

# Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*: Kenya's play of the year on the unresolved issues of independence

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*Directed and produced by Stuart Nash; written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii*

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's play *I Will Marry When I Want* (*Ngaahika Ndeenda* in its original Kikuyu), first produced in 1977, has at last returned to Kenya. Performed in May this year, the production was revived this month due to huge popular demand, which points to its continued significance and relevance.

Performed in Kikuyu and, for the first time, English, under the direction of Stuart Nash, the Kenya National Theatre production stars some of the country's best-known actors, including Nice Githinji, Mwaura Bilal, Martin Githinji, Angel Waruinge and Martin Kigundu.

The play depicts the betrayal of the independence struggle against British imperialism by a post-independence comprador bourgeoisie regime that ruthlessly looted the country and further opened it to Western corporations while acting as imperialism's main proxy in the Horn of Africa.

Land is central to the play: it was stripped from the peasants, many of whom had heroically fought British imperialism during the 1952-1959 Mau Mau rebellion. Tens of thousands were killed, and one million detained in concentration camps.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has explored this betrayal throughout his work, in novels like *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Matigari* (1986) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2004). A significant author, he remains marginalised within Kenya as a result. (Wa Mirii, a social worker and teacher, co-wrote two plays with wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's most significant writers of the last half century. *I Will Marry When I Want* belongs clearly with wa Thiong'o's other work exploring post-independence Kenya.)

On its debut, the play was banned by the Western-backed regime of President Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first post-independence president, for fear it would spark a revolution. The playwrights were arrested and detained without charge for a year in Nairobi's notorious Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. Wa Thiong'o's detention order was signed by then-vice president Daniel arap Moi, who succeeded Kenyatta in 1978. The authors later had to flee. Wa Thiong'o now lives in self-imposed exile in the US after briefly returning in 2004, when he and his wife were assaulted by armed robbers in a politically motivated attack. Wa Mirii died in 2008.

So threatened were the authorities that in 1982 government bulldozers and armed police demolished the venue for the debut, Kamirithu Community and Cultural Centre in Limuru—the largest open-air theatre in Africa, built by workers and peasants. The play was banned again in 1990.

Set in post-independence Kenya, it opens in the home of a poor peasant couple. K?g??nda, a former Mau Mau fighter, and Wangeci are preparing to receive the wealthy M?h??ni family. They are discussing with their beautiful daughter, Gathoni, who is dating the M?h??nis' son John. On the wall hangs a title deed to one and a half acres of land. This, says K?g??nda, is “worth more to me than all the thousands that belong to K?oi M?h??ni,” his rich visitor.

Before the M?h??nis arrive, G?caamba, a factory worker, and his wife, Njooki, a tea plantation worker, turn up uninvited. They represent militant, class conscious workers dissatisfied with the post-independence situation, and warn of the M?h??nis' ill intentions. “Since when have rich men been known to visit their servants?” asks Njooki.

G?caamba, another former Mau Mau fighter, is critical of capitalism, using gesture, impersonation and song to convey his political message. He explains to K?g??nda, who thinks he is in a better social position because he gets paid fortnightly, how workers never receive back all they work for. Wa Thiong'o, who has cited Marx frequently, is explaining the extraction of surplus value.

In physical gestures mimicking Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, G?caamba talks about long, routine hours in the factory, and denounces the indifference of the capitalist towards workers: “Since I was employed in the factory, twenty-one people have died.”

He tells K?g??nda that if the wealth workers created remained in their hands, they would access good schools, hospitals and houses, but it goes to feed “imperialists abroad.” Overseeing this export is a wealthy Kenyan elite which, among other things, employs religion to demand the poor be satisfied with their lot in life and wait for paradise after death.

(Just weeks ago, new millionaire Kenyan President William Ruto invited 40 preachers to sanctify State House as he promised a wave of IMF-backed austerity attacks on the working class, telling them “I want you to pray for our economy.”)

The wealthy guests arrive. K?oi M?h??ni, accompanied by his snobbish wife Jezebel, played by Angel Waruinge, wants to purchase K?g??nda's land to build a factory for Western corporations. Another rich couple is with them. This man, a born-again Christian, served in the Home Guard that helped the British army suppress the Mau Mau.

Jezebel insists K?g??nda should marry Wangeci in a Christian ceremony to legitimise their marriage. Although upset, they agree, in order to remove K?oi's objections to John marrying Gathoni.

K?g??nda and Wangeci are treated like animals at the M?h??nis' until they announce their intention to marry as Christians, but they are abused again when K?g??nda requests a loan for wedding expenses. K?oi refuses, but suggests he can secure them a loan in exchange for the one-and-a-half acres as collateral. They agree.

They spend the loan on wedding preparations, but Gathoni announces that John has left her on learning she is pregnant by him. K?oi calls her a "whore" and insists John have nothing to do with her. When K?g??nda threatens K?oi, Jezebel shoots him.

The final scene is extremely powerful, with Martin Kigonda excellent as G?caamba. K?g??nda is drinking desperately, after K?oi used his connections to call in the loan early. K?g??nda has lost his treasured land, which K?oi bought cheaply for a factory for Western companies. Gathoni has been forced into prostitution.

Wangeci is venting her exasperation to G?caamba and Njooki when K?g??nda drunkenly starts a fight with her. G?caamba appeals to them to channel their anger not against each other but against the Kenyan elite and its Western backers. They sing together about workers combining to organise and fight back.

They announce that the poor have reached breaking point. The "horn of the masses has been blown," they say, and the next revolution will be for social equality, not independence. When that revolution breaks out, G?caamba asks the audience, "on which side will you be?"

This could hardly be more timely. While imposing cuts, privatisations and slashing subsidies, Ruto has met US delegations eight times in six weeks, seeking to consolidate Washington's control over the Horn of Africa.

Inequality in Kenya is among the highest worldwide. According to Oxfam, less than 0.1 percent of the population (8,300 people), including Ruto, own more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 44 million people). Fully 7,500 new millionaires are expected to be created in the next decade.

Nash revived the play conscious of this wider growth of inequality. He told *Kenya Buzz* its themes "are universal. They reflect what was and is happening across the world in 1977 and today." He mentioned reports about the growing gap between rich and poor in the UK as further evidence of the play's continued relevance. When an audience member asked which themes had been introduced "to make it more modern," Nash replied "None, they are all in the original play."

Nash said he hesitated about producing the play, given the contemporaneity of its criticism. He deserves credit for not being intimidated, even as the ruling class internationally escalates its attacks on democratic rights amidst the promotion of identity politics, communalism and racism, and a frenzied war drive.

However, attempting to update the play, Nash has raised political issues that should have been left untouched or explored in more detail. G?caamba says the money from workers is going to the US, Europe, Japan and China, equating Western imperialism with Chinese "imperialism."

The original text did not mention China. Wa Thiong'o was influenced by Maoism, an offshoot of Stalinism. In *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1982), describing his illegal incarceration, he described Kenyatta as "a twentieth-century tragic figure: he could have been a Lenin, a Mao Tse-Tung or a Ho Chi Minh; but he ended being a Chiang Kai-shek, a Park Chung Hee, or a Pinochet."

Designating China "imperialist" serves a definitive function, which Nash may not realise. In a context of imperialist rants about "Chinese debt traps," it serves to relativise the counterrevolutionary role of US, European and Japanese imperialism, and sanction regime change operations under the banner of "self-determination."

The designation has no foundation in economic or historical analysis. The Chinese regime has nothing progressive to offer, veering between appeals to Washington for a deal, escalating an arms race and whipping up Chinese nationalism and chauvinism.

The legacies of Maoism can also be seen in wa Thiong'o's uncritical glorification of the Mau Mau. However heroic their struggle, pitting poorly armed Kenyan peasants against British imperialism and its local collaborators, their political perspective, based on petty-bourgeois conceptions of peasant "armed struggle" nationalism, ultimately failed. Kenyatta, himself jailed as an alleged Mau Mau supporter, struck a deal with British imperialism, which saw him as a reliable defender of imperialist interests.

The working class, the leading force against colonialism after World War II, was subordinated by Stalinist and "left" nationalist leaderships to bourgeois nationalists like Kenyatta and the more radical petty bourgeois forces of the Mau Mau.

This straitjacket led to the Lancaster House conferences where independence was negotiated, followed by the ruthless suppression of the working class and the peasantry by Kenya's new ruling classes. The illusions generated by independence quickly disappeared, as Ngugi's writings testify.

Nash's production is welcome. It is to be hoped his Nairobi Performing Arts Studio will continue with more projects, including other plays by wa Thiong'o.



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