I write as a pan-African: A Conversation with Oladipo Agboluaje.

By Sola Adeyemi

Oladipo Agboluaje is a Nigerian-British playwright who aesthetically re-presents Africa on the British stage as an "outsider" in the mainstream of British theatricality. In this interview, conducted on an August morning in the grounds of the National Theatre in London, Oladipo talked about his motivation, his writing style and influences, and why he writes the way he does. More importantly, he discusses his entre into the British theatre.

Sola Adeyemi (SA): How do you want to be referred to professionally, Oladipo or Dipo?

Oladipo Agboluaje (OA): Oladipo Agboluaje.

SA: Let's start at the beginning. When did you know you were going to be a dramatist?

OA: I..er... (*laughs*) It was from quite a young age... I knew I was going to be a writer. I didn't know much about being a dramatist though. I remember watching a television show here in England with my dad, an interview show, and the person being interviewed was an author. I was quite young then. And the person was introduced as an author, and I asked my dad who or what an author was. I had never heard the word before; I knew of course the word 'writer' and what they do. My dad explained that an author is a person who writes books. I then said to him that is what I wanted to be. An author. He said that's a good job. Because, you know back then in England, opportunities for black people were limited to being a carpenter, or bus driver, or post office worker and such. So he was very happy when I said that. Years after that, we went back to Nigeria. But that was the first time that I thought that was what I wanted to be.

SA: Were you fascinated by the word 'author', what the man was saying or the prospect of writing books?

OA: Well, I was very young and couldn't quite grasp what the man was saying but I liked the way he comported himself. I liked the image he gave of himself as an author. He was in a sort of a tweed jacket... kind of a stereotypical author in the 1970s. I liked the dignity... and he seemed to be so wise, so profound like an intellectual, and I said, "that's what I want to be".

SA: And when you got to Nigeria...?

OA: When I got to Nigeria... I was 9 years old when my parents took me back to Nigeria. This was in 1975 and the first thing – I was always interested in reading – the first thing I noticed was the reading culture. It was vast. Pupils were trading comic books, novels, whether it was Nick Carter, Mills and Boon, James Hadley Chase, Pacesetters, and books about Myths and all kinds of subjects. I was always constantly reading at the time; and my brother who was very good at drawing and I set up a comic book when we were in the secondary school. I would write the stories and he would draw the characters. Later, we graduated from comics to short stories, with pictures in them. And that's what we did for a few years until our father stopped it because he felt it was interfering with our studies. Book was more important for my parents, like a typical Nigerian parent at that time, and they preferred us studying than playing football, for instance, or drawing comics that were not part of the school curricula. After a while, he stopped us doing the comics.

SA: Do you still have copies of those?

OA: No, unfortunately. It's sad... I have looked for them but it seems that our cousins have taken all of them. I was the first of my brothers and sisters to come back to the UK, and then my brother came after. Then we realised there was nobody to look after them... because we kept them in a big leather suitcase, along with other old comics and books that we treasured. When I got back to the house, the old comics were still there, although my mum had disposed of almost all of them. So those ones that could have even been collectors' items are now lost. But

there were some that remained; unfortunately though, none of the drawings or the comic books that we created remained.

SA: You mentioned the culture of book reading in Nigeria, which reinforced your interests. What other 'cultures' encouraged you to become a writer?

OA: Theatre. The travelling theatre troupes used to come to our secondary school in those days to perform, and we paid about 30k or 50k[1] to watch. My parents never allowed me to stay to watch because they would have picked us up right after the school. But on the television – this was also around the time when all the travelling theatre companies had migrated to the television – there were many dramas. One of the first that we saw was Ojo Ladipo (Baba Mero) theatre. They did a 30-minute sketch that was really enjoyable, with the stock characters – Jacob, Papilolo, Bello, Aluwe, Iya Mero, Mero, etc. So, instead of staying after school for the travelling theatre groups, we started watching those, and Moses Olaiya Adejumo theatre (Baba Sala). It was the Yoruba comedies that we started to watch first on the television even when we couldn't understand what they were saying; but the actions were very clear; you realise what they were communicating. My father would laugh much louder than when we were watching the English comedies and characters such as Some *Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*. You could notice the different reaction to the Yoruba comedies in my father, which prompted us to ask to start pestering him: 'what did he say? What did he say now?'. So, he would tell us what happened, which to me was amazing because it wasn't just that they were 'falling over' kind of funny, the satirical aspects, the puns, the playing with words were just very funny; and they were serious jokes. And that's what I really liked. There was a particular episode from Ojo Ladipo theatre where Jacob goes to buy beer for his friend and he bumps into a young man of about 20 years old whilst admiring a very attractive woman. The beer fell to the ground, and two of the three bottles smashed. The joke was on the characters. Jacob was a midget and

[1] That was about 30 pence or 50 pence then

a hunchback; the young boy whom he bumped into was very tall, so you see the height disparity first. Jacob was asking the boy to pay for the beer and was attempting to slap him. When the boy finally agreed to pay for the beer, Jacob dropped the other bottle and insisted that the boy pay for the three bottles. But the ingenuity was in the acting between this hunchbacked character and the tall, thin young boy. It was then that I realised that we had stories to tell and we tell our stories better when we tell them our way.

SA: With your limited competence of the language then, did you understand what the performance were trying to satirise at that time?

OA: Yes. Because the comedies were so well written that they were self-contained. For instance, the example I gave is about respect for elders but it also contained elements of corruption by the elders of the meaning and sense of respect when they use it to oppress the younger generation. The culture is that you respect your elders; you don't even call those who are a few weeks or days older than you by their first names. When we got to Nigeria, this was very confusing when my father started asking us to call several people brothers and sisters. I thought, this man didn't tell us that he had several children by many women already! We had to negotiate that minefield and by the time we started watching those dramas, we had enough cultural capital to follow the gist of the narratives, and when we didn't, my father would explain the context of the joke.

SA: Is this kind of drama that inspired your early plays such as *Early Morning*?

OA: Yes. Definitely. That's where I started and *Early Morning* is my own tribute to those comedies. So, you see Ojo with the pot-belly is like Baba Sala; the young boy is Kola; etc. They are like 'types'. The characters in *Early Morning* are like tropes of popular Yoruba theatre.

SA: Let's go back to your University days. You went to the University of Benin, in the mid-western part of Nigeria even though you were living in Lagos. Why did you choose that university?

OA: I think it was to do with the way the whole educational system in Nigeria was set up really. I can't really explain... you are asking about me going to Benin...? My brother went all the way to the north east, to Maiduguri. How do I explain? I just felt I wanted to go outside the Yoruba speaking area because I had never been outside the Yoruba speaking area all the time I was in Nigeria. I had never even been to Ilorin (one of the northernmost Yoruba cities) so I thought going elsewhere may be a way to see how people from other parts of Nigeria live. And I had always been interested in Benin. I watched a Benin drama on the monarchy, on television – it was on either Ovonranwen or Erediauwa. It was by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Benin, shown on NTA Abeokuta. But it wasn't just that. I had heard a lot about Benin and Benin Kingdom. In any case, Benin's as good as any, and it also did Theatre Arts as well, so... I chose Theatre Arts because... my aunt also asked me why I didn't do English or Law... and my brother did Architecture because he's good at drawing. I was very shy then so people couldn't understand why I chose theatre. I didn't know why. The thought occurred to me... I felt like writing plays. I had done writing stories, I had done writing comics, and plays seemed to be the next phase, even though I didn't know it consciously. That was weird; I didn't even do the Playwriting course in Benin because I didn't like the lecturer. I was going to do it as an option in the final year, instead I opted to do American Drama.

SA: So, none of your lecturers influenced you in your writing career?

OA: They did but in different ways. In any case, the lecturer I was avoiding in the Playwriting class ended up teaching the American Drama and it was too late to change my options and joined the only four students in the Playwriting module, in a class of 56. In fact, I didn't do any writing when I was in the university. I was very interested in Theatre History, particularly African Theatre History; I enjoyed European Theatre History the least because I thought the African Theatre History was the one that needed a greater focus, whereas the department devoted quite a lot of the time to teaching European Theatre

History, which was strange for an African university, with the whole of Africa and its performances. The set text was *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* by Bernard Dukore. But the department did have a very thorough African Theatre History, and I think it was in keeping with the drama that I was watching on television that got me wanting to know more about Africa. Apart from the satires and the comedies, there were the epics such as Duro Ladipo's televised version of *Oba Koso*. We also started to read all those books by Ulli Beier and other writers about Yoruba folktales and myths of Sango and the gods. So, just like the Greek gods, we have our own gods with incredible adventures and journeys, and I wanted to know more. It wasn't that I disliked the Western Theatre, it was just that I felt I wanted to know more about African theatre. I wondered why European Theatre wasn't just an elective, why it was a core module for three years out a four-year course, whilst African Theatre was not.

SA: Do you think you were influenced by the earlier writers such as Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka in the recuperation of African performance culture?

OA: Yes

SA: But all these have not really been reflected in your writing...

OA: Not yet, because once you're seen to be working within a certain tradition, you want to position yourself within that tradition...

SA: What tradition are you now trying to position yourself within?

OA: I see myself as somebody who is trying to take more from the popular theatre tradition. That's where I would position myself.

SA: What do you mean precisely by the term 'popular theatre' because what could be termed as popular in the 1980s Nigeria may no longer be considered popular?

OA: For me, it is the kind of dramatic tradition that I first became interested in, the theatre of Baba Sala and Baba Mero. Nowadays, it's a

strange mix. For instance, you go to Lagos, to venues like Terra Kulture[2] where they are doing these 'contemporary dramas' which I can't really describe as 'popular' or as 'intellectual' like the dramas by Soyinka because they are mixed....

SA: You mentioned Terra Kulture, which is the main venue for theatre performance in Lagos. The plays that are shown there are different from what you'd expect, even when they do a play by Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka or Femi Osofisan, they introduce multi-media and other popular elements.

OA: Well, that could be a version of director's theatre like in Europe here where the text is only one aspect of the whole production and sometimes it's even a minor aspect of the production

SA: It could be... which leads us back to what we understand as popular. That's why I want to understand how you position yourself within the tradition, how you see your writing.

OA: Yes. Of course, I would go back to the shows of the 1980s. That's what I would consider as popular. Although it was televised, it was still popular theatre tradition and had a popular theatre aesthetics. Even though the dramas of Baba Sala and Baba Mero were different, there were certain recognisable tropes in those dramas, and that's for me what I would define as my main inspiration when I started writing.

SA: How do you intend to develop that format? Through language, or the metaphors and idioms that you are already using? Because, when you take a play like *Threshold* and *Iya-Ile (First Wife)*, the language in *Threshold* is deeply esoteric compared to the everyday language of *Iya-Ile* which everybody can understand. When you look at Yoruba plays, you find that the language is closer to that of *Threshold* because it's full of idioms, proverbs, metaphors and word-play. How do you see yourself positioning your writing because, to appropriate Veronica Tadjo's term, you write in the 'Midwest' (not the West!), and your primary audience

[2] Terra Kulture Arts and Studios Limited (formerly Terra Kulture Limited – The Nigerian Cultural Centre) is an educational and recreational organization in Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria.

are the people living in the 'Midwest' and you don't want to alienate them by going too deeply 'Yoruba'.

OA: It would depend upon what I was writing... the language of *Threshold* is quite different because I was trying to do something very different there and that drama was inspired by traditional gods and Yoruba spirituality, looking at the secular nature of life but also looking at the idea of creation. I remember when we... unfortunately we couldn't do it here, but we did it in America... and I remember one of the audience members came up to me and said the play is basically about death because simply the character, the hero or the protagonist, Kunle, is in the spirit world and it's only then that we realise he's actually died, in the sense of the way the hero of Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* goes into the spirit world; and that we don't realise until the end when we are at the funeral. So, the understanding there is that there is separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead, but in Yoruba, there is no separation. I the sense of looking at that cycle, the Yoruba cyclical world, for her, it was a linear journey and not a cyclical one; for her it was very much about death, but for me it was about reconciliation.

SA: Does that audience member's interpretation of the play bother you?

OA: Not really, because I have realised it's always very difficult to impose one meaning on a work. I mean, if you try to tell them that this is what the plays means, you've robbed them of what they have got from the play. I used to say that 'this is what the play is about' and received responses like, 'oh, I thought it was about this'; and you realise that people come with different expectations to a play, and people take away different things from a play. You could say it's a misrepresentation of the play, but a person is seeing a play from their own perspective or from their own experience, and from their own culture. So, it could be a misreading.

SA: Let's go back to immediately after Benin. Did you come back to England? What motivated you to come back to England?

OA: Well, first, before I came back, I did my National Service[3] in Niger State in the north, for the Bida Local Government where I was the Assistant Director of the Cultural Troupe.

SA: Did you do any of your plays there?

OA: No, I didn't. It was a full-time occupation working with the troupe but the service gave me an insight into another Nigerian culture. Though it was like most other local government troupes – performing at weddings, or opening ceremonies or other public functions that a government functionary or an important dignitary is attending. But we also did Community Development as well, doing plays on Educational Theatre. When I finished there, I went back to Lagos and after a period of unemployment, I got a job as a public relations officer and exhibition coordinator at Aragon Gallery, Obanikoro, Lagos. I did that for two years. It was a very busy period for the high profile gallery, before they later moved the business to the USA. During the two years I was there, we hosted Committee of Relevant Arts (CORA) meetings twice. This was when I re-started writing. I bought a typewriter. The work was satisfying, but I really wanted to get back into writing, and I started writing plays... I don't think I finished any of the plays, similar to the two I started when I was in the university, which I also didn't complete. But I still have one of the plays, which I wrote in a notebook. It was a satire where a community decides to ban Selfishness. But I didn't finish it. I didn't finish it. I didn't go back to it after university and the service year. One of the primary motivations was that I started watching drama on the television again. Some of my colleagues were in these dramas, such as *Checkmate*[4]. This was inspirational, in a way, because most of my colleagues moved away from Theatre after the university – to read Law or Business. So seeing some of the few remaining in theatre performing brilliantly on the television motivated me to start writing again. As I said, my work at the Gallery was satisfying but I felt something was

[3] NYSC, National Youth Service Corps programme. All graduates of tertiary education in Nigeria serve for one year in a different area of the country from their origin.
[4] *Checkmate* is a Nigerian television serial created by Amaka Isaac-Ene. It ran from 1991 to 1994.

missing, that that was not what I was trained for, that I should be in the theatre, writing. My heart was set on writing and England was the place for it to happen. So, one morning, I decided to leave Nigeria.

SA: Why England? Why not USA which was the more popular destination for recent Nigerian graduates, especially because of the more developed film industry?

OA: Yes, people went to wherever they could then but because I knew England, I had a passport, and it was easy for me to go. That was why, plus I was more familiar with the English theatre than the American one.

SA: How was it easy for you to get into the system?

OA: It wasn't easy. When I arrived, I found that it didn't matter that I had a passport, that we were all immigrants. People around me made me realise quickly that you may have citizenship, you are still an outsider. I accepted that. So, I did what some others did: work for a few years and find your way back into the education system. I did an MA at the University of North London, now London Metropolitan University, and did my PhD at the Open University. But I wanted to get back to Literature. When I was doing my MA, I wrote some short stories and started a novel; I wasn't writing plays. In fact, I did a few Spoken Words events where people knew me for writing poems in Pidgin English. I began a series which I called *The African Man*, and which I later changed to *The Nigerian Man*…, you know, *The Nigerian Man Learns a New Word*, and *The Nigerian Man Comes to Term with Homosexuality*. I wrote those two and presented them at the Open Mic at the Poetry Society in Covent Garden. I also did some Friday Nights at the Souls of Black Folks in Brixton. I did that for about four years – poetry and short stories – but it was the poetry that people knew me for the most. Nonetheless, I published a few short stories in some journals. It was while I was doing my MA... Debra Levy was the Creative Writing teacher and after reading some of my short stories, she commented that my narration read like dialogues and asked why I didn't go back to playwriting. Even though I was writing prose, the format was dramatic. Therefore, in my

second year, I switched and wrote a play that won the Playwriting Prize that year. Nevertheless, I was still concentrating on fiction because I knew which magazines or agents to send the writing and felt switching to theatre would be like starting all over again. One day, a friend, who was also studying with me, gave me a leaflet from Birmingham Rep advertising a playwriting competition. He encouraged me to enter the competition. So, I sent the first fifteen pages that they requested, and that later turned out to be *Early Morning*. They responded that the competition is only for writers based in Birmingham but they liked it so much that they would help me find somewhere in London to develop it. But I didn't write anything further on the play for a year, and in fact, didn't get back to it until Birmingham Rep wrote asking if I had finished the play. I then went back to it and wrote the draft in about a week. The Rep got in touch with Talawa Theatre. Talawa helped with the development but they couldn't produce it because it was not the kind of drama they were interested in at the time. After the development, I sent the script to other theatres but each one of them turned it down. It seemed that British Theatre was not familiar with that kind of theatre and the theatres couldn't place the style or thought that their audience would not relate with the play. That went on for three years until we decided to apply to the Arts Council for funding to stage the play. We got half of the money needed so everybody, apart from the actors, took a 50% cut so we could stage it. And it was great because we had Tunde Euba and Golda John in the play and that in a sense made a link to the heritage that I was coming from in terms of the play. They read the script and knew exactly what to do. I remember Tunde say to me that when he read it, he thought it was written by somebody living in Nigeria. When I turned up for rehearsals, he was surprised and said he thought the guy was living in Nigeria. I said no, I have been here for about six or seven years. Anyway, *Early Morning* was the kind of play I wanted to write, right from the university, the kind of satire that pokes fun at issues. The play ran for three weeks. Karena Johnson of Oval House attended a reading that we had after the development with Talawa. We invited all the theatres but I think only Karena and the

Theatre Royal attended out of all the theatres we invited, possibly because they had all read the earlier version and didn't like it. After the reading, Karena said, 'if you get the funding, we'll put it on'. That's why the play went to the Oval House, because it was a different kind of theatre that presented alternative voices, the kind of theatre that the Oval House was interested in. It was fortuitous because it was at the Oval that I met Steven Luckie, the producer of *Mother Courage*. He was in charge of the Eclipse Theatre at the time. He attended the production because he knew the director, not because he knew me. He saw it and said it was the audience reaction that interested him the most, that he felt that the characters were saying what was in the mind of the audience but which they would not say in public, and there was that recognition. The funniest part of the production was that the venues that turned it down all sent people to watch it because they couldn't believe that Oval House was going to put it on and that it was going to be successful, and I heard later that some of them thought that people would protest against the play. Most of them said they didn't know where I stood and came with such questions as 'are you for black people or are you against black people, or are you on the side of white people... we don't know?' I told them I just write what I like and that is why it's liberating for me. It's a form of liberation to be able to do that. And I write about human beings. That's what I see as my job as a writer. So, when they got there and saw the audience's reaction… in a sense, it was the audience that actually helped me, because they understood where I was coming from, particularly the Nigerians that were there. They said the most outrageous things! And that's when I knew that I don't need to be afraid of the audience; they are not going to protest; they are not as gullible or as easy to be offended as...

SA: So, they understood the play better than the critics or the professional theatre people....

OA: Yes, because they recognised their lives, as cleaners, sending money home, phone cards... I'm sure there are a lot of British people who have never had to use a phone card, and probably will never have to, and

have never seen one before. At that time, things like 'PIN-Number', what did that mean to people? Except PIN was something you used with your bank card. What was a PIN with a phone card? To scratch a phone card and read a PIN? And this was all in the play, about people living here in the UK but having families back in Nigeria.

SA: *Early Morning* is different from your subsequent plays. It seems rather to be a one-off in terms of style and form...

OA: That's right, and that was interesting because I remember some people were saying to me, after I had written about three or four other plays... we did a workshop as part of Talawa Writers Group... they would invite people from theatres to give workshops... and somebody mentioned the *Mother Courage* adaptation, and the person running the workshop asked when the play was done. I said it was done at the Regent mostly but that it was also done at the Hackney Empire. 'Can I read it?', he said. I sent it to him. He read it within days and emailed me to send him any other play I had written. So I sent him *Early Morning*. Then he asked if I had another one! So I sent him *For One Night Only*. Those were the three I had at the time. Then the next time we met, at the second workshop he was going to do with us, the following month, when he had read the three plays, his comment was that if there was no name on the scripts, he would never have believed that they were written by the same person.

SA: Why?

OA: I don't know. I think the reason is that I get bored easily doing one thing or similar things. I think it's probably a kind of restlessness, and the hunger to do a different thing.

SA: But that didn't happen with *The Estate*, which is in three parts?

OA: No. *The Estate* is in three parts, with *Iya Ile* and *Fractures*. *The Estate* came about... because I had known Femi Elufowoju Jr and I knew about his company Tiata Fahodzi. In fact, I saw *Booked*, one of their plays, at the Oval House and I really liked it. After I did *Mother Courage*, Steven

Luckie said that Femi and I have to get together and do something, and he said it's the most logical thing and he was surprised that we had not done it. I didn't understand... and this was when we were doing *Mother Courage*, which was designed to use a different aesthetics using puppetry, dance and movement, a new style to which I had to adapt. I thought, well, ok. So, when Femi told me his theatre company was trying to do more mainstream work, unlike *Early Morning* or what he called my alternative theatre style. He suggested writing a play that is inspired by, say, *The Cherry Orchard*. I baulked at first, arguing that we have our own inspirational drama rather than going all the way to Russian to source inspiration. But he convinced me about the merit of having my writing style interpret such a play for the British stage, though set in Nigeria. I agreed and wrote *The Estate*. I remember doing the first draft with pages of Nigerian English and pidgin! Of course, the argument was that it was too Nigerian, and will be too inaccessible to their audience. It was funny, because I countered that 'you can't ask me to write a play set in Nigeria and complain that it's too Nigerian'. The second draft was similar. Femi convinced me to rewrite it, based on the fact that no London venue would stage the play. I wrote another draft and removed all the pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo and other languages. Femi even then wasn't convinced that we were going to find a theatre for it in the new format, and that was when it occurred to me that we had signed a contract for two days in June. I told him we're going back to the old draft. He rejected that idea; that the theatre would probably think that we had planned that move all along. I stood my ground, and to make sure I didn't reconsider, I deleted the new draft and went back to the first draft. Of course, Soho Theatre – where we were going to stage the play – was angry that that was not what was agreed. But I stood my ground; I marshalled my arguments – it's my name on the script; you can't dictate to me precisely what to write; how can I write a play set in Nigeria without flavouring it with what is quintessentially Nigerian?, etc. Anyway, on the first day of rehearsals, I was prepared to apologise to Femi for all the *wahala* and the headache as we hadn't seen each other since the theatre agreed to do the play, but he was just smiling and

continued rehearsing. We did a small tour with the play, and by the time we came to Soho, we had sold about 60% of the tickets in advance and everything else was at the door; people were just turning up. In fact, the theatre opened a waiting list, for returns, which had to be closed after two or three days because the play was oversubscribed.

SA: Yes. It was that a remarkable play but the more important aspect of that production, if I recollect, was the play-without-the-play, with crowds of people streaming towards the theatre and gathering in front of Soho when they couldn't obtain tickets, in their fanciful and traditional Nigerian attires....

OA: I was so proud that day. I was standing in front of the theatre watching the people too. And the staff was quite surprised at the turnout, that it had never happened before. Anyway, you know, with Nigerians, everything is a carnival, a celebration of some sort. The production, in any case, was a learning curve for everybody, for Soho, for us, for the actors as well, because a lot of the actors were quite young, and only doing their second or third gig or so, and they had never been in any African play, set within a typical Nigerian culture. Even the audience! It was amazing when the electricity went off in the play, and the cast went 'NEPA!'. The audience at the first night was disapproving, commenting in Yoruba that they'd been disgraced, embarrassed – *'Won ti ba wa je ni London o*[5]!'. You could feel them cringing. However, we had discussed this before in rehearsal because when Femi asked me what kind of play I was thinking of, I told him my idea was to go back to those kind of plays we used to watch whilst growing up in Nigeria, those satirical, social comedies, but I stressed that I wanted to use the social milieu in its particularity, not in the broader term, and played dramatically to show the reaction, the reality of the people when they bring out the torches and the lanterns, and the candles. What subsequently happened was that, just before that scene, the audience started shouting 'NEPA!', 'Up Nigeria!' And I think the

[5] We've been disgraced in London!

audience was delighted to see even the Nigerian *atupa* [6]on the stage! It brought back, you know, that feeling that you were in a Nigerian home, a Nigerian environment with its regular unpredictability. Anyway, how is this tied to the script? That point is funny but what happened next? They switched on the generator, which promptly exploded because they used adulterated oil from the unlicensed market. Those little points are funny in isolation, but you have to read them as part of a whole.

SA: How did you think this affected or influenced the reception in other London theatres? And do you think the audience was composed mainly of Nigerians who wanted to watch a flavour of home?

OA: Yes. But it was mixed audiences most of the time particularly during the week. However, once you get to Thursday, Friday, Saturday, it was 90% Nigerian and I didn't have much of a problem with that because the atmosphere they created was the right atmosphere for the play.

SA: Are you writing for Nigerians?

You have to think of an audience first. I think it is very difficult to say you're writing for the whole world, for everybody, because I think our humanity is circumscribed by our culture and where we come from. Even when a European writes about Africa or China, they write about it from their own perspective. When they make plays or do films with Chinese actors, the perspective cannot be Chinese; it has to be the orientalist way of seeing the Chinese, and that is correct for everybody. I do not think that English writers think of Nigerians, or Ghanaians, or the Japanese, or the Arabs when they write their plays. It's always from their own cultural perspectives and that is why a play written by Soyinka or Osofisan is fundamentally different from a play written by Tom Stoppard or even written by an African-American writer. There are fundamental differences directed not just by the world we live in as such but how we have been brought up in that world by the education system. I have always pointed out to students in some classes that I

[6] Lamp

teach at Florida State University, that there are limited numbers of books written by Africans or Asians on the shelves at the SOAS library, because *they* listen to their experts first before *they* listen to an African or an Asian, because *they* have decided that objectivity is something that belongs more to them. These are the people who have made careers defining us and we have to continue writing against that grain. To them, we are always politicised bodies; there is always an agenda that we are pursuing, whether ethnic or nationalistic. That is what a writer, whether academic or creative, is battling against. That is what has always been the debate, commented upon even by Chinua Achebe concerning Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* or *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. How Achebe writes against the grain is by telling stories, and that is what I'm doing, socially and culturally.

SA: You decided to write both a prequel and a sequel to *The Estate*. Is it because of the reception or because you felt you had not exhausted the narrative of the Adeyemi family?

OA: To be honest, I didn't have anything in mind to write about. It was Femi who suggested capitalising on the project. I remember telling him that this is not Nollywood now where we do Part one, Part two, Part three. You see, I was already thinking of writing another original script. Because of the way things went with Soho, I didn't have the time to develop the draft of *The Estate* in the way that I had originally wanted. But Femi was again convincing, arguing that it was not often that a writer can turn back the hands of the clock and do something right, or different from their earlier attempt. He suggested a sequel set in London but I couldn't see the Adeyemis coming to London. Then he wanted it to be another adaptation, of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. So, we went to see an amateur production of the play. I had read it but I didn't like it. So, we went to see the show but left after about twenty minutes. After some thought, I told Femi that the Adeyemi family can stand on its own two feet and that I was going to write a prequel, which would be a play about when I was living in Nigeria, compiling my experiences. *Iya-Ile* was a quick write, drawing upon the nascent era of

television dramas in the Nigeria of the early 1990s before Nollywood, and making references to common and popular programmes from around that time. When we did the reading at Soho, there was no argument like we had with *The Estate*, and the theatre gave us five and a half weeks, which was one of the longest runs at the Soho. So, we started telling people about it and people poured in again like the last time. And the critical reception was even better, with most reviews holding that it was a better play than *The Estate*. The interaction between the cast was tremendous, as if we were in Nigeria. The bonding was great. It was also another learning curve for them and the atmosphere contributed to the drama as well. We had a few issues like the pronunciation of Yoruba words, but it was a more technical performance. The musical director had enough time to work on the music, which was lacking in *The Estate*. In fact, we were able to do all the things we couldn't do with *The Estate* in *Iya-Ile*. The rehearsal process was also quite intense. The first week was like Nigeria 101, with the cast learning about the culture and the customs of Nigeria and even watching Nollywood for clues.

SA: In essence, the main point for you was to showcase the Nigerian culture for Nigerians.

OA: Yeah. Originally it was it was Femi's idea to do a sequel and I said, let's do a prequel. It's all about bargaining really and then we did this and when Femi read it, he thought, ah, there's so much I can do with this. Okay, let's go. Let's do it. And it's interesting to read some of the Nigerian blogs that reviewed or spoke about it, how it made them feel proud to be Nigerian. I've always said to myself as I come to the National Theatre and see all their plays, there is no sense of 'I have to show my culture'. They just do it because it is inherent, although for us too, it is inherent but we can only point it out depending on where it is being staged.

SA: You are right about that. For instance, if *Iya-Ile* is being staged in Lagos or Ibadan, the audience would enjoy it without being especially conscious of the culture on display.

OA: And that is what I said to Femi, that though the play is a cultural text, it's not an anthropological play; it's a drama, it's about a family. It's simply about a man who is about to get a government contract and his wife hates the people that he is going to get the contract from, and they are having family problems at the same time between themselves because the man is sleeping around. And almost everything stems from that.

SA: What now happens in the sequel?

OA: The sequel is set around 2011, the time of the Occupy Nigeria protest. Yinka, the son, is now a Senator. What's the other one? Soji is one of the Occupy Movement organizers. Pakimi and Helen have got married, so they're living in the Estate. The Estate belongs to them and he's trying to build a new annex because there is now more competition from these new churches and he's trying to... but also at that time, you know, a lot of people have left Victoria Island, a lot of the wealthy people have left Victoria Island and they've moved either moved to Ikoyi, to Lekki, to Aja. So, he's built this multi-million naira complex at a time when the area is on the wane, when the people who should be his clients are now moving out further to Lekki and his main competitor has already built the biggest church in Lekki.

SA: Is that why the title is *Fractured*?

OA: Yes. Everything becomes fractured. Sola is also getting married to Wale, one of the minor characters we don't see in *The Estate*. I've now written a second draft.

SA: Are you going to get Soho to do it?

OA: I was hoping so, but it seems it's just one thing after another. It was supposed to be this year then next year and now it's not certain.

SA: Are you therefore going to consider any other London theatre?

OA: Well, actually, no, because the funny thing is, most of the association's I had were not with theatres, they were with companies such as Talawa, the company that produced *Early Morning* and Eclipse

which I have done two plays with. I have been working with companies rather than theatres. It's just how it happened. I think because they were more willing to take risks.

SA: Talking about risks, what were the risks in doing *The Hounding of David Oluwale*?

OA: Oh! I think the biggest risk for me then was emotional because the story was so horrible that... Wait, let me start from the beginning. West Yorkshire Playhouse sent *Nationality Wog: The Hounding of David Oluwale* by Kester Aspden to me to read. They asked whether I would read it and whether I would be interested in adapting it and I said, okay. The funny thing is that I had seen the book the previous week in Waterstones Bookshop in Charing Cross and it was already on my list to acquire. So I read it but as I was turning the pages, I was getting angrier. Without completing the book, I sent an email to say, 'Yes'. And that's what set the ball rolling. We... I read books about Leeds – fiction as well as historical books about Leeds – to prepare for it, just to get an idea of what that place was like. I met with the author of the book and we talked a lot and then I set about writing. Then Dawn Walton got involved and we talked about how we could bring David Oluwale back, otherwise it would be a story about somebody talking about someone else and why would a black Theatre Company do that to a black person? We agreed that he would come from the dead and actually tell his own story by himself. And when we did that, it just changed... because I had written the first draft earlier before Dawn joined... so it just changed the whole complexion of the project. When we did the auditions, a lot of actors did not turn up and there were some who... I think there were auditions for *Death and the Kings Horseman* at the National Theatre at the same time. So a lot of people didn't turn up for our audition, but it wasn't a problem because the actor we actually got in the end was brilliant, was amazing. A young actor, Daniel Asher (Francis), and he embodied the vulnerability of Oluwale because we didn't want it to be a stock character, we wanted his Humanity to be on the stage. And when he came, we knew we'd got the right person. Let's proceed. Let's keep

developing this play. We had the rehearsals in Leeds; I was in Leeds for two full weeks and we just kept working at it. Some of the cast weren't sure about playing the scenes of violence towards David. And the reason why is because the police station where it all happened was across the road. There was a big poster in front of the theatre gazing directly at the police station. But more importantly, the rehearsal for the scenes of the violence was particularly tough on the actor playing the policeman. He was a Buddhist so... Then we opened! We did very well in Leeds. We met with the Nigerian community in Chapeltown, and we got them to come and see the show as well. I can't really say – since I don't live in Leeds – I can't really say what the effect of the production was on Leeds. You know, I mean, I think reviews were sort of fair in terms of the Press; it sold out and we had the youngest audience for a play not specifically written for a young age group. We had a lot of them and we were wondering why, and we realized that somebody on the Leeds United Football Club website had seen the show and was telling everybody about it. And this was very surprising because when I was reading the history of Leeds, I sensed how conservative it was, you know, when we talk about the North, the Industrial North, we normally think of the Labour Heartland, but Leeds is not different from York, or Manchester, Liverpool or even Bradford. So, it felt right for a play like that to be on in Leeds...

SA: Where it happened.

OA: Yes, and it sold out. So it was quite interesting to see a lot of the ex-policeman who were there at the time come to see the play.

SA: That's interesting. But of course, not all the policemen would have agreed with what was going on then, with the kind of treatment that Oluwale received.

OA: That's right. And some of the policemen said that we were too gentle on the police! That if people found out about some of the things they got up to then... Anyway, for us, it was about David, it was about mental health issues as well.

SA: When we look at the play, David Oluwale, it reminds us what you were talking about in *Early Morning*, about the issues that migrants still grapple with in this country. There is a similarity, as if time has stood still. It's also part of what you raised in *The Christ of Coldharbour Lane* (2007). So, that means you have this agenda that you pursue whether consciously, or unconsciously, the agenda that says, 'Look, I'm an immigrant here and being an immigrant, I have a life. I have something to contribute. I have a culture and I am a human being and I want you to see me in that light, not in your own light'.

OA: Completely. I once said to friend that the way I see my writing is like I'm like a fly in the ointment that... I just see myself as somebody who is given a space to say things that other people can't say openly about how we feel. I see myself as filtering the experiences of all of us. I remember one evening when a friend of mine had come to see *Early Morning* and he warned me to be careful about some of the points I raise in my plays.

SA: Well, I think you writing is different from that of the other writers from Nigeria, such as Biyi Bandele, for instance with *Marching for Fausa* or *Brixton Stories*. You are using the same material but your approach is more profound, you look at the effect on the characters.

OA: Yeah, but the thing about *Coldharbour Lane* is that I'm trying to look at our existence from a psychological, spiritual and material point of view.

That's one thing I always keep trying to do. A character like Omo is torn between these different multiple identities that are challenging his existence, but there's always one that is more dominant and that is what society thinks of him. He's wrestling this idea of not knowing who his father was that leads to his confusion about himself and in the end, he was occupying a sort of an African centered space. The one line that I think is very important in *Coldharbour Lane*... is 'I was always hoping and praying to God that the audience would understand what the cops are going through'. That one line very important is, when at the beginning,

when the Jamaican security guard at the prison is accusing him and he says to the guard that the thought of a black man as his saviour repulses him and he should shake off his self hatred. He is trying to say to people that, be yourself in your Blackness. Don't be ashamed, don't be afraid. Move away from your double consciousness. And that's his mission. And that's why the opposition to it is more deadly, because he is now seen as someone very dangerous, someone revolutionary.

SA: More like Malcolm X but yes, it's more dangerous because it's not telling them what to do, it is telling them how to do it and why it is important.

OA: Yeah, and that is why some people who didn't understand said, 'Why doesn't he say or do this or that? It is because everybody's issue is different, and that is why he talks to them differently. He says this to the lady in the wheelchair. He says that to Mary Magdalen. He says to the two guys to perform a miracle, which is nothing more than just a sign. Nothing else. Okay, I perform a miracle and then what? And he says, look into yourselves and stop falling into the old stereotypes of following a leader, which may not lead us to where we need to go or be. Everybody should see himself as an autonomous human being.

SA: You have written some science fiction, and for children. Is this the new direction for your writing or are you still experimenting?

OA: Well, I have always enjoyed writing different genres. *Threshold*, which I really hope we can do in the UK... I bumped into one of the actresses yesterday and we talked about how, after we did the workshop in North London, the next step. Because it wasn't just the story that resonated deeply with her, but also the fact that we spent a long time in trying to understand the dance. Juwon Ogungbe is always asking, ‘what’s next?’. Because the music he made for it, when it was fully done... when we did at Richmond University in America with the band and everything was beautiful and was so connected. It was all part of this whole experience of the play as Science Fiction, an African sci-fi. Now, I've always enjoyed reading comic books. On *Immune*, The Theatre

Royal Plymouth approached me to work with their youth theatre company to write a play about young people. The play was a collaboration with Theatre Royal Plymouth, West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds and Royal Theatre in Northampton. I went to all three theatres and we did lots of exercises around discussions of young people and what interests them today. I had files of material. Now, I had a problem. How can I represent experiences from three different towns in one play because I didn't want to do Act One, Leeds, Act Two, Northampton, etc. Well, the only place I haven't been to or have never had a play done is in Plymouth. I spent hours walking around the place and decided to set the play there. As a location, it spoke to me a lot. I had to tone a lot of the Plymouth things down in the end because of Leeds and Northampton. And that's why I decided to make it sci-fi, because it would incorporate all the points suggested by the youth companies. That's how that came about, with one thing leading to the other. It didn't start off as a sci-fi piece; it was about how to tell a story of about fifty different youths. I have always wanted to write sci-fi. I enjoyed writing *Immune* so much that I will be writing more of that kind of play in the future.

SA: After *Immune*, you wrote the short, *Black Lives, Black Words*, which is again different, making one think that *Immune* was a one-off experiment.

OA: No, it's not. *Immune* was... well, I just thought to myself, you know, it'd be nice to write this piece where you had this massive concern, this massive issue with young people in peril and how they get through. And I really liked it. I saw all the three performances and each theatre did its own performance and it was interesting to see how different directors and casts told the story.

SA: What are your future plans? Sometime ago, you mentioned doing a play about Fela's Kalakuta Republic.

OA: I have not spoken to Lekan Babalola the producer for a while. The research is done; several drafts have been completed. The problem with doing the play has always been financial. In fact, that has always been the problem with some of my plays. *Threshold* for instance was supposed

to be done here in London and not in the USA but there was funding for it in Richmond.

SA: What are you working on now?

OA: What I am working on now that I think has a 90% chance of being produced is a play set in Nigeria and it's about what would happen if a left-wing coalition decided to unite and contest elections in Nigeria. The play will explore the ideology of Nigeria as a nation, which I don't think we have. We don't have a pan-Africanist ideology, we don't have a nationalistic ideology, and that is why religion and ethnicity have taken up the space of ideology in the country. I want to explore this from my position as a pan African. My culture is Yoruba, and I grew up as a Nigerian, but I see myself as a pan African because I can't see another way forward. We need to reconstruct ourselves as a continent of people. This is what the play is about: three people from three smaller parties come together to overcome their personal, ingrained, interests in the interest of the nation. It will be staged at the Arcola Theatre in East London.

SA: Thank you Oladipo Agboluaje.