

THE PERFORMATIVE TOWER OF BABEL: THE SINEWS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE THEATRE IN KENYA

ABSTRACT

Through the annals of history of theatrical performance in Kenya and the globe at large, one thing that has stood out is the specificity of each undertaking. Stemming from the idea of theatrical performance as process and product of ritualistic performance in the African context, the outlook of the national and community theatres has, in spite of the “standardized performance lingo” continually edified various “accents”, characterized by the variations in disparate elements of theatre including, storytelling and characterization, stage business, stage design and branding the troupes. Additionally, and very importantly, the linguistic choices of theatre have provided another strong pillar in accentuating theatre lingua franca. In Kenya particularly, contemporary theatre which has largely reverberated British theatrical accents from its colonial heritage, plays in local languages including Kiswahili, Kenya’s national language are regarded as the exception in the face of an English language plays norm. Notably, even in these Anglicized proscenium pedestals, and buoyed by an audience that has developed its taste from indigenous language radio and television, indigenous language theatre has found, crafted and furnished its space within the mainstream theatre and attracted a host of thespians, producers, directors and poignantly, a consistent audience in urban and rural Kenyan theatre spaces. As such, this paper seeks to establish the accent pillars of language, style and narrative in indigenous language theatre in Kenya. The study arguments will be anchored on theories of performance and the post-Afrocentric discourses to delineate performance aspects and to contextualize the “accent” in theatrical style and form. Primary data will be sourced from interviews and close reading of scripts and watching recorded performances and will be intercrossed with secondary data derived from books, journals, newspaper reviews and posters, online and archival material. The data will be analysed thematically and discussed in line with the study objectives.

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