Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* returns: A drama of post-colonial violence

Kipchumba Ochieng
15 March 2023

Directed and produced by Stuart Nash; March 2-12 at the Kenya National Theatre.

On the eve of the 60th anniversary of Kenyan independence, Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* has returned to the Kenya National Theatre, 46 years after its last production.

Imbuga (1947-2012), one of Kenya's most important playwrights, was part of the "second generation" of post-independence writers. He grew up at the end of the brutal British occupation and after independence, when the new Kenyan bourgeoisie demonstrated its incapacity to satisfy the democratic, social and economic aspirations of workers and peasants and rapidly exposed itself as a new tool of imperialism.

Betrayal in the City (1976) is one of his most popular plays, long required reading in the country's secondary education system.

The revival was directed by British expatriate, Stuart Nash, whose recent productions have indicated a healthy interest in Kenya's post-independence politics. The popularity of his revival of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* testified to the enduring relevance of its themes of exploitation, inequality and the betrayal of the struggle against imperialism by the post-independence elite. Nash followed that with *Mstinji*, an adaptation of Molière's classic *The Miser* (1668), set in a country resembling Kenya, saddled with a money-obsessed dictator.

Francis Imbuga's initial preoccupation with family relationships led him to consider broader social questions. "Eventually," he said, "the question of what influences such relationships proved crucial. And while reflecting upon this question, outside influences such as politics, religion and even economics appeared to be central to this reflection. And so I began to think seriously about the influences of politics on the drama of life."

Betrayal is set in "Kafira." The fictional country is ruled by a regime recognisable as the Western-backed authoritarian government of Jomo Kenyatta (c. 1897–1978), independent Kenya's first president, although Kafira resembles many newly-independent African nations.

Nash makes Kenya the explicit setting. Unfortunately, in doing so, he introduces new comic business and jokes immediately touching upon contemporary Kenyan politics. This extends the play to an overlong three hours and often undermines its more powerful satiric content.

Kafira/Kenya is formally independent, but has not satisfied the demands of its ordinary people. Under the dictatorship of Boss (Raymond Ofula), the economy is still dominated by foreign capital, citizens are jailed for exerting freedom of expression, strikes are violently suppressed and student demonstrations are fired on. The corrupt ruling elite is ransacking the state.

Nina (Wakio Mzenge) and Doga (Omondi Ngota) are grieving their son, Adika, killed during anti-government protests. His grave has been desecrated, probably by his killer, preventing a traditional burial ceremony.

Their other son, university student Jusper (Francis Ouma Faiz), went mad after Adika's murder (in an overlong scene here). Nina and Doga, anxious to get him out of the way, fail to realize that Jusper is telling them that he killed his brother's killer after a scuffle. He is jailed after confessing.

Semi-illiterate drunken henchman Mulili (Ibrahim Muchemi) and military man Jere (Duncan Murunyu) bring government instructions preventing Adika's burial, on the grounds of maintaining social peace. Mulili is contemptuous, but Jere changes his mind. Doga and Nina, he says, "have done no wrong." Adika "died for Kenya's progress."

When they clash, Mulili explains that Boss—his own cousin—has promised him land and livestock in exchange for keeping the peace. Jere ends up imprisoned with Mosese, jailed for criticising the regime.

Discussing how Boss reneged on the promises of independence, Mosese utters the play's most famous lines: "It was better while we waited [for independence]. Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and are busy killing the future."

This scene, one of the most important in the play, shows the ruthlessness of the regime, which spares no one, and highlights the difference between the idealist Mosese and the man of action Jere. It suffers, however, from extensive new comic relief on the part of the guards, which distracts from this discussion without adding anything of great value. The play's real humour lies in the narrative itself and the interaction of the main characters, not in Nash's new comic bits.

Mosese will be released if he takes part in a play to be performed for a visiting foreign dignitary, as the regime tries to improve its international standing. Mosese refuses, saying it "would imply

© World Socialist Web Site

guilt, and I'm not guilty of anything."

The scene is set for a Shakespearean play within a play designed to trap Boss.

At the house of his girlfriend Regina (Joan Wambui), Jusper meets Boss's right-hand man, Tumbo (played excellently by Dru Muthure). While Jusper is blunt about the regime, Tumbo says the problem is just a few bad apples, Mulili especially.

Regina says Jusper is a good playwright. In an excellent scene, Tumbo convinces Jusper to enter a playwriting competition to win the prize money. Tumbo will award him victory and pocket the cash. Jusper's ironical pledge to enumerate Kenya's progress sets a trap to beat the regime at their own game, demonstrating that he is not mad at all.

A counterpoint scene shows the corruption of Boss's flunkeys. After quarrelling with another official, Mulili tells Boss that his rival helped leak information about the dictator's foreign bank accounts. Boss orders his execution.

The final scene starts with the dress rehearsal of the play in the jail. Boss arrives, concerned what impression the foreign dignitary might get. Meeting Jusper, Boss rages against students and their ingratitude for the achievements of his regime.

But Boss falls into Jusper's trap. Offering to play chief-of-staff in the drama, he tells his guards to give the actors their guns, because the props have not arrived. Boss orders them to untie Jere and Mosese so they can join the rehearsal. Mosese and Jere argue comically over the length of their guns, and appeal to Boss's character for help. He tells them each to take a gun and show him. Now armed, they overcome the guards.

Mulili tries to save himself, saying Boss should be killed because he has plundered and spoiled Kenya's economy, and ruled for too long. Boss tells Jere "Shoot me. Spare me this betrayal. Shoot me." Jusper spares Boss, but executes Mulili. One is left wondering whether Boss really deserved to be pardoned.

It is a powerful reflection of post-independent African states and their ruling classes, humorously portrayed, with wide audience appeal. The cast is excellent.

The play's impact is undermined by Nash's additions, but its greatest weakness ultimately is Imbuga's own political perspective. The message is that leaders in power must listen to the people at the bottom to avoid despotism, and should be surrounded by wise advisers—a clear warning to the Kenyatta regime, rapidly becoming an authoritarian, corrupt state when Imbuga was writing.

Betrayal was a reaction to the string of political assassinations and repression carried out by the regime on its "left" flank. Petty bourgeois radical Pio Gama Pinto, a former anti-colonial Mau Mau fighter, was murdered in 1965. Conservative nationalist trade unionist Tom Mboya, Kenyatta's potential successor, was killed in 1969. Stalinist union leader, Makhan Singh, who spearheaded Kenya's trade union movement in the 1930s and 1940s, was sidelined. Oginga Odinga, Kenya's first Vice-President under Kenyatta, was put under house arrest for a decade after trying to create the petty-bourgeois nationalist Kenya People's Union as an official opposition in 1966.

The year before *Betrayal*'s debut, populist nationalist Mwangi Kariuki, who described Kenya as "a nation of 10 millionaires and 10 million beggars," was killed by assassins widely believed to be working at Kenyatta's behest. The gruesome murder—Kariuki's hands were chopped off, his eyes gouged out, his face burnt with acid and his body left on an ant's nest—shocked the country. There were mass demonstrations, and several ministers fled in fear. Imbuga was considering a book on it.

Betrayal was an appeal to Kenyatta, who died two years later, to look to better advisers—the ones his regime was murdering. It is unsurprising that Mulili is executed, not Boss. Mulili could likely have been based on Kenyatta's successor, the ruthless Daniel arap Moi, former vice president and previously responsible for Kenya's brutal police.

Despite leftist pretensions, these figures played a key role in subordinating the radicalised working class and peasantry in the struggle for independence to the bourgeois nationalist Kenya African Union and Kenyatta's Kenya African National Union. Opposing Marxism on the basis of nationalism, they directly contributed to betraying the democratic, social and economic aspirations of the masses in their struggle against imperialism.

As elsewhere across Africa, independence only gave imperialism a new face. Corrupt national bourgeois cliques ruthlessly suppressed workers and peasants, overseeing IMF austerity while looting the state in the interests of their own enrichment.

Betrayal was welcomed in 1976 for exploring these questions, and government officials tried to shut it down. Over the next year, Kenyatta's regime clamped down on dissent in the media, academia and the petty bourgeois "left" opposition in parliament. Historian Charles Hornsby wrote that "Any signs of Marxism, radicalism or appeals to Kikuyu peasant aspirations were classed as support for communism and therefore sedition."

Imbuga noted government attempts to censor his play, describing the "bulldog … person I have been meeting" as being the same as Tumbo. *Betrayal in the City*, said Imbuga, was "a true representative of real life. An attempt to frustrate the play is in fact an acceptance of the play's truths."

The play's overdue revival is welcome, in spite of its shortcomings. It is to Nash's credit that these plays are in Kenya's theaters again. One hopes they will encourage workers, youth and the best elements of the middle class and intelligentsia to look further into the historical experiences with the dead end of bourgeois nationalism—and turn to socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site