

Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Basi and Company*, Four Television Plays, Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1988, £3.50 UK.

'Transistor Radio' won a BBC African Theatre prize in 1972 and was subsequently published in one of Heinemann's collections of African plays. Set in a familiar world where employment and accommodation present major problems, the situation is economically and vividly presented, the twists and turns of plot deftly handled, and the dialogue rattles along at a good speed. Partly for these reasons, the play has been widely and successfully produced. Its origin as a television situation comedy roots it firmly in a popular tradition - one too often neglected by ambitious authors who imitate irrelevant models.

The author of 'Transistor Radio', Ken Saro-Wiwa, is a man of many parts, who works in a variety of forms and operates as both an author and a businessman. The publication of *Basi and Company* by Saros International Publishers brings together 'Transistor Radio' and three of his other plays from the same hugely popular tv series.

The educational market clearly provides the major market for such collections, and the scripts are indeed, as the Introduction, claims very suitable for use in secondary schools. In order to increase the volume's appeal to teachers, the Saros International edition provides a suggested layout for the set and a series of questions on the texts. Unfortunately these pedagogical sweeteners do not adequately complement the vital and theatrical texts.

The suggested stage arrangement is cluttered and over complicated. Feasible in a television studio, it offers little inspiration to the secondary school teacher anxious to bring the plays to life quickly and with as little fuss as possible. A stage production has to find a fluid convention which maintains the pace of the original and it is important to use a suitably flexible and, possibly, modest set.

Some of the questions might profitably have addressed problems of staging and those raised by transferring plays from one medium to another. As it is they are almost entirely framed so as to test basic comprehension; only one or two on each play raise issues of technique or social relevance and so might be expected to open up wider discussion. In fact, the questions on these issues seem to be afterthoughts. They are placed at the bottom of the list and are very general. Along the lines 'What amuses you about the play and why?', they provide little guidance for the teacher anxious to initiate a discussion about the techniques Saro-Wiwa has used or about his attitude to the social situations he presents.

Although the plays are set among those trying to live by their wits in a very uncertain environment, the uncertainties are not always examined closely or presented coherently. In the third of the plays, 'A Shipload of Rice', *Basi and Company* are caught up in a series of deceptions relating to the importation of rice. Eventually, as is the way in many such situation comedies, most of the tricksters are tricked, stingers stung and scammers scammed. Clearly greed clouds the eyes of normally cautious and suspicious people, but the decision of Madam, Basi's landlady, to give him N. 1,000, suggests not that her eyesight has been dimmed by greed, but that she has been blinded, deafened and given an instant lobotomy by it.

When Dandy tells Segi that 'Millions are not made so easily', she replies 'Elsewhere, no. But in Lagos, anything can happen. Everything happens.' Lagos is certainly an amazing, surprising and terrifying place, but this text makes such demands on the reader/member of an audience that I for one could no longer willingly suspend my disbelief. Once again the question could have been used to prompt students to think about the relationship between drama and life, between comedy and credibility, and, perhaps, even to distinguish those situations which Saro-Wiwa has explored within a situation comedy convention and those for which he has employed a different, very broadly caricatured style.

All in all, the strengths of the volume are infinitely more important than the weaknesses and this collection can be enthusiastically recommended. It will be very warmly welcomed by producers all over Africa who are on the look-out for short, fairly easily staged plays requiring small casts, and it is to be hoped distribution problems will be overcome so that *Basi and Company* is available throughout the length and breadth of the continent. In this regard it will be interesting to see the influence, if any, of the decision to publish the text simultaneously in Nigeria and the UK. (UK address : 48 Aragon Avenue, Ewell, Epsom, KT17 2QG).

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