interest. The flat characterisations of black as hero and white as anti-hero, the transparent plot, the brave 'mother', the heroic revolutionaries, the treacherous brother, the platitudes, the posturing - all contributed to make 'The Trail of Dedan Kimathi' as dead as a dodo in my estimation. Maybe I am too severe. But one has to admit that the politics of the nationalist 'dream' that lies at the base of Ngugi's play has turned into ashes in our generation; looking back at the rhetoric voiced in the play, therefore, one only sees the ironies, the illusions, the 'jargon', the half-truths and mis-readings of reality that betrayed the nationalist struggles of Africa and that have led to the chaos that Kenya and other countries in that region are in today.

Perhaps one could have salvaged Ngugi's play by re-interpreting it, producing it in a different mode. Who knows, I am not a play producer, only an observer on the sidelines. But this production is so didactic in its framing of the text and somehow, plain and simple 'agist-prop' no longer pleases. We have passed through too many traumatic situations to be any longer content with revolutionary rhetoric, red flags and clenched fists. We demand to see the truth and the whole truth, we demand to see the dark side of the moon.

From speaking to some of the actors, they appear to have gained a tremendous insight into African society, politics and culture from working on the play with Somalatha, who has always displayed a remarkable ability to relate to, and interact with, children and the young. The mixing of actors and theater persona from the English and Sinhala speaking theater worlds is also a virtue in itself in our circumstances. But all this would have been perfect for a workshop production, not for a play that is put on for an 'average' audience.

For such audiences, then, Somalatha Subasinghe's production of 'Dedan Kimathi' seemed a waste of resources, talent and energy. A real pity, that. And, perhaps, as a codicil, one may add that one wonders whether Ngugi's 'politics of nationalism' are so dead and obsolete in today's world and therefore safe for even the British Council.

Neloufer de Mel Interviewed

MAKING 'OPERA WONYOSI' TRILINGUAL

Why a trilingual production?

It has been important for us to experiment with a trilingual production for many reasons. Firstly, we want to present a trilingualism that is different to what gets called trilingual in Sri Lanka today. Very often, trilingualism means the dominant or hegemonic language remaining in place, with gestures of one-liners in the other two languages. Or, language is compartmentalized. There are plays and tele-dramas in which the Sinhala characters speaks only Sinhala, the Tamil only Tamil and so on. We wanted to stage a production in which all three languages are given equal status, and moreover where the actors are required to speak in all three languages. This is because one of our aims was to confront, and come to terms with how difficult it is to learn, speak and act in another language, and through this process, realize the **commitment** required in achieving this form of trilingualism.

A very important reason for such a production was also the need, within the context of the University, to provide a forum at which students from all three linguistic mediums and different faculties could meet, take part in a production and get to know each other. Our education system has bred a linguistic and disciplinary isolation which spills onto the social level as well. Students from different faculties and departments tend to remain within their own milieu, and very rarely do English, Sinhala and Tamil medium students really get to know each other. To me, the fact that this production has facilitated such a forum in which, there is not only representation from all three linguistic mediums, but the faculties of Arts, Science, Law and Medicine as well has been a significant achievement.

How difficult has it been, to get the students together?

As with any experimental work, we have had to confront a lot of scepticism from students, academics and critics alike. In terms of getting students together for this production, one of the biggest hurdles was to establish the credibility of the English Drama Society and English Department in this venture. Although calls for auditions etc. were publicised in all three languages within the University, there were those who

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were diffident at the prospect of having to deal with English. Then there were others who left the production, finding the commitment of having to speak in all three languages too much, and there were still others who, finding such a trilingual production untenable for their own political programme, refused to have anything to do with it, although they watch interestedly on the side-lines. But the students who remained - there are about 30 in the cast - are committed to the project and have enjoyed themselves tremendously. In fact, the experimental version of the play we staged within the University last August was so successful that many students come to us even today - we have now started rehearsals for a public performance in early June - wanting to join in.

What made you choose 'Opera Wonyosi'?

The Drama Society members wanted to present a play by a contemporary playwright. Choosing an African play over a Sri Lankan or Indian one I think had something to do with familiarity with certain African writers, and more interestingly, diffidence about 'messing about' with a classical, canonical Indian text for instance. Wole Soyinka's 'Opera Wonyosi' seemed ideal for a number of reasons. Based on Brecht's 'Threepenny Opera', Soyinka's play is an extremely entertaining and witty expose of power, corruption, opportunism etc., and although the specific context of the play is an imaginary African country, the socio-political milieu depicted in the play is familiar.

Secondly, the structure of the play is fairly loose, with the character of the Disk Jockey linking the proceedings. This was ideal for our purposes, as the play lent itself to a constant 'disturbance' of the text that an experimental version such as ours demanded. For instance, we have introduced three DJs - an English, a Sinhala and a Tamil DJ instead of the one. These DJs are the only characters in the play who speak in one language, and they are used to link the plot and draw the audience's attention to crucial lines in the play through emphasis or reiteration of what is being said in another language. We have tried, where possible, not to provide direct translation, as that would defeat our purpose and weaken the dramatic effect of the production. Fortunately, even though we may not be truly trilingual, we have heard enough Sinhala, Tamil and English to have it in our ear, and so, when we did the play last August, language itself didn't pose too much of a problem for the audience. The comment was that it was 'remarkably coherent' - and this reflects the strength of the theatrical medium. However, the frustration of an audience unable to catch the nuance of the unfamiliar language is, in my mind, very enabling.

What have been the major problems in mounting such a production?

The biggest hurdle was to get someone capable of directing such an experimental work with students who have, for the most part, hardly acted before. We are very grateful to Somalatha Subasinghe for agreeing to help us, giving generously of her time and expertise. The exigency of time has also hampered our ability to master the unfamiliar language to the extent we would have liked to have. At times, Sinhala speaking students have had to take down their English and Tamil lines purely phonetically at first, before comprehending the meaning of what is being said. This situation however has provided one of the most productive spaces within the production, as students from all three linguistic mediums have had to help each other with comprehension and pronunciation etc. And for me personally, it has been process of learning how difficult the practical project is, how it smudges and makes the theoretical underpinnings leak. Thirdly, the translations presented a problem. Soyinka is notorious for his puns and wordplay. Approximating this in another language has not been easy.

How did you adapt the text into the three languages?

First, we looked for opportunities provided within the text itself. When there are repetitions in the text, and they are important enough to keep, the reiteration is made in another language. There are also times when the text changes gear as it were. This is when characters shift stances, and changes of perception and mood take place, and these provided ideal instances for language changes. There are also times when we felt the content of the play, the situations and experiences it depicts are especially suited to a particular milieu and language. For instance the thugs sing a wedding song for Macheath and Polly. This is in Sinhala and the song resembles the *Jayamangala Gatha*. The adaptation has been a collaborative effort between myself, Dr.Arjuna Parakrama, Ravindra Ranasinghe and Somalatha Subsinghe all of who have contributed greatly. In fact, the editing still goes on at rehearsal!

What do you hope to achieve with this?

We are not simplistically offering the production as an instant solution to the ethnic problem, or assuming that people can go and learn the Other language and that everything will be fine. But for me the commitment required for an experimental venture such as this, the friendships it has fostered have been important. At the same time, when we performed the play last August, it brought together an audience that had hitherto been separated from factors of language and class. For these reasons I would like to see trilingualism become a regular, if not more prominent feature of theatrical styles in Sri Lanka in the future.