

ENTERTAINMENT

Dr Ntangaare for vetting artists



Dr Ntangaare is one of the most enduring figures on the arts scene in Uganda. PHOTO BY BAMUTURAKI MUSINGUZI

*Sage: The folklorist and playwright, Dr Mercy Miremba Ntangaare believes theatre in Uganda is faced with a number of challenges. Ntangaare, the former head of the Makerere University music, dance and drama department is the author of “Dustbin Nations” (2000), “The Chief of Shumankuzi or The Corrupt Chief” (2002), “Lady, Will You Marry Me?” (2002), “The Rat Trap and Other Plays” (2007) - an anthology of five plays - and scholarly articles on drama/theatre and culture, among others. She talked **Bamuturaki Musinguzi**. Excerpts:*

Q: What do think are the major challenges facing the industry?

There are quite a number of things not functioning properly in Uganda’s theatre industry, especially the business side. But we’re not doomed. We only need to be a bit organised. For example, if we love the industry and the profession of theatre we should set minimum standards (of operation and doing business) as well as a code of conduct.

We need to establish professional associations and unions for example, of writers, directors, actors/actresses, among others. Why should anybody wake up one day call themselves an artist and we just agree with them without subjecting them to a minimum entry requirement? There must be some minimum requirements and form of regulation.

On the other hand, one asks why the government always looks at theatre and the other arts, most of them arising out of our culture, as none of its business? How can a country develop without culture? What if it put in place some basic infrastructure (theatre labs, music studios, arts’ schools, among others) and let the artists do their experiments in such places, wouldn’t it reap more taxes and create employment for many people? Theatre in Uganda has a future but only if we, the practitioners in our different professions, stop a minute to think about the current state and what we can do to redress the situation. We now have many trained and educated practitioners which means many of the artists know what to do.”

Some practitioners are uncomfortable around trained and educated artists from Makerere University but this is the greatest asset the industry has.

Qn: What role has Alex Mukulu played in the Ugandan theatre industry?

From a distance, and from his dress and walk, Alex looks eccentric, quiet and reserved. When you get to talk/interact with him, he’s an approachable, humorous and clever person. But I also know him (from the few interactions we have had) as a very determined person, self-sufficient and one who cannot change his mind so easily. A number of these traits and perceptions appear in his plays, particularly through his main characters. Knowing, too, that he normally directs and performs in his plays – he’s always the main character – one could be tempted to think Mukulu extends himself to the stage. His love for and active participation in theatre during the three decades (1980s through to the early 2000s) marked the apex of his career as a playwright, director but mostly actor. Thus, Alex has played a central role in Uganda’s theatre especially of the 1990s and early 2000s.

His theatre is largely experimental in form. He stages in conventional theatre spaces but does not always follow conventions, for example of plot, character development or dialogue.

He’s more concerned with the spectacular hence his heavy use of revue methods and emphasis on large groups of the chorus and dances. If he had continued his experiment he could easily have delivered a contemporary Ugandan musical on the theatre scene.

The other aspect is that, besides the Ugandan dramatists of the 1970s and early 1980s, who could have been “forced” by the environment/circumstances to write political plays, just a handful of Ugandan playwrights have dared to write on or produce political theatre. This is a big contribution Alex has made. He may not have written perfect scripts but he dared to try. One thing I think Alex should still do for Uganda’s theatre is to write down his “theories” and “practices” of theatre i.e. his philosophy of theatre for debate and posterity because it certainly is worth study and criticism.

Qn: Which of Mukulu’s plays do say is the best?

I think “Wounds of Africa” is Alex Mukulu’s best production because there’s a certain degree of consistency in the structuring of the play. One can “see” the play’s

story/plot as coherent, and there was an effort put in character development and theme. The message is also "universal" in a way that the question of poor leadership in Africa has become perennial. It's always a puzzle when the common/ordinary person sees the problems that need to be addressed in society while the leaders on the other hand seem not to know what to do.

And none of the African leaders seem to have a direction/vision. So where's the problem? This is a very fundamental issue Mukulu is struggling to discuss.