happened after the Scotsman left. It presents Harcourt Whyte as an

enlightened and selfless leader: perceptive, alert, resourceful, incorruptible, determined, aware that the ability to provide for oneself is the basis of self-respect and true independence. Thanks to his personal qualities and the support he receives, Harcourt Whyte is able to cope with waverers and to overcome various devious enemies, to keep the group together and give it dignity. He is, above all, a democrat anxious to ensure that the people are informed about events and involved in decision making.

In a speech delivered to the actors at the first reading of the play on 8 February, 1985, and printed as 'A Charge to the Actors', Rotimi pointed out that the production's audience was primarily an African audience; he described it as a 'polaroid audience', a 'wait-and-get audience'. One, he explained, which lets you know its likes and dislikes in an instant. Clearly there is much in the text for such an audience: strong statements, devilish plots, heroic deeds, emotional singing, and glorious victories over suffering and disadvantage. There is also pathos which would clearly be profoundly moving in performance, for example, in the desperate attempt by the leprosy-stricken Corp'l to pick up a gun.

In the same 'Charge', Rotimi said that 'the literary critic... hardly exists in the priorities of our theatrical concerns'. He went on to suggest that in Europe and America the actors do not know whether they are good or bad, until they have read a review by 'a critic arrogating to himself the perception of the majority.' Rotimi is right to insist that the critic who approaches the theatre or a dramatic text in a purely literary way is of little interest - though there are words, and expressions, such as 'cruncher' and 'shooting war', in this play which a literary critic might well isolate as sounding unconvincing notes in the Nigeria in which the play is set.

He should, however, have distinguished between the literary critic and the theatre critic, the person likely to be responsible for a review of a production and not, in any case, a person in a position to 'arrogate' any rights. He he is wrong to suppose that instantaneous contact between performer and audience is a feature of African theatre which is absent from European or American theatre.

The strongest moments in HOPES OF THE LIVING DEAD are not those which have the audience laughing most loudly

or signing most deeply. They are those in which the problems of the lepers after the departure of the 'mad Scotsman' parallel those of Nigeria during the post-independence period. The most intriguing study is that of the responsibilities and temptations which face a leader and of the backbiting which can erode confidence and frustrate effort. In his treatment of those themes, Rotimi develops ideas and, it seems from the intensity of the writing, draws on personal experience.

The most pressing issue raised by the play is the relationship between the leader and the led. In a characteristically melodramatic flourish at the end of his hortatory 'Charge', Rotimi said: 'Those who show up (for the first rehearsal) remember - in theatre work, my bargain is that of the devil himself: you volunteer your person, I insist on your soul, till the production is over'. Clearly he demands much from those who work with him, equally clearly, he has, over the years, overcome the myriads of forces which work against productions in West Africa and elsewhere. He has harnessed the skills and energies of hords of performers etched scenes on the memories of those who have seen his productions.

It would be misleading to associate him too closely with the democratic choirmaster and composer at the heart of HOPES OF THE LIVING DEAD. But it would be turning away from an important dimension of his enterprise if one did not compare and contrast the 'totalitarian' demands made by the author-director at the front of the book with the principles espoused by the central character and, apparently, recommended by the manner in which the drama of struggle unfolds.

James Gibbs