

Malawian theatre at the crossroads: developmental paradigms and underdevelopment of stage drama in Malawi

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Introduction and background

As the millennium negotiates into a new one, it is widely noticeable that Malawian stage drama performances hardly feature in international programmes, festivals, and conferences in a meaningful way, even those taking place in the Southern African region. Academics and other practitioners wonder why this is so. And one Malawian commentator, Steve Chimombo, confesses that he gave the theatre kid-glove commentary because '(he didn't) have the heart to tell (them) and other producers that their stage business ... (spoils) their performance' (WASI, April 1995:9). When he couldn't take it anymore, he described the stage-work as 'appalling' (ibid.)

But as Malawian theatre struggles, other Southern African countries are producing and participating in festivals. Zambia, for example, brought Sam Kasankha's *Daughters and Workmates* to the 2000 Southern African festival in Johannesburg, South Africa; as Namibia performed *The show is not over until the fat lady sings*. Zimbabwe staged Robert Kavanagh's *Simuka Zimbabwe* at the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, and South Africa has travelled the world as far as Broadway, USA, Royal Court Theatre in London, to Germany, Canada etc. On the other hand, the plays that have represented Malawi, for example, at the 2000 Southern African Theatre Initiative festival like *Last Temptation* performed by Alabama Theatre of Blantyre, though with a very innovative storyline and controversially adventurous topic, appeared rushed and unpolished as regards performance. Its failure to fully realize dramatic moments, the idea of dialogue without silent moments in performance, and unmotivated speeches where the actors could not feel or believe the moments, needed more work for the credibility of the play as a realistic performance.

But this is not as if theatre is a new concept in Malawi. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre (CCTT) was known as one of the performance leaders in Southern Africa. In Africa and the world it was seen as one of the leading practitioners of Theatre For Development (TFD) (Kerr 1991: 58). Outside educational theatre, The Travelling Theatre made Malawi University Drama festivals possible (Chimwenje : forthcoming). It not only brought together performances from the then four constituent colleges, and boasted such names of performers as Edge Kanyongolo, Viphya Harawa, Owen Mbilizi, Christopher Kamlongera, Kamdoni Nyasulu etc., but also such acclaimed patrons as James Gibbs, David Kerr, Mupa Shumba etc. (Baraza 1983). The known playwrights included Steve Chimombo, James Ng'ombe, Timpunza Mvula, Chris Kamlongera and others (Kamlongera 1984). Besides, with the lead that the Travelling Theatre gave in instances like the Mbalachanda workshops and other national TFD trips, a new core of groups using Chichewa as a language medium mushroomed and performed on stages around the country (Kerr 1987). Out of such exercises, companies like Kwathu Arts Drama Group, Umodzi Drama Group, Upile Drama Group, and Lonjezo Drama group emerged (Chimwenje *ibid.*). However, the formal educational side as well made its contribution. The Association for Teaching English in Malawi (ATEM)'s annual secondary school festivals brought about such English medium performing groups as Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre, Force Theatre and several others (Magalasi 1993). And radio was never left behind either. From writing experiments at the Chancellor College Writers' Workshop, and Malawi Broadcasting Corporation's (MBC) *Writers' Corner*, such English Radio drama programmes as *Theatre of the Air* were broadcast every Friday at 9:10 pm. Besides the English radio programmes, popular Chichewa radio dramas like *Sewero la Sabata lino (Kapalepale)*, *Pa Majiga*, and of late *Zimachitika* and *Nzeru Nkupangwa* were broadcast, and still continue to do so on MBC. And yet, out of this plethora of drama and theatre activities, the turn of the millennium sees Malawi as an absence on international drama and theatre programmes. What has gone wrong? Is it lack of resources? Or are Malawian practitioners satisfied with the localised popular drama they are so steeped in?

A close scrutiny of the Malawian drama practice from the 1960s reveals major problems hindering its growth. Gibbs, P. (1980), Gibbs, J. (1976, 1982), Kamlongera (1984), Kerr (1987), Chimombo (1990s), Chimwenje (ms) etc. have tried to outline the various problems that bedevil the growth of Malawian drama and theatre. Before 1990, major debates raised by Gibbs and Gibbs, Kamlongera, and Kerr rested on government censorship which was entrusted to the Malawi Censorship Board. The Board, whose task was mostly to guard the interests of the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP), infuriated many practitioners and commentators. Scripts for performance had to be

screened before staging. The Board's readers, whose theatre credentials were never discussed, searched for any allusion to the then Malawi political affairs, plus any suggestions of explicit sex to disqualify a script for public performance, unless it was a classical play (Gibbs 1982 and this issue). The other debate, which almost all the critics agree upon was lack of a clear government cultural policy: a vision whose presence probably could have led to the formation of a more solid National Theatre Organisation to consequently see the building of theatre performance infrastructure in the country. While in some countries like South Africa, the building of theatre infrastructure has led to the breakdown of the practice into two contending camps on racial lines (Magalasi 2000a); or pro- and anti-government camps in Namibia in which the National Theatre Organisation tows a government line, but the presence of infrastructure can start to negotiate a leveling of the ground, as regards technical approach, between the national practices and other parts of the world. To date Malawi has no theatre building except multi-purpose halls like The Great Hall at Chancellor College in Zomba, and Institute for Sports in Lilongwe, which theatre companies do not have full access to except on performance days. Performances had to and still continue to make do with either Open Air theatres. School and club halls, pubs etc. The attempts at forming a national theatre organization has been too erratic and ad hoc, with so many drama groups' tensions tearing it apart, consequently making any attempts at such a formation fail to last and make meaningful impact on theatre in Malawi (Chimombo 1994:19).

However, out of all this critical commentary, nobody seems to talk about the philosophical premise the drama was and is still based on, apart from talking about historical influences and governmental inhibition. Drama in Malawi has been dominated by the TFD practice, which commentators like Kerr have called popular theatre (Kerr 1991). The practice is referred to as 'popular' because of its methodological approach. Since TFD is made for social conscientisation, it includes, as part of its form, popular dances, songs and games. found in areas targeted for development (Mlama 1991). The practice consequently takes on the name of 'popular'. This definition of 'popular theatre' is, however, different from how Chimwenje views popular drama in Malawi, referring to groups like Kwathu Drama Group and others. While these groups might have been used in 'conscientisation' crusades of some sort, but their 'popularity' comes not for their conscientisation plays but because they managed to create a big audience following for themselves. Laughter-provoking strategies incorporated in their plays draw wide audiences. But besides Chimwenje, Michael Etherton (1988) looks at practitioners like Gibson Kente of South Africa, and Hubert Ogunde of Nigeria as popular dramatists. Kente's popular township theatre was at loggerheads with popular political black theatre of South Africa. He was heavily criticized by the Black theatre movement

of the 1970s as doing escapist entertainment plays at the expense of political conscientisation (Gwala 1973). So TFD as popular theatre is different from entertainment popular theatre, and popular theatre in this paper refers to the non-political that creates a big following for itself.

But having said that, the contention this paper makes is that TFD practice overshadowed any meaningful development of aesthetic theatre in the 1970s and early 1980s, besides the imitative entertainment popular drama, and one or two professional part-time practices (Chimombo 1994:19); and that is a problem. The term 'professional' here refers to those practices that followed performance aesthetics in an informed way, rather than those that practiced drama without any proper training or operated without any trained theatre artist like a director. But the developmental messages TFD propagated are, however, not the matter per se. Rather the focus that the messages got at the expense of aesthetic theatre is. The most influential part of the TFD practice saw the Travelling Theatre, government ministries, and other Non-Governmental Organizations travelling the length and width of the country to spread news of social development, health and agriculture through theatre, and not the news of theatre as an art form that exists independently. And in this case, TFD became a very helpful tool in undermining the growth of professional practice in this country. Yet the issue of damage to professional theatre only starts to be discussed by the mid 1990s.

Critical framework

Steve Chimombo, besides letting such drama professionals like David Kerr to subscribe the 'how to' articles for drama (Kerr 1992 a & b), made himself and WASI magazine the life-blood of drama information and debates, besides newspaper reports. He noticed that many practitioners could not differentiate drama forms and media (Chimombo 1995), besides the fact that some groups survived on unmediated imitation of productions done by others. Chimombo here stopped short of pronouncing the easy way most Malawian drama groups knew theatre through, TFD, as responsible for the lack of proper training and entry into the career via the back entrance. Chimombo's most enduring contribution, however, was a production of a Malawi Drama directory. Though not complete, as he based it on information gathered from known urban drama groups (Directory's Introduction), it is a very important resource, sent to libraries around the world.

But another commentator, Chimwenje, in two unpublished papers elaborated more on the question of training for Malawi Drama practitioners. Alluding to some points of training and organisation that Chimombo raised, Chimwenje went further to look at the

response of audience on the performances that:

(...) the audiences need a mature handling of both issues and the artistic medium... No wonder the most common criticism leveled against popular drama in the country today is that the plays are childish and immature. The audiences are craving for something new and more challenging than the shallowness that characterizes some of the performances....(Chimwenje: ms)

While it is apparent that Chimwenje is talking for the intellectual audience, the point of 'audience's search for something new and challenging' is nevertheless vital. In Malawi, drama is taken very casually because of unmediated humour that play-performances from almost all popular groups strive to encompass. However, Chimwenje here does not state the impact of the populist mass audience on the plays. The common and unintellectual Malawi audience is now schooled to accept and enjoy the mediocre productions the groups offer because that is what it knows. The audience's subtle commentary, whether it be an applause for jokes, costumes, clichés, or big words, in the case of both Chichewa and English however related or unrelated to the theme - or a quest for Malawi cultural didacticism, is interpreted as an encouragement and approval from the audience, thereby misleading the practitioners and the practice. And Chimwenje himself decries the trend of the plays that:

(...) they are treated with pedantic didacticism, haranguing audiences with the so-called moral issues in the plays, which are also treated without any depth. Most of the performances also strike as being simply a re-working of popular jokes, hurriedly assembled and masquerading as comedy.... (Chimwenje: ms).

However, all these commentators do not seem to pin-point the root problem that Malawian Drama faces. Though Chimombo (1995), Kamlongera (1984), and Chimwenje (ms) refer to it in passing, none of them settle for it as the main issue. However, David Kerr (1991) while decrying TFD's falsified impact on development, raises a few points around the problem.

Kerr's commentary needs a proper mention and contextualisation in this paper. Taking TFD to task in a provocative article titled *Participatory popular theater: the highest stage of cultural under-development*, he thinks TFD, presented as popular theatre has exacerbated social underdevelopment in areas that it was practiced. He admonishes the belief Community theatre practitioners have on participatory theatre that:

The problem with turning on the popular voice is that what rushes out may well be con-

taminated by the perverted clichés of a repressive ideology. If the popular voice that results from such a process merely parrots the received wisdom of political despots or developmental gurus, then the people are participatory in their own mystification....

Popular theatre workers are tempted to assume that a participatory form is automatically liberating.... (Kerr 1991: 68-69).

Kerr talks about the underdeveloping misbelief after he had given, in his paper, a historical growth of TFD in Africa, and how the economic and political relations of the 'North' and 'South' have seen Africa as a recipient of dubious aid from IMF and World Bank. While receiving the aid either as loans or aid through developmental agencies, Africa becomes, at the same time, a net exporter of Capital to the North as it strives to return the loans, becoming at the same time a slaving sufferer of the North's Structural Adjustment Programmes (Kerr 1991: 70-71). Kerr, as a TFD practitioner himself, condemns the practice for partially failing to achieve the objective that it was supposed to achieve: Development.

This paper, on the other hand, explores the extent to which developmental, and radio theatre paradigms have misdirected professional commercial stage theatre practice in Malawi. The TFD movement is taken to task for the paradoxical philosophy it propagated - development - at the expense of developing aesthetical theatre. Besides acknowledging the positive impact TFD practice has had on community theatre in Malawi, this paper criticises the arbitrary nature in which the approach was carelessly or ignorantly ferried from developmental to aesthetical theatre, misleading professional stage theatre practice in Malawi.

Alongside the TFD paradigms shall be the ATEM's 'school-drama-club' approach which has done considerable damage to professional stage drama in Malawi as well. The emphasis on spoken English as a measure of quality, at the expense of aesthetical performance (Magalasi 1993), shall form the core of the argument.

But apart from the developmental paradigms, Malawi radio drama's approach shall also be scrutinized for its misleading influence on the stage drama. The unhelpful legacies that *Sewero la sabata lino* (Kapalepale), *Pa majiga*, and *Theatre of the air* amongst many others leave for unsuspecting stage drama practitioners will be brought to light. And to highlight the argument beyond the exposition on the three paradigms, the paper shall use the 'generalized' practice of Kwathu Drama Group and Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre as examples of the misled practice. On where this paper stands as regards critical commentary on Malawian Theatre, it takes further arguments Chi-

mombo and Chimwenje have made about lack of proper theatre training and organisation in Malawian theatre, apart from, in principle, alluding to Kerr's position on aid and underdevelopment in Africa. At most, the paper suggests the creation of a systematic and solid foundation for the Malawi Theatre practice, if staging quality drama practice is our intent in this space-age of post-colonial revisionism.

Theoretical framework

Talking about postcolonial revisionism, the seeming weakness of this paper is that it sounds reactionary to the most wanted 'development', as it is known in 'developmental' circles both in Malawi, Africa and the world. To propagate the growth of aesthetic stage drama other than developmental theatre, when Malawi is a former colony, found in the third world, described as a developing poor country, in need of 'development' to raise the standards of its people, might be reversion of progress, if understood within emphases of liberal humanist organizations like World Bank and IMF, African socialist ideas like Ujamaa, the abandoned African National Congress' Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) now recycled by Thabo Mbeki as a continental phenomenon called 'African Renaissance' etc. These perspectives, though different in approach agree on importance of 'development' to people in Third World countries. However, as this paper strongly questions whether development of aesthetic theatre is necessarily retrogressive because aesthetic theatre is commercial and probably individualized-skills' orientated, it also acknowledges the gains Malawi has made from 'development', as defined and practiced from the above perspectives.

The post-colonial revisionism this paper takes is the re-casting of 'development' as defined and implemented from the perspectives of 'progressive' forces mentioned above. The questioning is done in the manner of Said's criticism of Orientalism. In *Orientalism*, Said (1995) questions and rejects the colonial manipulative romanticism of being Indian or Asian which the British presented to the native Asians, which Said thinks was a way of keeping the Asian natives away from aspiring for the beneficial things the colonialists did, thereby partly restricting the natives' cultural antennas of dynamic interaction and cultural growth. In the case of this paper, 'development' as defined by the Western donors makes countries like Malawi to accept positions of helpless poverty accorded to them. As such, the terms of the aid, as posited the Western donors have to be followed. Consequently, many areas for development that the donors do not know, either out of ignorance or sheer neglect continue to deteriorate. But also in use here is the manner in which Mbembe (1992) critically questions accepted

notions about resistance in the postcolony, in his famous *Notes on the postcolony*. After many post-colonial critics had agreed that common people did not offer much resistance to their leaders under the different dictatorships in Africa, Mbembe, through Bakhtin's heteroglossia - *many voices in society*-discovers a lot of resistance in the ways the commoners expressed themselves in popular culture to either relate or share power within that postcolonial time and space. The principle taken from such studies for this paper is the exercise of going beyond the accepted notions to discover tensions that are otherwise accepted and taken for granted in discourses about the postcolony. Kerr (1991) questions the type of communication that takes place in TFD, and the 'development' given to developing countries as defined from the donors perspectives. Kerr believes Africa slaves under a burden of loans and misinformation, deliberately misdirected by the so-called experts.

But one seeming weakness of this paper is its tendency to subscribe to Western notions of theatre, drama and its capitalistic organization, which such TFD practitioners like Kerr (early writings), Kamlongera (1984), Mlama (1991). have rigorously battled against in favour of such African popular theatrical approaches like song, dance, mime etc. However, this paper's seeming acceptance of the Western notions of theatre is exercised within the notions of revisionism on ideological beliefs stated above. This paper's analysis shall not restrict itself to any particular ideological stand for the sake of it. It shall use what it sees as beneficial within the theme in discussion. And the paper's wish is to be understood within the paradoxical central confusion that it poses, namely, shall the judgemental binary positioning that western notions or the so-called progressive approaches are either bad or good help the development of Malawian stage drama? Not wanting to run ahead of the debate, the paper turns to consider the Malawian if not African view of development in perspective.

Development in perspective

After many countries gained independence in Africa in the early 1960s from colonial powers, talk of development in economic, social and political spheres dominated. Because many nationalist leaders who mostly came to power to lead the countries after colonialism pointed fingers at the previous colonial powers for under-development, they got the former colonial powers involved in developmental activities of the colonies, as evidenced by Dr. Kamuzu Banda in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly after Malawi's independence that:

I would like to thank you, Mr. President, and all members of this assembly (...) At the same time, I would also like to thank those representatives of a number of countries in the Security Council such as representatives of United Kingdom who sponsored our membership.... (Banda 1964).

Malawi was a former British protectorate and the sponsorship that Britain gave to Malawi was not arbitrary, just like the development aid that came from it was as well not. David Kerr (1991) talks about how this type of aid was packaged to benefit the donor countries more in a subtle way, presented to the recipients as aid, ignorantly cherished by the leaders. And this development had a catch for countries like Malawi. The colonial powers, disguised as developers manipulated the countries to the Colonials' own benefit. They defined politics and the consequent Development from their perspective. Dr. Kamuzu Banda in his 1964 speech at a state luncheon for foreign dignitaries unambiguously stated the origin of the constitution that:

I just wanted to say this because if we are celebrating the independence of my country today, Mr. Macleod set the ball of Malawi's independence rolling - gave us a constitution in 1961. I don't know what he and the others thought about the constitution but I knew what I was going to do with it once he gave it to me. (5th July, 1964).

It is evident from Malawi's early constitutions to the end of 1960s that there wasn't anything much that had changed in it. The reporting to 'The Crown' still dominated the constitution. But this did not happen freely, because as Banda said:

(...) I am saying this because as I stand in front of you now, this country as a state, to use the vulgar language, does not pay for its own keep. In other words, it costs more to run this country than the country earns every year. During the federation, the country was receiving between 3 and 4 million (British Pounds).... As I stand before you now, we are being helped from the point of view of money....

(Dr. Banda opening Malawi Congress Party Convention, Oct, 1966:3)

Banda thought that this failure to fund itself was not necessarily because Malawi could not have managed to use its resources to get the money, but because the developed countries lowered the prices of produce coming from developing countries in world markets, leading Banda himself to request, in the first speech to the United Nations General Assembly, to stop that type of treatment of developing countries' goods (Dr. Banda, 2nd December 1964: 4). But Malawi was a sad economic case, as compared to Zambia and Zimbabwe, because apart from being a resource for labour to the mines of Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa, it existed on subsistence farming, outside the

'native' low-level tobacco farming in the Central Region that the Colonialists had tried to suppress in favour of white settler farmers (Vail and Landeg White: 1992). Taking over power, Banda had no alternative but to ask for financial aid.

The African leaders, in the name of development and modernisation, unquestionably accepted the new plans of development and finances (Kerr 1991). There were many promises to bring poverty, disease, and ignorance to a halt through modern education, medication, agriculture, and investment, financed mostly by the previous powers. However, because the colonial powers continued to control the world, thereby hege- monically dictating their methods as advanced, and consequently making the develop- ing countries to develop on their (developed countries) terms, the developing countries always found themselves lower in status when compared to the Europeans and the West: so did African Theatre.

African theatre, even though it uses African subject matter, in the form that it is medi- ated as narratives, whether it is in form of literature or performance, continues to lean on the West. Descriptions of modern drama, even in Africa, lean on Aristotlean articula- tions from character, story, to plot and other elements. Such things as African dances, myths, stories etc. come in as mere embellishments of the adopted European forms. It seems, therefore, to be of no consequence to dogmatically hold on to an imagined ideal practice that fails to be realised in practical terms, in the 'theatrical' times Africa and the whole world is living in. To condemn western aesthetical practice, as defined and practiced in contemporary times that it is non-developmental because it stems from Western, capitalistic and individual-orientated perspectives, serves nothing for those that need helpful contemporary paradigms to make a meaningful contribution to 'their world' that bases itself on such a language and aesthetics. And it is from this position that the philosophical paradigm of development, encompassed in TFD should be seen as partially problematic.

In the absence of a strong aesthetical commercial stage drama, the TFD paradigm over- powers other theatre areas that need development: areas that could offer strong career grounding for stage drama. Unless possibilities of a proper aesthetical commercial ori- entated development of stage drama is seen as part of the big picture of 'development', the concept of development, seen from liberal, socialist and Africanist perspectives fails to tease out certain tensions of unfulfilled desires in some of the subjects for devel- opment, especially around theatre skills. Apart from that, the liberal, socialist and Africanist paradigms shall be seen to be dogmatically static. They will fail to expand and dynamically include helpful elements taken from those other paradigms that are generally seen as enemies of progress like Capitalism and individual development. And

if that type of thinking is not reversed for Malawian stage drama, 'development' fails to give Malawian stage drama a proper direction, away from the crossroads it is stuck at, not only to be able to reflect on its own activities but get into dialogue with the world of cultural representation. But what is TFD?

Theatre for development: some definitions

Theatre For Development is defined as educational theatre or drama, meant to be a forum for a participatory performative-dealing with social problems by the very communities that encounter them, facilitated by experts (Mlama 1991). TFD is, however, two pronged. One, Theatre In Education (TIE) refers to a practice in which a drama company or a non-governmental organisation creates a play to be staged for particular-problem-affected communities, to enhance discussions that will lead to measures of either prevention or eradication of the problems. Mda (1992) refers to it as agitprop theatre. The other, Drama In Education (DIE) refers to a practice in which experts, together with the communities create plays around problems that the communities face, as the focus.

It is noticeable in these definitions that the focus is on the community problems and not the art itself. Secondly, as in DIE, while there is a chance for the community members to perform, it is a performance of non-skilled actors. In Malawi, according to Kamlongera (1984) and Kerr (1987), there have been attempts to do both TIE and DIE. The Travelling Theatre's national trips saw creation of performances both with, and for, local communities using social, health and agricultural themes. But, besides, the Travelling theatre itself presented plays to the communities written and performed by its members (Chimwenje:ms).

These approaches reveal a number of problems when contextualised in Malawian stage drama practice. As regards the TIE approach of the TFD, there was usually no continuity to develop actors, writers, and directors to the advanced level that the Travelling Theatre members engaged drama practice with. There is no evidence that the Travelling Theatre, after leaving Mbalachanda went back again to continue where it stopped. As regards other practices in Africa, at least the Tanzanian practice has tried to be consistent by going back to the communities, if Mlama (1991) has to be taken seriously. The state of non-continuity led to lack of proper drama-skills for the participating community members, leaving a loophole for underdevelopment of drama. Those people who were interested to join the theatre, and were not at University, started to practice more as imitators than skilled theatre artists. And also for the fact that TFD focuses on

message to the community other than perfection of performance aesthetics, the CCTT itself had no obligation to offer theatre training to members of the community that might have been interested in the performance skills further than what was offered. But besides this, for the fact that TFD contact period between the experts and members of the communities lasted for a few days, two weeks at most, there wasn't enough time for those interested to absorb the skills of stage performance. And at most, the discussion that happens in TIE is not about performance. Rather it is about the problems that the community faces.

DIE, however, had a chance to offer development of stage-drama skills because the experts - both artists and extension/health/social workers - develop the message drama together with the community (Mlama 1991). And in this instance, the process of firstly clarifying the problem, and merging it with the medium - drama- becomes the focus, much more than the final product. But problems of short period of contact with the community lets the inspired community performer down in his/her quest to learn drama. Essentially, DIE cannot properly impart skills of performance to the interested community member unless the experts' visits to the community are constant.

These aforementioned problems were mammoth for a drama practice like that in Malawi which had no properly organized professional model. Besides, there were no proper performance standards of the practice established outside the Traveling Theatre's, except for Owen Mbilizi, who performed at the Mount Soche Hotel and other commissions, (though Nambote, in *Muse 55* contests Mbilizi's originality, presenting him as a mere imitator of Chancellor College's Travelling Theatre productions). Others were practitioners such as Kamudoni Nyasulu who produced plays at the French Cultural Centre (Chimombo 1996), amongst many other places. But probably the question befitting to be asked at this point is what legacy did TFD leave for Malawi stage drama?

Theatre for development and implications for Kwathu drama group's stage drama

TFD has implications for staging a play, the actors, acting, the play script, funding and other organizational matters, when considered within aesthetic drama. Because TFD is done in the communities and for the utility of community members, the staging makes do with what is available. There is no luxury of proper setting, costume or props. In very rare circumstances are these specially considered or their absence seen as a problem. Secondly, the actor is essentially a non-actor on stage. Because of having no

training, the actor is unable to use the body, voice or intellect as skillfully as an apparatus for performance, required of career actors. Besides that, there is not enough time for the drama experts to do such a demanding training exercise for the participants in TFD workshops. And what the audience sees on stage in TFD drama performances is more of unfreed actors in a story than the characters that they try to portray. But the other implication for the being of drama, for those involved community members, is an assumption that getting on a theatre stage does not need well focussed career training. This opens the acting career to chancers and others who come into the field for wrong reasons. A quick assemblage of jokes to an applauding audience superficially confirms them as dramatists, graduating them with fame. Thirdly, in terms of the play script, there isn't enough time to polish, firstly the story, and secondly script development aesthetics of dramatic structure, dramatic characters and dramatic twists. The scripts in most cases have a linear and predictable ending with an expected moral. Rehearsals are also not seen as a strong prerequisite for a performance to get on stage. Outside these problems the TFD practice leaves a loophole that any person who is either vocal or has the ability to organise people becomes a director. And lastly as regards organization, TFD is non-competitive. Governments or developmental organizations fund it. And because of the availability of funds for development, companies and groups are relaxed concerning theatrical competitive survival in the theatre world. They focus more on what best proposal they can concoct to suit the developmental requirements and objectives of the donor agencies. Neither the companies nor community members are urged to perform as if their life depended on it. And this is evidenced by most of the people who cannot even perform or direct well, but are presently doing TFD for some non-governmental organisations and government agencies in Malawi. They call themselves 'action performers' when their understanding of drama itself is scant. But to look at the effect of these problems on Malawian stage drama, we turn to Kwathu Drama group's production presentation, before we tackle ATEM's approach and its effects on such groups as Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre.

Kwathu Drama group, established in 1980 (Severe 1992), was the leading theatre company amongst those that used Chichewa language as medium, until the death of its organizing director, Charles Severe. The Chancellor College Travelling Theatre created circumstances for its birth after its hectic drama activities which included performing Chichewa plays at the French Cultural Centre in Blantyre (*ibid.*). Kwathu was popularly known for its comedy, and such actors as John Nyangayathyoka Chodola, late Estere Jekete, Eric Mabedi, Charles Mphoka, Christopher Chiwalo and Linda Chatha (Chimombo Dec. 1992:7).

As regards TFD practice and its implications, there are a number of influences notable in Kwathu's practice. Neither director Charles Severe nor any of the actors in the company were formerly trained as theatre artists. They came into the theatre with what Chimwenje (ms) describes as 'talent' for drama performance. Severe, an ex-teacher, and a graduate of 'school radio productions on MBC' (Chimombo April 1995) took on the actors and started off with what they had seen being done on stage elsewhere, albeit, by the Travelling Theatre (Severe Dec. 1992). The group became popular not necessarily because it had a good director or performers but because of its skill in mixing clichés, steeped in jocular strategies. It combined these with ragged clothes as costume (Chimombo April 1995), village like, worn by Nyanga and Mabedi to the amusement of the audiences.

The staging of the performances was done mostly on bare stages, with a chair or two. When Kwathu reached its heights of popularity, chairs were put behind microphones on a bare stage, and Chimombo thinks this came from radio drama influence which the director, Charles Severe was part of. But this 'musical straight lines behind a microphone to a large audience' style restricted the actors in their attempts to enact realistic performances. At the French Cultural Centre Open Air theatre, Kwathu presented its funny clichés to audiences of up to three or four thousand people. The plays themselves were mostly improvised. Having known what made the audiences laugh, the actors, cleverly repeated the same stuff again and again to amused audiences. Characterisation was stereotypical, costuming ragged and repetitive, character speech, say of John Nyanga, Eric Mabedi and Esterte Jekete never differentiated from play to play.

This type of treatment could be defended that it works in radio or television drama serial episodes. In these, the drama carries forward a story of the same characters week after week. Treatment of character and story builds up on the same subject matter. However, this type of treatment becomes problematic when companies present it in the same way for full-length plays that are supposed to be different, in story, characters, subject matter and theme. Repetition of what is achieved in previous plays as regards costume, character, speech etc. marks lack of technical know-how to deal with performance of two or more different plays. And this is where Kwathu fails to properly articulate its stage drama skills, alluding to the TFD philosophical under-development.

In addition, though Kwathu drama became a big Theatre Company, the company did not have anyone trained to manage it. It survived on commonsense management by Severe who was essentially an ex-teacher. Later Nyanga and Mabedi, they themselves untrained managers, broke away from Kwathu to form their own company called

Alufeyo Performing Arts (APA). The name of the company came from the character that lead actor John Nyanga played in Willie Zingani's adaptation of his novel, *Njala Bwana*, which Kwathu produced and toured with. Currently, APA mostly performs quasi-stand up comedies, generally called *Izeki ndi Jakobo* which incorporates didactic messages, cliches and jokes, presented at political rallies or on radio for civic education. And in this instance, APA does not have to work hard at anything, whether it be perfecting their skill or rehearsal to survive in the Malawian theatre world because it has established its popularity and its performances are well paid for. But the question that still remains unanswered here is how does a professional practice depend on people who just happen to bump into the practice without any deeper technical know-how to advance it to levels of professional performance and organisation?

However, this does not mean that all Chichewa plays are performed on this ticket. *Mchira wa buluzi* was done by a professional group, the Chancellor College Traveling Theatre. And Chimombo's *Wachiona Ndani* was presented at the Chancellor College Open Air theatre and the French Cultural Centre at least from professional circumstances. And 'professional' here refers to the performers' adherence to informed performance aesthetics that come about as a result of proper training or when a play is overseen by a trained theatre director. And while this contrast of Kwathu and other companies seems to favour the professional approach, biased against the popular approach, it is important to mention that the current popular approach is misinformed and as a result misleads others who, likewise, join the theatre without technical know-how. Having looked at TFD in relation to Kwathu, let us now turn to ATEM and Wakhumbata's practice.

ATEM and its implications on Du Chisiza and Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre

ATEM was formed by English teachers to strengthen, inter alia, spoken English amongst Malawian students in secondary schools. Finding drama a good medium for its objective, it started to organize drama festivals. What is interesting about ATEM's attempts is what it consciously or unconsciously propagated as regards performance. ATEM's approach to drama was just like the TFD practitioners. Because the intention was not necessarily drama but spoken English (ATEM Newsletter 1969), there was little attention paid to aesthetics in the productions that were staged. Performed in school

or college halls, proscenium in style, most schools and their directors presented half-baked and usually confused performances. For example, Ludzi Girls Secondary School was pronounced the best English play for Central Region in 1992 because the performers imitated an English accent well, and yet from an aesthetical performance point of view, their characters were stranded, and could not fully realize dramatic moments while on stage (Magalasi 1993). But also because the organising force for ATEM was mostly expatriate English teachers who emphasized on original Malawian subject-matter, the plays came out mostly as a blend of Malawian traditional realism, as regards its setting, yet presented as stylised, because of the type of dancing, singing, and dialogue structure that accompanied most of the plays (Kerr 1991). In addition, the performers, despite having more time in contact with their teacher-directors, approached the performances as an extra-curricula activity. It is a fact that drama is not offered in Malawian secondary schools as a subject. As such, seriousness for what the students presented lacked. Apart from that, because the directors were mostly untrained, the productions were mediocre. One saw productions in which most performers moved up and down the stage without any clear motivation as they delivered their dialogue. And either untrained students or teachers wrote the play scripts, except in few cases where certain schools used the services of a practicing writer. For example, Paul Paseli wrote for Dzenza Secondary School from 1989 to 1992. But also most of the judges, except in the early stages of the organization, knew very little about performance and were either English teachers or journalists who might have interacted with a script or Shakespeare for literary criticism elsewhere.

Noteworthy in the plays was lack of dramatic considerations, with plays set in more than three spaces. Because of lack of experience, the changing of set would take more than two minutes as fellow students ran around the stage with furniture in preparation for the next scene, at the end of the other. What implication did this have on Malawian stage-drama? To answer this, let us turn to the practice of Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre, a leading theatre company that used English as a medium.

Wakhumbata Ensemble is partially a product of the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre activities, and a direct consequence of ATEM. The director of Wakhumbata, late Dunduza Chisiza Jr. was firstly inspired by Owen Mbilizi, who performed as part of the University theatre activities in the 1970s while a student at the Malawi Polytechnic. When Mbilizi later went to teach at Chichiri Secondary School where Chisiza did his Junior secondary school education in the late 1970s, Chisiza was part of the Drama Club Mbilizi wrote for, and directed. Chisiza, however, never featured meaningfully in drama then until he transferred to HHI Secondary School, where he wrote and directed plays for the school. But his initial know-how came from Mbilizi's activities. And his first play, *The Deceased's Attack* was written while he was in Form three at HHI.

But how did ATEM's prevailing practice leave its legacy on Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre which Du Chisiza founded, wrote for, and directed?

The deceased attack

The Deceased's Attack was mixture of singing, dancing and performance, though presented on a proscenium stage as a realistic play. The play's set has a hut at upstage centre, and two others by the wings on either side of the stage, (Chisiza 1992:1) suggesting a realistic/naturalistic form. One of the play's main problem is its inability to present a story, credible enough to suspend disbelief, in at least the critical audience, apart from confusion of form. The play is built on a superficially treated story, typical of secondary school plays that came out of the quasi-amateur secondary school drama environment of the late 1970s and early 1980s, condoned by ATEM.

Firstly in the play, Viyezgu returns from war, and after being welcomed by his two young wives and two younger brothers, he is told that his father Moyala was killed by the uncle Kanyoli, who later married Viyezgu's mother (pp. 3-12). Already, there are several problems that undermine the play at the level of credibility. Firstly, if Viyezgu is coming from a war, there is temptation to ask: whose war? Was it a clan or tribal war? Because if it was either of the two, then why did the father and the uncle not go? An answer to that could probably be that they were old. But if men fight and kill each other for a woman, it means they still have the energy to run around. Suggestions that these men could be middle-aged cannot be easily dismissed. So right from the start, the story does not ring true if circumstances of clan and tribal war are considered. The popularity of the play, however, was because of its 'rumoured' metaphoric representation of Malawian politics and the fate of Chisiza's father under Banda's early rule as leader of the party. At the time of the first performance in 1983, many people whispered, lest the abundant government informers heard them, that the playwright wrote it as a way of remembering the mysterious political death of his own father, political economist Dunduza Chisiza, who died at the height of a campaign for Malawian independence in 1962. Kanyama Chiume, in his autobiography, suspects Chisiza Sr. was one of Banda's political victims. So, Chisiza Jr.'s play was famous owing to what people thought it metaphorically presented, owing to the political censorship that existed at the time it was staged.

Secondly, the story and performance is undermined by action commentary by the very character who has to do them. For instance scene four opens with Viyezgu's feeling of achievement after he had killed the uncle, as per the 'ghost' father's instruction:

(Viyezgu is pacing impatiently around the cemetery)

Viyezgu: I have done what my father wanted me to do. Now there is nothing to worry me, nothing for me to dread and nothing to haunt me.

Voice: (*From afar*) Viyezgu.

Viyezgu: There, there my father calls again, yes, let him come and hear the victory and let his heart be happy when the (sic) returns. (p.19).

What Viyezgu is internally going through is verbally explained to the audience, instead of letting him express his feelings without words. The silence that might have accompanied the performance could have intensified the audience's attention and excitement when the father, whom instead of just congratulating and letting him go, asks him to go and kill the mother. The silence here would speak volumes about Viyezgu's state. However, the above dialogue approach might have made sense if Chisiza deliberately used Brechtian style, in which such description can be seen as part of epic theatre's aesthetic that Bertolt Brecht propagated. But because it came from the writer's confusion, it is worthy pointing out.

But yet another instance is Viyezgu's announcement before he goes to kill the mother:

Viyezgu: ... Here I am now. Go in Viyezgu and kill without mercy. Please your father, your beloved father... She is the one, well I will stab the mortar in the face, and as far as I am concerned, I won't be committing a sin, for I am going to kill with the feeling of stabbing a mortar. (*With renewed determination, he succeeds in defeating his pessimism*)... (p21).

Of course there are temptations to defend such type of dialogue approach that it works on radio. But *Deceased Attack* was a stage play, not a radio play. The play versions for radio and stage could have been different. Chimombo decries this same approach by Severe at Kwathu that 'most of the time he (Severe) produces his plays as if they were only going to be heard and not seen by a live audience' (WASI April 1995: 9). This failure to differentiate form and medium is evidence of lack of training in the theatre. But MBC also contributed to the confusion because winning stage plays at ATEM were recorded while in performance and broadcast on radio. And these are the areas in which ATEM as an informed organiser could have intervened. Its silence either meant ignorance or condoning, affecting young artists like Chisiza.

The other problem with the play lies with Chisiza's arbitrary use of words and language in the dialogue. In Scene three when Viyezgu goes to kill Kanyoli, Viyezgu announces himself loudly, ... 'Come out Kanyoli in your powers for this is the end of you. Come out naked or dressed'. And Kanyoli responds that 'If it's madness, I too go mad if the matter (sic) is hideous'.... (p.17). The contextual meaning of the word 'hideous' is not

clear. The Oxford Dictionary defines hideous as '...filling the mind with horror; very unpleasant or ugly: a hideous crime/face/noise' (Hornby:1995 - fifth edition). Whatever Chisiza meant by using *hideous* does not come across.

But just a few lines up before this moment, at a time when the father is ordering Viyezgu to kill Kanyoli, there is an instance of extravagant use of words:

Moyala: ... Kill Kanyoli for me....

Viyezgu:.. But... but how father, how?

Moyala: That question is irrelevant, awkward and immaterial. (p.15).

Chisiza's usage of the three words, 'irrelevant', 'awkward' and 'immaterial' following each other delayed the dramatic moment. He could have been more precise, as the father was actually in a commanding mood to dismiss and prompt Viyezgu to listen. Because the father was giving him an order, it was a tense moment. By prolonging the sentence with up to three words that stand for almost the same expression of feeling, the dramatic build-up got diffused.

But obviously part of the defence for this could be that Chisiza wrote this play while in secondary school. Nevertheless, this paper's dissenting view is that the play was only published in 1992, nine years after it was performed as HHI Secondary School's entry to ATEM festival, and a couple of years after he returned from his drama studies at Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts. The new knowledge he gained at the college could have helped him to make the play better. His contention, as per the review of the book after it came out, that he left it untampered because it was like sacred (*Malawi News* 1992) is professionally unacceptable. How do others who follow him stage a badly written play that is professionally unsatisfying?

But the problem of extravagant wording is also coupled with extravagant characterisation. *Deceased Attack* has about eight characters and a chorus of six. On close scrutiny, the play needed about five characters and probably the chorus. The bulk of the play is in the hands of Viyezgu, Kanyoli, Moyala, the Mother, and an informant. The first part of the play where Viyezgu inspects the wives and the two brothers is not necessary. It does not add or subtract anything to the theme of the play. This is why, once the two wives and the brothers exit, they don't enter again to contribute to the ongoing performance. Moreover, when this inspection of wives by a husband is closely considered, it can be seen as reminiscent of James Ng'ombe's *Banana Tree* in which the main character Mwambi inspects his wives Mkundikana and Mangepo, as the wives competed for his favours by presenting their physical bodies and products of their different crafts.

The difference with Ng'ombe's placement of the characters was that they were the centre of the dramatic conflict, and he used only three characters to build the entire play.

But problems like these are not only restricted to *Deceased Attack*. The other two plays that make part of the *Du Chisiza's Classics* namely *Chitowelo* and *Nyamirandu* have similar problems. However, *Chitowelo* is at least a slightly better play as regards story. Its plot manages to use the characters Chitowelo and Khata as the focus of the conflict. Though the play digresses later to bring in other characters to help, the character Chitowelo is the one who deals the final blow to Khata to punish him for trickery, which was one of the central issues of the play. *Nyamirandu*, on the other hand, poses a different problem. It does not have a clear story perspective. As it jumps from setting to setting, it firstly robbed the main character the play's point of view, besides suggesting multiple stage set, which many secondary schools were unable to deal with in staging. The removal and arrangement of furniture from scene to scene, while in performance, would take from one minute to three minutes, leaving the audience waiting: a problem which Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre still has at the time of writing this paper. But, without sounding very harsh on Chisiza as a writer, his audience was mostly the youth in secondary schools or school leavers who admired him as a drama personality and were not equipped enough to technically disapprove some of the major faults characterising his and consequently Wakhumbata's practice. His return from studies in America increased his audience as the new plays bore influence of Americanism as regards accent and Hollywood-like parlance. The play *Misidi Burning*, for example, has Malawian police officers, in Misidi, a rural area, who swear and talk like American 'cops' in their movies. Apart from that, the title *Misidi Burning* is reminiscent of the popular American film *Mississippi Burning*, just as *Educating Mwalimu* brings memories of the British film *Educating Rita*.

Chisiza's practice and the Malawian drama context

One thing that is noteworthy about Du Chisiza and Wakhumbata's early plays is the reflection of the period they were written and produced. They used traditional material. And the idea of traditional kingship, traditional wives, advisors, and queens was abundant in many ATEM productions. James Ng'ombe's *Banana Tree*, which dramatises the Chewa creation myth, was one of the popular scripts that did its rounds in Drama clubs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Likuni Girls, Chichiri Secondary School, Stella Marris Secondary School presented it at the ATEM festivals on different occasions. And the other influence was Owen Mbilizi's adaptations of European plays into an African setting. Chichiri Secondary, where Chisiza was introduced to drama and

abundant in many ATEM productions. James Ng'ombe's *Banana Tree*, which dramatises the Chewa creation myth, was one of the popular scripts that did its rounds in Drama clubs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Likuni Girls, Chichiri Secondary School, Stella Marris Secondary School presented it at the ATEM festivals on different occasions. And the other influence was Owen Mbilizi's adaptations of European plays into an African setting. Chichiri Secondary, where Chisiza was introduced to drama and Mbilizi wrote and directed plays, did *Chiwaleso*, an adaptation of Sophocle's *Medea*, and *Crossed by Fate*, adapted from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. All these adaptations won Chichiri first place in the festivals. But furthermore, traditional material managed to by-pass the Censorship Board that had its sensors up for political allusions to Dr. Banda's harsh rule or suggestions of sex (Gibbs this issue). Even though by now the 'censorship' criticism seems to have been just an excuse because the question that is being asked by other writers is why is it that, since the new government relaxed censorship has there been very little creative work of note? (Kishindo 2001). But while this is so, this is an area worthy speculation. However, back on ATEM and Chisiza, what ATEM did not do for youngsters like Du Chisiza was to identify and find a way of eradicating the theatre problems, thereby developing the youngsters. So, just like the TFD paradigm, therefore, we see ATEM's drama festivals, with their focus on developing spoken English in secondary school youths, undermining the youths' development in drama skills, and consequently growth of stage drama in Malawi.

Radio drama and stage drama

Radio dramas as well left their mark on stage drama. Firstly, radio uses sound and speech for its presentations. This means that things associated with particular scenery are either sounded or the scene is described. This description method also goes for characters as regards size, the costume they wear, and some of the actions they might want to do (Chimombo: 1995). Thonyi Gondwe 1990 in a radio play called *I'm on the phone* uses this. In a scene between a prostitute girlfriend Mbachi and boyfriend Kanyozi, set in a night club, the descriptive dialogue goes thus:

Mbachi: ... but if you think the night club is a suitable place for people to discuss their private affairs, I'll go ahead.

Kanyozi: Ok, I'll come out with you. (BRING BAR ATMOSPHERE DOWN) (p. 23)

And later when Kanyozi has to find a way of getting rid of the woman out of his sight, Gondwe brings up another instance:

Kanyozi: (RUSTLE OF MONEY) Here, have this five kwacha for you and the child. (p.23).

This characteristic, apart from using music to bridge scenes, is found in *Sewero la sabata lino*, *Pa Majiga* and even *Theatre of the air*. In Chisiza's plays, there is a consistent use of music to bridge scenes. Deceased Attack starts with a dance and song sequence, and ends with a song 'Wamala Banthu Viye'. Scene three starts with 'Ndivu Mwachicherenga', as Viyezgu paces up and down at a cemetery, waiting for the 'ghost' father to give him the first instruction to go and kill. This kind of structuring which consistently employs music and dance is used in the whole length of the play. And his other plays like *Chitowelo* and *Nyamirandu* have this same flow. While he might have thought that he is presenting them as musicals, the music did not emanate from the character's psychology, neither was it played or sang by him. It came as an embellishment from without, as happens in realistic plays, thereby making its use not only anomalous but as bridges of scenes, as done in radio plays.

Chichewa radio dramas, *Sewero la sabata lino* and *Pa majiga* as well left a big mark for its stage counterparts. Assemblage of jokes around developmental moral messages as a methodology, and Chimang'anja/chilomwe affected-speech, apart from impromptu improvisatory plays hurriedly rehearsed or with no rehearsal at all (Kumpukwe 1983), are some elements Chichewa drama groups faithfully copied. Producer and lead character of *Sewero*, Smart Likhaya Mbewe, a native of Phalombe has a Lomwe accent, seen as 'countryish' when compared to the Ngoni accent adopted by urbanites. As part of an attraction for his audience, he presents a character, Kapalepale, who speaks with that type of accent. And Kwathu Drama group's jokes and characterisation are reminiscent of *Sewero*, as Smart Likhaya Mbewe does for Kapalepale (Kumpukwe *ibid*). And in *Pamajiga*, Mbewe creates a dupe, Zamadula who always makes mistakes for correction by the Chiefly character Chumachiyenda, and villagers aNyoni and his wife. And the developmental moral (Kumpukwe *ibid*) in these set-ups is the target while the jokes sustain interest to keep the audience listening. For popular stage drama, the described elements became a problem as Chimwenje, quoted above, observes. The practitioners started to emphasize the jokes and the moral at the expense of theatrical aesthetics consistent with the form and style of the staged productions.

However, *Theatre of the air* was treated differently. It was a testing ground for radio drama writers, some of whom came from the Chancellor College Writers' Workshop,

and later the general public. Unlike *Kapalepale* and *Pamajiga* which had permanent characterisation but different stories, *Theatre of the air* used scripts from different writers, and explored different topics. But there were times when writers and performers could dominate, week after week, when the producers saw them as good, or became influential for the production of the programme, as Owen Mbilizi and Towela Chawinga later became in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The other problem with *Theatre of the Air* was that at times it accepted, as hinted elsewhere in the paper, stage plays recorded from ATEM festivals for broadcasting to the nation. This created an impression to unsuspecting young dramatists that the plays for stage were transferable to radio without any mediation for transition. And also due to scarcity of radio actors, it started to depend on untrained stage actors, who in the end unquestionably accepted what the radio producers wanted them to do. And this, interestingly, did not only affect stage drama, but the quality of radio productions themselves, including radio adverts. And because of the thinking that proper training is not necessarily important for drama in general, evidenced in TFD and Likhaya's approach, *Theatre of the air* slumped from the quality productions featuring Owen Mbilizi, Towela Chawinga, and Marvin Hanke to despicable mediocrity.

In the above three paradigms namely TFD, ATEM drama festivals, and radio drama - probably with qualification on *Theatre of the air* - it is apparent that 'development' was the focus. But 'development' at what expense to the medium that carries it? And who loses or wins if theatre is not well developed but arbitrarily approached?

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper has focused on developmental paradigms encompassed by TFD, ATEM's drama festivals, and Radio drama. These approaches have been critically examined to reveal problematic philosophical bases that undermine the growth of stage drama in this country. The practices of Kwathu Drama Group and Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre have been used to illustrate some of the problems that need aesthetical attention. The intention has been, not to undermine what the two companies have achieved as regards 'popular drama', but to point out where things might be improved if a proper professional drama practice has to come about: a practice that will have the ability to check unmediated imitations that disguise themselves as professional drama

on Malawi stages: a practice that shall get into dialogue with other practices beyond the borders of Malawi.

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