



Wole Soyinka
The Invention
&
The Detainee
Editor: **Zodwa Motsa**

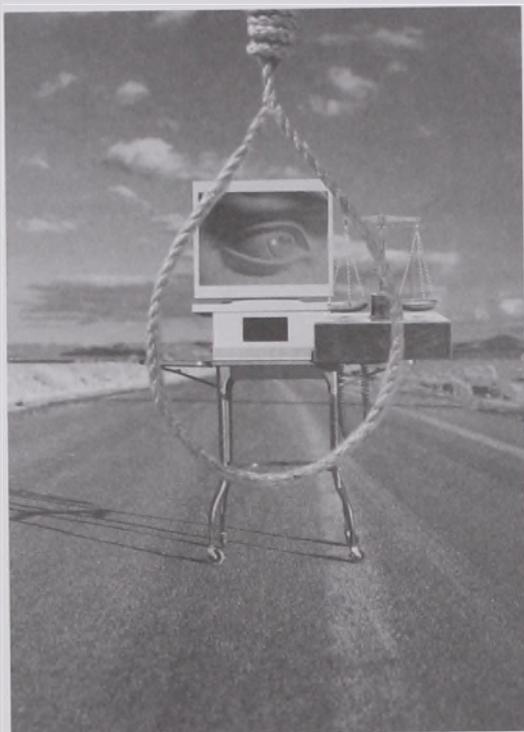
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Translated
by

Michael
Ondaatje

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Editor
Zodwa Motsa

Foreword
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University of South Africa
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Zodwa

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Foreword

The works that mark a writer's early phase of development, sometimes referred to as 'juvenilia', often provide significant pointers to the later, mature work, the more accomplished productions on which his or her reputation is based. This justifies a full critical interest in the writer's beginnings, even when such beginnings can be said to be tentative. This observation applies with special relevance to the two early plays by Wole Soyinka that Dr Zodwa Motsa has unearthed and made newly available in this publication, for they not only focus on the central preoccupation that gives thematic unity and ethical grounding to all his work – his vision of a moral order in the collective life – but also reveal the lineaments of the dramatic style to which he was later to give distinctive elaboration in the great plays by which his subsequent career was to be distinguished.

It is not without value to look beyond the immediate African reference of these plays, as Dr Motsa has done in her introduction, and to place them in the specific context of dramatic expression in which they were created – that of the malaise in England in the 1950s that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* has come to epitomise. It is even more important to relate the plays to the general mood of disillusionment with modern industrial civilisation that has affected so much of modern art and literature, a mood that is well reflected in Charlie Chaplin's presentation, in his film 'Modern Times', of the crushing impact of modern systems of production and social organisation. The same mood is evident in *The Invention*, whose critical view of the uses and abuses of science forms part of the dystopian distrust of its intellectual dominance and its social applications that we encounter in such works as Eugene Zamiatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, works that give expression to a central apprehension inspired by the betrayal of the scientific method when it is placed at the service of inhuman ideologies and irrational impulses.

The specific reference of the play to the obsession with race that marked the apartheid regime in South Africa grounds *The Invention* in a history and experience with an immediate import for Soyinka as an African. There is a thematic current in his work that reflects a fixation on South Africa, for he was to return to this theme in the long

poem 'Ogun Abibiman' in his Nobel lecture, 'This past must address its present', and more recently in the opening chapter of his Harvard lectures, *The Burden of Memory and the Muse of Forgiveness*. Dr Motsa expresses a mild surprise at this fixation, but this is almost to forget that every African on the continent and in the diaspora was concerned with apartheid, which was felt as an affront to the entire race. For Africans in general, the denial of humanity to people of African descent entailed by colonial racism, of which apartheid was the most intense expression, was primarily an ideological issue, with important consequences not only for our social fate and material condition but also for our self-conception. These considerations obviously serve as the motivation for Soyinka's writing of *The Invention*, which can thus be counted as his contribution to the literature of black nationalism and racial protest. This no doubt explains the largely hostile reception that Dr Motsa reports the play as having met with in the English press. But this is to miss the point that the common theme provides a background here to the psychological dimension of apartheid and its moral implications that Soyinka foregrounds in the play.

The tone of Mrs Higgins's interventions suggests a connection between *The Invention* and the well-known poem 'Telephone Conversation', which may have been composed at the same time as the play; both convey a deep response to racism, the lighter vein of the poem giving way to the unambiguous statement in the play of the evil of apartheid. The satiric intent behind the depiction of Mrs Higgins thus sets off an exploration of the murky depths of the racist mind. It is here that the influence of the so-called theatre of the absurd on Soyinka's play remarked upon by Dr Motsa assumes significance, for the absurdist aesthetic represents another connection with the modernist temper, coming readily to hand as the appropriate mode of representing the irrationality of racism. Its deadly import, arising from its extreme vision of the world, is summed up in the words of the character Glu: 'When human beings become so mutated that it becomes impossible to distinguish between black and white – is that not the end of the world?' Soyinka's irony here is penetrating, and is further sharpened when he makes the inane character Fremuler describe the group's patently unethical scientific work as a 'service to humanity'. That this is an imposture is the burden of the play, for the action provides in fact a counter-demonstration of this declaration of faith. The point is made with the gruesome details of the uses made of the human body by the scientists, which recall the practice of the Nazis and attest to the process of dehumanisation that, as Aimé Césaire has pointed out in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, racism invariably sets in motion. *The Invention* is remarkably prescient for, as Dr Motsa observes, it embodies Soyinka's prophetic power as a dramatist. We may note in passing that the play anticipates by decades the dramatisation, in *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* by Athol Fugard and his co-creators, of the methods by which apartheid strips its victims not merely of their personalities, but also, ultimately, of their human essence. More

significantly, it prepares us for the exposure in the testimonies that came before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the physical violations that formed an essential component of the 'racial terror' promoted by apartheid. All these facts throw a sharp light upon the new understanding we have since derived from the studies by scholars such as Foucault, Elaine Scarry (*The Body in Pain*) and our own Achille Mbembe ('Necropolitics') of the indispensability of physical bodies to the organisation of structures of power and of modes of repression.

Beyond its attack on apartheid, the interest of this play resides in the intimations it provides of the dark irony of *Madmen and Specialists*, perhaps the most disconcerting of all Soyinka's plays. One cannot help but wonder about the possible lingering power in the playwright's mind of the words spoken by one his characters in *The Invention*: 'Independence of thought only leads to madness'. It would indeed be instructive to establish parallels between the two plays, and to observe the development that Soyinka gives to the moral reversal that is the basis of the action in both, the curious subversion in situations of mass hysteria of positive systems of knowledge, in such a way that they are transformed into life-denying principles. In *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka extends the moral of his earlier play to the general African situation. The problem of evil is apprehended on a larger canvas of humanity.

This brings us to the other form of anticipation represented by *The Detainee*, in which the 'prophetic' content has to do with Soyinka's personal experience of detention during the Nigerian civil war. Much less need be said of this play, which corresponds to a familiar pattern of meditation on the vagaries of African politics in his work. What is striking here is the acuity of the premonitions demonstrated by Soyinka, and their confirmation by the responses to prison atmosphere that he documents in the essay *The Man Died* and the poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. It is also remarkable that the reduced confines of this play contain the multiple directions that Soyinka's imagination was later to take in the political plays, beginning with *Kongi's Harvest*.

These, then, are some of the thoughts that these plays inspire. The plays are not by any means masterpieces, but they are not to be disparaged, for they take us back to the first manifestation of a creative genius that was soon to flourish. Dr Motsa has put us in her debt by bringing these plays to our attention, for, as she remarks, they not only afford a more complete view of the Soyinka corpus, but also enable us to grasp the thematic and expressive continuities within that corpus.

F. Abiola Irele

Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 2004

Introduction

I have one abiding religion – human liberty – conditioned to the truth that life is meaningless, insulting, without fullest liberty and in spite of despairing knowledge that words alone seem unable to guarantee its possession, my writing grows more and more preoccupied with the theme of the oppressive boot, the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it and the struggle for individuality.

Wole Soyinka

It has taken four and a half decades for *The Invention* to reach the public. *The Invention*, sometimes called Wole Soyinka's lost play, is among the playwright's first serious plays.¹ Along with *The Detainee* (a radio play broadcast in 1965), *The Invention* appears here for the first time in published form, making it possible to establish a more complete picture of Wole Soyinka's canon, and affording us a preview of the playwright's early development. Its publication by a South African publisher is fitting, since the play deals with South Africa under apartheid.

The Invention was performed for the first and only time on 1 November 1959 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. It was written by the only African playwright among the so-called Angry Young Men, a group of modern British dramatists active in the years following the Second World War, which included Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, John Arden and Harold Pinter.² Gibbs explains that in addition to staging his own work at the Royal Court Theatre, Soyinka was a play reader, involved in inviting scripts from prospective playwrights, and then evaluating them for possible production at the theatre.³

Over the decades *The Invention* has been referred to in various commentaries as Soyinka's first play. James Gibbs handed a copy of the manuscript to me in March 1996 while I was conducting research into Soyinka's pre-fame days at the Royal Court Theatre. In an interview that I conducted with Gibbs, he stated that '[*The Invention*] was a terrible play. Soyinka has tried to bury it'.⁴ However, at a Wole

Soyinka Festival at the University of Central Florida in February 2003, when Soyinka was asked why he had never published the play, his response was that there was no strong reason for not publishing it, except that '[he] simply got drawn to other matters'.⁵ Because he did not have a personal copy of *The Invention*, and I was the only person in that audience who did, Soyinka granted me the rights to have it published.

The Invention

As if reflecting his maxim 'The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny',⁶ the past four decades have shown Wole Soyinka to be a vocal commentator on abuses of power, wherever they may occur. His early poems recited in the 1950s and 1960s at the Royal Court bear witness to this. One of the poems he presented on the evening of the premiere of *The Invention* satirically protests against what he metaphorically calls France's decision to 'lay nuclear eggs in my own backyard'. On that occasion Soyinka also presented the famous 'Telephone Conversation', a satirical poem that criticises racism in Britain. Giving a little background on the circumstances that inspired this type of preoccupation in Soyinka, James Gibbs explains that:

[Soyinka was] dominated by a concern for what was happening in South Africa, and by colonialism. He sometimes took responsibility for selling Anti-Apartheid papers in the university's refectory and he has described his attempts to get [his] plays about South Africa into shape. It was not surprising that in 1959 he directed his play set in South Africa, *The Invention*, or that much later he produced a drama based on the inquest into the death of Steve Biko. Soyinka's earliest (un-shaped) South African plays are not available, but *The Invention* is.⁷

Why South Africa? Given the parochialism of many twenty-first-century South Africans who tend to perceive themselves as different from other Africans, Soyinka's 'obsession' with a country that is not his own may appear misdirected. An interview with James Gibbs throws some light on the matter:

[Soyinka's] first plays were about South Africa; he used to sell anti-apartheid pamphlets . . . we are talking about the years 1954, '55, '56. This was the time when apartheid was coming down with great impact on the black community and the liberal whites. So that was the issue. It was partly because of the fundamental question Africans would ask themselves: 'Am I a human being? Am I a black human being and why is so and so labelled a white human being – and so forth?' Obviously he studied beside white people and did very well

as a student. And when he spoke, when he wrote, people couldn't tell whether he was white or black; but as soon as they saw him, some of them quickly made up their minds. And he tells his account of the racism he encountered in Leeds where he describes how he sat down next to a white passenger and that white passenger moved on to occupy another seat.⁸

The Invention depicts calamitous race-instigated events that were taking place in the winter of 1976 in Johannesburg, South Africa. With the advantage of hindsight, it now seems prophetic that a 23-year-old Nigerian saw so far into the future as to 'know' that in the winter of 1976 the apartheid system would begin to crumble. The prophetic theme of *The Invention* therefore becomes one of many fascinating aspects about it.

Set in what at the time of composition was 17 years into the future, *The Invention* is an ambitious political satire. It is a one-act play and an aptly prophetic comic satire that exposes the devastating effects of racial discrimination. The story features three major proponents of racism in the 1950s: the British, white South Africans, and the Americans of the Deep South. In the context of the play, the date of July 1976 is important, says Soyinka, for being the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the Declaration of Human Rights in America. In the play America sends an isoto-nuclear bomb to Jupiter to be exploded. The rocket goes astray and, in its unguarded course, shoots from Massachusetts to Madagascar, and from there to the icebergs of the Antarctic Ocean. Entering the earth through the icebergs, it then passes twice beneath the North Pole until every compass on earth is distorted. It finally disappears from sight and from detection by radar for two days and nights, only to resurface three days later, hovering over the Cape of Good Hope. The rocket eventually lands in a disused mine in Johannesburg. It explodes, killing humans and distorting their racial composition to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish blacks from whites as a result of the black population's loss of pigment. Consequently, all South Africans are obliged to submit themselves to racial testing in a laboratory where a few handpicked scientists are set to work. This is when one of the scientists invents a machine – the invention of the play's title – that shows within seconds to which race each 'specimen' belongs.

In exposing this diabolic folly, *The Invention* addresses a variety of other important themes. For instance, nepotism and favouritism are alluded to. The issue of academic dishonesty is raised via the inventor who cruelly steps over fellow researchers, steals a colleague's idea and passes it off as his own, thus attracting all the glory to himself. Soyinka deftly uses characterisation to advance the theme of dehumanisation. The playwright advises in stage directions that the characters' faces 'could be hideously deformed or simply pasty or sickly grey'. All the researchers appear in white

overalls. These are meant as an external reflection of depleted humanity in the white race. Possibly Wole Soyinka was drawing on the Brechtian technique of having a representational character create distance between the actor and the role. This technique is also found in the oral performance culture of the Yoruba, where a mask-like deportment of characters is used to emphasise the character's representational role.⁹ Adding to this stylistic trend, a group of people simply called 'the guinea-pigs' forms part of the cast. The guinea-pigs are projected as voices but they never appear on stage; one hears, for example, the desperate off-stage cries of the 1st Voice: 'I don't want to be a guinea-pig; I am only a simple farmer'. By exposing the avarice of the scientists, Soyinka shows the cruelties of elevating an ideal over human life. The scientists are shown to be scrambling for new human bodies, callously calling them 'fresh specimens for research', as in this conversation:

DESTUS: What do you say now, Bytron? We're in the running again!

CRUGER: *(Suddenly beginning to run)* Bodies! Bodies! Fresh specimens for research.

The most shocking scene arises from the following stage directions:

(All . . . are now back and the activity mounts to fever pitch. Burners are turned on full, beakers bubble, flesh is ripped and bones are cracked etc. etc. FREMULER . . . gathers every bit of material that the others discard and pounds it up in his mortar. The concentration of all is maximum. GLU mutters to himself:)

GLU: What a boon! What a boon! Business has been slack.

Forming part of the cast of characters is the invention itself, which talks in an eerie, automated voice. Looking at the dramatis personae, one observes that all are defective in one way or another. For example, Destus, one of the researchers at the so-called South African Restoration Vaults, is consumed with pride and class consciousness. His job involves identifying race by analysing people's nose hairs to ascertain whether they are black or white. There is also Glu, a senile old man for whom the end of the world has arrived, since it has become impossible to distinguish the races. Then there is Hardiburr, 'the slobbering idiot', overtly the 'fool' in the play, but who turns out to be more perceptive than the rest.¹⁰ Fremuler, also a member of the team of researchers, is noted for his blind and often annoying loyalty to the government and his single impairment relates to his speech – he stammers. Mrs

Higgins, the British representative, is described as 'a simpering fool'. Soyinka uses her to emphasise the idiosyncrasies of the British: she wears a plastic smile and is the epitome of pomposity; when other envoys give generously to the invention cause, she offers only fourteen pounds two shillings and eight pence against the twenty-five million dollars from the Americans. Briklemaine is a bloated white American from the Deep South whose commitment is clearly towards the preservation of the purer races, believing in the creed that from conception the 'Negro' must accept his class, respect the white man, and keep to his own. Briklemaine presents to the South African team of scientists an exact replica in velvet and satin of the Confederate flag, and a Ku Klux Klan hood.

Soyinka uses typecast characters as a means of deriding those who treat other races as inferior. The biting humour is not directed only at the Americans; the British certainly do not escape his satire: for example when he jibes at their policy of bathing once a week, Soyinka is clearly intimating that the British are not nearly as 'clean' as they make themselves out to be.

A number of satirical incidents form the axis of *The Invention*, creating comic relief from the play's disturbing central theme. For instance, the failure of the South African scientific experiment echoes the failed American spacecraft experiment in the play. These failures may be viewed as the writer's jeering at what he perceives as childish preoccupations and wasted efforts to uphold racism. Soyinka spices this satire with dialogue, as in Bishop Kalinga's interaction with the Prosecutor:

BISHOP

KALINGA: . . . And amidst this carnage, the only fact that distresses my countrymen is that they can no longer tell who is black and who is white. The wealth of the nation has gone into a laboratory where men must submit themselves to the testing of . . .

PUBLIC

PROSECUTOR: (*Comes forward*) One moment, you. Are you a white bishop or a black bishop?

BISHOP

KALINGA: (*Turns slowly to face him*) Is this a game of chess?

The climax of the story is reached when, after much secrecy, the South African team is set to display the invention to their eager visitors and counterparts from other countries. Hiding the fact that the original machine blew up, the South Africans

try to deceive their visitors by presenting a newly constructed imitation. Sadly, this machine is received as ‘Horrible! Simply horrible!’ by the British envoy, and as disgusting, having an ‘unprepossessing appearance’, by Briklemaine. Witnessing such an anticlimax, Hardiburr, ‘the idiot’ giggles and exclaims, ‘The Emperor is naked!’ He takes off his coat to lend to the ‘Emperor’, in this way denying that he is a fool and defying all those who say he is.

HARDIBURR: *(Whose grin has been growing wider and wider, bursts suddenly into idiotic laughter)* The Emperor is naked!

DIRECTOR: *(Between his teeth)* Somebody shut him up before he says something dangerous.

HARDIBURR: They are always trying to call me a fool. He . . . he . . . But I know what it is. I am going to lend the Emperor my coat . . . I’m going to lend the Emperor my coat! *(Begins to take off his coat)*

DIRECTOR: *(Fiercely)* Guards!

HARDIBURR: They can’t make a fool of Hardiburr. I know.
(The guards hit him sharply behind the neck. He crumples and falls. They all look relieved.)

MRS
HIGGINS: I hate scenes. For a moment I thought the man was going to make a scene.

DIRECTOR: He’s merely had one of his attacks. We put him to sleep and when he wakes, he feels much better. Now, about this Invention . . .

THE END

The story thus ends with no great oration, but with yet another lie from the Director. The guards knock down the idiot and the director covers up by claiming that this is routine. However, the Director fails to reclaim the interest of the visitors in the invention.

The idiot is silenced because he is able to perceive and to speak the truth about the ghastly failure of the ‘scientists’. Soyinka here makes use of the traditional role of

the fool in drama – one who has deeper insight into issues of the moment. Through Hardiburr, Soyinka communicates that this demeaning project and the general engagement of nations in racial discrimination are among the most dehumanising and laughable human preoccupations ever invented.

Although *The Invention* may be perceived as not being one of Soyinka's best plays, it is not necessarily 'terrible', as Gibbs described it.¹¹ In my opinion the play's merits lie in its content, embodying Soyinka's prophetic power as a playwright. One must appreciate the seriousness of mind and bravery of the young Soyinka, who as early as the 1950s, was addressing sensitive subjects such as chemical and biological warfare, a topic South Africa began to deal with openly only relatively recently, as witnessed, *inter alia*, in the Wouter Basson case. The play's subject matter alone makes it a uniquely 1950s piece of literature, since it pointedly brings to the fore society's ills by staging the topic of racism in the familiar discourse of the kitchen-sink drama current in the British theatre of the time, albeit using a science laboratory instead of a kitchen.

The Invention does not have conventional scene divisions. The first 'scene' of the play presents the time and cultural setting of South African society in the 1950s. It also shows scientists hard at work dragging in a human specimen for testing. This scene graphically exposes the cruelty of racism and the waste that goes into the pursuit of establishing which human form is that of 'the true son or daughter of South Africa, the lover of the purity of races'. The story is presented crisply through dialogue and action, for example:

BYTRON: ... All we have to do is to wait until the baby is born, and that should establish the race of the mother.

DESTUS: Too many obvious snags. Suppose she has been having an affair with a black man.

In unison: She might as well be dead!

Offset against these shorter exchanges are lengthy and overtly didactic speeches reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw's 'soapbox' plays, which were renowned for their preaching. Soyinka makes no attempt to vary the dialogue with song, dance or mime, techniques which are a trademark in his other works of the same era such as *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*. This trait makes one wonder whether *The Invention* is not perhaps an even earlier play, since *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers* show a definite change in style and dramaturgy. The dominance of discussion and idea¹² in *The Invention* may well be one of the

reasons that the African critic Abiola Irele sees Soyinka as having been influenced by Shaw.¹³ The absence of dramatic techniques such as music, song and dance renders *The Invention* susceptible to the judgement that it is poorer in quality than the rest of Soyinka's later plays.

The dramaturgy of *The Invention* also differs from Soyinka's later works in that the play does not have a single, outstanding hero/protagonist who embodies the main message of the story. This would certainly have made the play difficult for theatre critics in the 1950s to digest, since they were accustomed to pinning down the playwright's central message. Another aspect to observe is the stage directions. Soyinka attempts to apply the Brechtian device of breaking down the theatre's so-called fourth wall. In his stage directions Soyinka bluntly advises that certain words should be spoken directly to the audience. For example, he suggests that '*Long speeches where obvious should be directed frankly at the audience. In fact, this need not be confined to the longer speeches*'. Apart from offering guidance to both actor and director, this advice is reminiscent of Brecht's tendency to give detailed advice on the staging of his plays.

Soyinka also employs the Brechtian device of acknowledging the presence of the audience. However, when it comes to destroying illusion by interacting with the audience, in *The Invention* Soyinka does not use this device with the same sophistication as Brecht. Brecht would cause the audience to participate in the action, answering back to actors and vice-versa.¹⁴ The function of the stage directions in *The Invention* is generally restricted to traditional explanations of actors' movements and gestures, for example (*Picks up the pencil*), (*He is helping up the woman*), (*He claps. Others follow suit*). There is also the standard use of stage properties such as a cigar being stubbed out, and the description of sound effects such as metallic sounds and the shutting of a gate. Soyinka relies more on verbal than on non-verbal techniques to present his ideas. The dialogue carries both irony and humour, as contemporaneous reviews suggest. The conclusion that may be drawn here is that the strength of the text lies more in its content/subject matter, which may support the prevailing view that, theatrically speaking, *The Invention* was not a particularly successful play for stage. Soyinka's gift of being a wordsmith is strikingly evident in this early play, and his efforts to put into practice such unconventional techniques as the absence of a central theme-bearing hero, breaking the fourth wall, and using stock characterisation allow one to conclude that the hesitant beginnings of Soyinka's non-realist theatre can be seen in *The Invention*.

Political drama was popular at the Royal Court Theatre in the late 1950s. The plays of Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker and John Arden dealt, *inter alia*, with topical political issues such as the war and disadvantaged Jewish families. Similarly, *The Invention* presents what may be termed a protest topic. It is angry in subject matter

but, unlike the voice of John Osborne's Jimmy Porter, the voice of the victim is not heard at all. Instead, a more general folly is exposed through the satirical treatment of the British, white South Africans and white Americans. The topic of apartheid and racism was perhaps inconsequential to Britain's theatre-going public at the time, despite the play's topical adoption of the postures of disdain and anger as seen in plays such as *Look Back in Anger* and *Chicken Soup with Barley*, and it is probably true that Britain in the 1950s was not the ideal platform to present this drama of protest. The playwright is indeed angry, but there is no sense of despair in *The Invention*. The absence of cynicism sets Soyinka apart from the majority of (mainly European) practitioners of the theatre of the absurd, with whom he is often associated. Soyinka chooses to deal with his source of dissatisfaction by subjecting the offending party, the white racists of the world, to ridicule and satire. The Royal Court Theatre provided an obvious outlet for themes such as found in *The Invention*, even though the subject matter did not go down that well with the critics.

Most of Soyinka's early plays were received with hostility and outright rejection by the London theatre reviewers. In the late 1950s the issues dealt with in *The Invention* must have been topical and highly provocative for audiences of the time. Tony Richardson (director) and George Devine (artistic manager) at the Royal Court Theatre paid the play little attention; *The Invention* did not receive the same treatment as John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, which was presented on 22 October 1959, a week before *The Invention*, and several times thereafter. Like *The Invention*, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* was not successful at first, suffering repeated box-office disasters and costing the Royal Court Theatre thousand of pounds.¹⁵ The manner in which Arden's play was treated shows a glaring partiality when viewed against the way in which the Royal Court Theatre handled Soyinka's piece. The opinions of several researchers on Soyinka, such as Abiola Irele, James Gibbs, Alain Ricard and Lionel Ngakane, shed some more light on the quality of the play. As we have seen, in Gibbs's opinion, *The Invention* was not a good play. Unfortunately, Gibbs does not fully explain why he regards the play as so deficient. He does, however, dwell on the impracticability of fighting somebody else's cause from a distance and criticises Soyinka for taking upon himself a calling that would be better pursued by those closest to its source, such as black South Africans themselves; this implies that the fault lies in the theme. Gibbs does not read the play within the ethos of continental solidarity often found among African critics. Soyinka's supposedly unjustifiable interests in South African politics can helpfully be seen from the point of view that at the time any affront to any single African was perceived by the rest of Africa as an affront to all. Gibbs's more thoughtfully considered opinion is the following:

The decision of the South African regime to embrace the doctrine of 'Separate Development' was a deeply-felt insult and a challenge to 'men of colour'

everywhere. [And to] those, like Soyinka, who, against amazing odds, were using their brains alongside whites, in white lands, in white languages, and triumphing, it was a gage thrown down.¹⁶

Reaction to the imposition of apartheid was not confined to blacks and Africans in Britain. For example, Christopher Innes mentions playwright Edward Bond's anti-apartheid and nuclear disarmament pieces written for specific protest meetings. Certainly, the theme of *The Invention* was not necessarily out of place in Britain at the time. However, the views of Lionel Ngakane, a South African who was with Wole Soyinka at the Royal Court Theatre in the 1950s, give us an interesting dimension:

Wole Soyinka's plays have to be regarded firstly as Nigerian. They had to be understood and appreciated by Nigerians. When they were discovered by Europeans they were still alien, but they gave a glimpse of the African, of African writing and African culture. But Wole's plays were for the few who were studying African literature, culture and history. The question is, does African drama have to follow the traditional English drama, or [it must] introduce and support its [own] creativity? I suppose the latter. Regarding the skill and workmanship of Wole's plays, like his novels, one feels one is in Africa. The language, symbolism and the characters are African. This is a result of the commitment and dedication of Wole to African storytelling with a sting.¹⁷

In newspaper reviews of the time, *The Invention* was received with scepticism and, at best, mild tolerance. The attitude found in the British theatre reviews was not confined to *The Invention*, but continued to manifest itself seven years later, when Soyinka staged his more famous play, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1966).¹⁸ A few examples of responses to *The Invention* will suffice. The Times of 2 November 1959 reports that the audience responded warmly to Soyinka's poetry and drama, which included the one-act play *The Invention*. Soyinka's outstanding quality as a wordsmith is noted. However, it also paints a picture of an artist who is very shy, if not suspicious, of the British accolades.

We must hope that the reception given at the Royal Court last night to verses and song by Mr Wole Soyinka and to his one-act play, *The Invention*, will make this Nigerian writer less suspicious of the London theatre than he gives the impression of being. Whenever he allowed a reader or a character to speak directly to the audience the audience responded . . . even when Mr Soyinka plainly was not addressing it. If he thinks this was prompted by the thing he hates most, a patronising attitude on the part of the audience, it will be a pity. It was prompted by respect for his gift for words.¹⁹

Alan Brein of *The Spectator* is more hostile than the writer of the above review. His main argument is that Soyinka's theatre is poor and *The Invention* had been put up merely to endorse political correctness on the part of the Royal Court Theatre.

The presence of a Negro in a play is becoming very near to being a guarantee of a masterpiece. Two blacks do not make a white – but two blacks trying to make a white is still good box-office theme. In the Thirties, Left-wing intellectuals consistently overpraised anything written by a worker. In the Fifties they overpraised anything written by a Negro. In both cases their amazed delight that someone from the lower depths can actually put words into sentences is not only irrelevant but also betrays an unconscious contempt for the very group they are supposed to be championing . . . Mr Soyinka is a fluent, funny and angry West African, but he has not yet begun to understand how to work out a verse or to organise a play . . . His play, *The Invention*, revealed his limitations even more embarrassingly, [although] the original idea was quite sharp and provocative.²⁰

The Detainee

The Detainee is another of Soyinka's 'lost plays'. The cover page of the manuscript bears clues to the performance history of this play. *The Detainee* was first broadcast in East and West Africa on 28 August 1965, running for 27 minutes, and then again in East Africa alone on 5 September 1965, and finally in West Africa on 8 and 12 September 1965. Until now the play had not been published in text form. This radio script is unique in that it is in some ways autobiographical and resembles *The Invention* in its prophetic aspect, foreshadowing the playwright's own imprisonment in 1967, two years after *The Detainee* was broadcast.

Like several of Soyinka's political plays, *The Detainee* shows the destructive effect corrupt politics can have on friendships, the family and personal integrity. The characters, Konu, Zimole and Haruzai, are old associates who used to belong to the same political party. When the drama begins, Konu has already spent five years of an indefinite term in jail, for the last two of which he has been in solitary confinement. Zimole, his one-time friend and only link with the outside world, has become a successful politician in a government headed by Haruzai. This is the same government that put Konu in solitary confinement. In earlier times, Konu had coined the nickname 'the Torch' for Haruzai to describe his sharpness of thought. In those days Konu admired Haruzai so much that he believed Haruzai to be their political party's guiding light. 'But we must never, never hesitate to use [the torch] as a fire, to scorch obstructive undergrowth!' Zimole once declaimed in support of

Konu. Little did these two know that this friendship was only temporary and that both Haruzai and Zimole would later turn out to be corrupt and self-serving political leaders in the neo-colonial government.

An inscription by James Gibbs on the manuscript states that there is no page one. The absence of a first page makes it difficult to establish the play's setting. However, the drama appears to be set in a prison cell where, after five years, Zimole has come to see Konu (played by Soyinka himself). The action unfolds via the use of flashbacks to past events during the course of the conversation between Konu and Zimole. Zimole's outbursts expose his cunning and treacherous nature. For instance, we learn that Konu was unwittingly trapped and detained under the Preventive Detention Act, in the formulation of which Zimole actively participated.

In the past five years of imprisonment Konu has been subjected to untold suffering, solitary confinement and lack of exercise. He has no reading material save propaganda, and he is permitted to exercise only in the corridors, near the wall or the front line of the cells. This acute isolation has given Konu a sharpened sense of hearing; he can tell the number as well as the kinds of people walking outside merely by listening to their footsteps – the hostile, the treacherous, and those given to espionage are all betrayed by their steps. Konu has developed a friendship with a deaf guard, and with a rat that he has named Haruzai after Haruzai 'the Torch', who ordered his detention. The extent of the reduction of life to nothingness is suggested by one of Konu's pastimes: watching how far mildew spreads in an hour.

On the day of Zimole's visit to Konu, Zimole fails to articulate his main mission clearly, and rambles on. First he tells Konu that there has been a fresh outbreak of riots in the wake of another attempt on the president's life – and Konu is the prime suspect, he reveals:

ZIMOLE: . . . Listen Konu, what I was beginning to tell you . . . there has been a new riot. And another attempt was made on the President's life.

KONU: (*Bursts into harsh laughter*) And they think I organised it from here?

Zimole's inability to communicate clearly exposes his incompetence in helping Konu. The climax of the incident is the shattering discovery that Konu's seventeen-year-old son, Eseki, the alleged suspect in the attempted assassination of the president, was arrested early that same morning and that he may be hanged. No further details are given about Eseki's alleged crime. Self-pityingly, Zimole views

the arrest of Eseki, who is in his charge, as a ploy to discredit him after two years of faithful support for the government.

The theme of the unprotected child, common in Soyinka's work, resurfaces in this play. It is found in the Westernised brat of *Childe Internationale*, the trapped and deflowered girl of *The Lion and the Jewel*, and the bribery token in *My Father's Burden*. The tone and treatment of this sub-theme are more sombre in *The Detainee* than in either *Childe Internationale* or *The Lion and the Jewel*. As in *The House of Banigaji* and *The Night of the Hunted*, in *The Detainee* the world of innocence is shattered by the unavailability of support from parental figures for a child. This is accompanied by threats of incarceration and execution of the minor. The overall impact on the child figure is displacement. In addition, the theme of filial loyalty that is challenged in *My Father's Burden* and tinged with the burden of duty in *The Swamp Dwellers* is addressed in *The Detainee*, where Zimole's failure to uphold brotherly duty is somehow replaced by young Eseki, who carries the sins of his father Konu and traverses his father's path to detention. The central concern of *The Detainee* seems to be, in the main, the wrecking of ordinary families by a dictatorial regime. As is common in Soyinka's plays, the playwright's anger is directed primarily at the government of the day, for its abuse of power and destruction of the right to a normal life.

These two plays, *The Invention* and *The Detainee*, are a seedbed for Wole Soyinka's later and longer works over the next forty-odd years. Their concerns about exposing social injustice under regimes of both indigenous African and foreign European descent encapsulate Soyinka's avowed intent – to attack the boot that perpetrates injustice, irrespective of who wears it and what his or her colour is.

Zodwa Motsa

Unisa, Pretoria, June 2005

Notes

- 1 Although the chronology of the history of each play is not entirely clear, what emerges in all the literature is that *The Invention*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *The Swamp Dwellers* were among Soyinka's very first 'serious' plays. They were staged in different locations and on different occasions: the Royal Court (*The Invention*, 1959), the University of London Drama Competition (*The Swamp Dwellers*, 1958), and the Arts Theatre in Ibadan (*The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*, 1959). See Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court: The Nature and Implications of Wole Soyinka's Interactions at the Royal Court Theatre: 1956–1966' (Unpublished thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2000), 96.
- 2 The label 'Angry Young Men' is a construct of critics and was generally disliked by those playwrights described as such. The Angry Young Men never perceived themselves

as a group (see Walter Wager (ed.), *The Playwrights Speak* (London: Longman, 1969), 195). This may explain the tendency in Western criticism not to perceive Soyinka as a member of this 'group' despite his active participation in the activities that characterised the Angry Young Men as revealed by, among others, T. W. Browne, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at The Royal Court Theatre* (London: Pitman, 1975); J. Gibbs, *Talking with Paper: Wole Soyinka at the University of Leeds 1954 to 1958: The Making of a Playwright* (United Kingdom: Nolisment, 1995); R. Findlater (ed.), *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (New York: Grove, 1981); E. A. Ogbonna, 'A Reader's Guide to the Plays of Wole Soyinka.' Diss. Bowling Green State University (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1990) and O. Owomoyela, *African Literature: An Introduction* (Waltham, Mass.: Crossroads Press, 1979).

- 3 Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court', 74.
- 4 Ibid., 270.
- 5 Many suppositions have been made concerning why Soyinka never published *The Invention*, including the view that it is a poor play. However, in his own response to the probing questions of Esiaba Irobi of Ohio University, Soyinka explains that his preoccupation was simply taken over by other subjects and he never got back to *The Invention*. W. Soyinka, Audience Question and Answer Session, 20 February 2003.
- 6 Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (London: Rex Collings, 1972).
- 7 Gibbs, *Talking with Paper*, 18.
- 8 Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court', 267.
- 9 The role of the mask in representational characterisation in Nigerian folk-theatre is explained at length by K. Götrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama: A Study in Traditional Yoruba Theatre and its Influences on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiskell International, 1984), 108–10.
- 10 This same technique is used in *The Swamp Dwellers*, where the blind beggar from the north turns out to be more insightful than the ordinary characters who have no overt disability.
- 11 Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court', 270.
- 12 This in Shavian parlance refers to the actors' deliberations on the key issues of the play. A. Bermel, *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty* (New York; Taplinger, 1977) gives further detail on this subject.
- 13 Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court', 260.
- 14 Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), 65.
- 15 About the promotion of his play, Arden states that: 'as an illustration of this doctrine [the playwright's right to fail] . . . [George Devine] would frequently quote the case of *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* – a play which lost the theatre . . . ten thousand pounds, but which he nevertheless had insisted upon presenting in the teeth of hostile critics and different audiences until acceptance of its qualities was finally secured'. See J. Arden, *Arden: Plays: One Sergeant Musgrave's Dance, The Workhouse Donkey, Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, 5th ed. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 5.

- 16 Gibbs, *Talking with Paper*, 18.
- 17 Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court', 292–93.
- 18 Close to 20 reviewers responded to the stage productions of *The Invention* and *The Lion and the Jewel* in London and Nigeria. I refer to these more fully in my research – see Motsa, 'A Tiger in the Court'.
- 19 'African Playwright and Poet', *The Times*, 2 November 1959:3.
- 20 A. Brein, 'Where Spades are Trumps', *The Spectator*, 6 November 1959:629–30.

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