

Book Reviews

Adelugba, Dapo (ed). **Before Our Very Eyes**. Spectrum Books limited, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1986. 213 pp. No price indicated.

Before Our Very Eyes is a collection of articles and tributes to Wole Soyinka. Contributed by colleagues, former students, theater apprentices, admirers and close friends, the book was intended to be a special 50th birthday present. It ended up celebrating Soyinka as the 1986 Nobel Prize Winner for literature.

Divided into two parts and featuring sixteen articles, most of them folksy and chatty in style, the book is perhaps by far the most important document so far on Soyinka the man. The first part contains eleven articles on Soyinka while the second part focuses on his writings.

In his understandably long article, Olumuyiwa Awe embarks upon the rather difficult task of piecing together experiences of a profoundly memorable relationship spanning forty-two years. His account includes life at the Government college, Ibadan, where they first met. We also meet Soyinka as a government clerk at the then University College of Ibadan, which at that time, was a Nigerian campus of London University. Among his numerous contributions at the UCI were the creation of the Pyrates' Confraternity in 1953 and editorship of the campus newspaper. Since graduation from Leeds, Soyinka has lived as a writer, director, founder of theater companies, lecturer and social activist. Awe recalls Soyinka's numerous brushes with death --especially in the hands of unfriendly governments against whom Soyinka simply never stopped acting as well as speaking out.

Ifoghale Amata's memory of Soyinka dates back to the early fifties when they were students at UCI. He remembers Soyinka with respect and fatherly affection. He remembers particularly how Soyinka, through mere satire, brought about a change in an unpopular University menu. He also employed the same medium to rid UCI of a ridiculous decree which compelled university students at Ibadan, a tropical town, to wear the academic gown in order to dine in the cafeteria. Soyinka's iconoclasm seems to have always been founded on common sense.

Bola Ige's short articles is a testimony to Soyinka's dedication and thoroughness in pursuing any task. It also bespeaks his striving towards an understanding of the implications of any endeavor, no matter how seemingly minute, before undertaking it. The role he was called upon to undertake was that of a godfather,

but Soyinka would not commit himself to that role until he had investigated its implications thoroughly.

In his "No Half Measures," Tunji Oyelana testifies to Soyinka's perfectionist posture. Soyinka is a man of high standards and is never pleased with anything short of the best a person can offer. He helps to bring out that best in all with whom he works.

The Soyinkareque high ideal also comes out in his taste for wines--be it palm wine (a favorite drink in most of Southern Nigeria) or foreign wines. This is the assessment of Bordeaux-born Alain Ricard, a long time associate and evidently, a drinking pal of Soyinka's. To Ricard, Soyinka is not only a connoisseur of wine, he is also a good brewer who uses local materials such as kolanuts to an advantage.

Femi Johnson, another long time friend shows, Soyinka as a man of a fathomless mind, a risk taker, brave and tireless. We get to know Soyinka as a brave hunter--even by Yoruba standards. Johnson describes a rather fairy-like event which occurred during one of Soyinka's hunting episodes. Soyinka once passed through a village which, according to the villager's accounts, was being menaced by a boar. Soyinka, who in the meantime had lost his way, decided to pass the night. In the morning, he encouraged the villagers to lead him to the boar's track. The story ended as Soyinka, by one gun shot, killed the boar, took one of its thighs and left the rest for the villagers to feast on. Johnson also reminds us of the risk Soyinka took at the outset of the Biafra sessionist movement, his subsequent incarceration in solitary confinement for nearly two years, and his selfless role in the Oyo State Road Safety Corps to mention but a few. His plays are an extension of his numerous attempts to bring about sanity, fair-play and dignity to the human race.

Like Johnson, Yemi Ogunbiyi also alludes to Soyinka's many-facetedness and his commitment to social justice and well-being. He justifiably describes Soyinka as a local man as well as a unique internationalist; a well-travelled man and yet, a connoisseur of his homeland and culture. To Ogunbiyi, Soyinka "exudes tremendous warmth and genuineness of the human spirit." He cares. He personally answers his mail and addresses himself to even the minutest questions. Explaining why some of his works might come across as difficult, Ogunbiyi reminds us that, among other factors, Soyinka considers language as "a vehicle of mythic meaning".

In his brief analysis Agbo Folarin touches upon the wrath readily discernible in some of Soyinka's plays. He affirms the usefulness of the wrath by comparing it to what emerges "when Ogun. . . beats on his anvil [and] the sparks of the molten iron

extracted from the ground, are forged into useful implements." Ogun is Soyinka's patron god.

Wale Ogunyemi shares with us his first and rather unfavorable impressions of Soyinka--impressions which were to change in later years as Ogunyemi got to know him better. Not only has Ogunyemi become an admirer but he is also a beneficiary. Himself a writer of weight, Ogunyemi feels that he owes his success in the theater to his early contact with Soyinka.

Michael Etherton's article is an analysis of Soyinka's commitment as discernible in his plays. Etherton, who has been acquainted with Soyinka's drama from the early 60s, describes it in terms of "its liberating force." He expresses the hope that poets like Soyinka would merge their vision and art with political endeavors at the grassroots level to project the needs of the dispossessed people in the third world.

Starting with David Cook's article, the second part of this book focuses essentially on Soyinka's works. Cook tackles the issue of the frequently alleged obscurity and inaccessibility in Soyinka's plays. Cook concludes, based on his personal experience and practice, that not only can most of Soyinka's plays be done as popular theater productions, but they will prove to be enjoyable. He challenges popular theater practitioners and critics of Soyinka's plays to develop an open mind and stage some of Soyinka's plays at the grassroots level.

Joel Adedeji deals with the aesthetics of Soyinka's plays in terms of structuralism and theatricalism. In order to shed some light for those who perceive Soyinka's plays as plotless, he reveals certain aspects of traditional Yoruba theatrical aesthetics which he believes have influenced Soyinka. He also provides a number of personal but nonetheless important clues which can be useful in understanding Soyinka's plays. For instance, he contends that Soyinka does not set out to provide a "moral"; rather, his intention is to impart experience; to set a riddle, rather than tell a story.

Olaimpe Aboyade's critique centers around Death and the King's Horseman particularly as it reflects the Yoruba world view. She also explores the play's central theme, a theme which is of relevance to the contemporary African reality--namely, the lamentable process through which the African world has been wretched from its "true course."

Brian Crow examines the "Romantic Tradition" and its possible influence on Soyinka. Although he concedes that Soyinka is essentially a product of Africa, it is still possible to study his plays in "light of Western tradition," for, after all, "as a young man, Soyinka's formal education was in institutions shaped by British

models." In addition, while at Leeds, Soyinka came under the influence of the renowned romantic critic, G. Wilson Knight.

In their respective articles, the last two contributors, Dan Izevbaye and Adelugba concentrate their efforts on the latest and "popular" work of Soyinka, notably his 1983 long playing record, Unlimited Liability Company. This record was Soyinka's response to the decadence which characterized Shehu Shagari's infamous regime. Adelugba's critique of the record is enjoyable to read.

Before Our Very Eyes is a unique work on Soyinka for a variety of reasons. Although a lot has been written on Soyinka's works, the articles in this book are a refreshing and welcome addition. The strength of the book, however, lies in its descriptions and testimonies on Soyinka, the Man. One's only regret is that this collection only features one woman's article, thereby leaving the public with the erroneous impression that Soyinka's world is populated mainly by male friends, male students, male beneficiaries and male admirers. The reviewer is aware of a good number of women whose contributions to this important book could have been equally poignant and valuable.

One fully understands that the book was never intended as a publicity piece. Soyinka has never needed one! However, it may inadvertently serve as one. Especially for those who will never have the opportunity of meeting Soyinka, this enlightening collection is a good substitute. For those whose first or brief contact proved to be a negative experience, Wale Ogunyemi's piece is a lesson; it may indeed be therapeutic.

One major contribution of their collection is its limp presentation of a writer who is not just a great and hardworking erudite being but a man of character and depth, a selfless fighter for social justice, a man truly worthy of admiration and emulation.

Before Our Very Eyes is in itself an inspiration. It should, at the least, inspire students of the other African talents too numerous to count. We need not wait until they are fifty or awarded the Nobel Prize to recognize and honor them.

The Cinema in Nigeria. Francoise Balogun, Enugu: Delta Productions (Nigeria) Limited, 1987, 144 pages.

Film Production in Nigeria began and continues to develop at a snail's pace. For years, appeals to successive Nigerian governments to become seriously involved in the establishment of a national film industry have failed to achieve the desired result. Despite official acknowledgment that the cinema has immense