like “combat,” “commitment” and so on are associated with left-wing causes. When you think “combat” you think of the literature of commitment, you think of the literature of social struggle and so on. Certainly, his is a literature of critical -- there is a critical stance in his writing and social criticism is a major aspect in it. In fact it has been since the very beginning. That is true.

Now to see this as a literature of combat, you must then see the way in which it draws on certain traditions of commitment.

But in his own case, commitment to ideals, certain ideals like justice (you may see that in Maja Pearce’s book), because for Soyinka justice is a primary value. But very often his social vision is not clear, and this is my main criticism of Soyinka. You never know what his idea of what society should be like. So if you use words like “combat”, you’ve got to define precisely what you mean and then confine it to that sense of outrage, consciousness struggle, injustice, moral imperfections etc. But NOT political engagements. Even in Kongi’s Harvest which is his most political drama, you never get that clear cut idea as to what kind of politics, what kind of society he wants to because he reflects only certain values. So if you say “combat” it may give the wrong notion that his is a political drama like in the sense of Brecht, which it is not.

**Zodwa:** Over the three decades of his writing, in what ways would you say Soyinka has made a meaningful contribution to literature, especially literature in English?

**Irele:** There are a number of ways in which his contribution can be seen. However, the most significant is the renewal of theatre as a celebrated form, theatre became the scan of the mind as well as a catalyst for social reform in Nigeria.

**Zodwa:** I certainly would like to go on and on with this discussion, but let me end here by thanking you for this interview.

**Irele:** You most welcome. Feel free to contact me for any further discussions on Wole Soyinka. I will help where I can. Good luck on your research.

**Zodwa:** Oh Thank you.
Appendix B2

Conducted in Bristol England: Monday, 11 March 1996

Interviewer: Zodwa Motsa
Respondent: James Gibbs

Accession Number still to be supplied by the University of South Africa Library.

Please note: A small portion of the beginning of the interview is not audible due to technical failure. The audible portion starts here.

Zodwa: *So what could have been the major shaping forces on his writing?*

Gibbs: Well -- that's such a huge question that I won't try to answer all of it but you'll see from my book e-h (this Macmillan one) that I spent sometime looking at European heritage, if you like, and the African heritage, but don't forget about the American heritage as well. I think it's a little bit interesting that he was interested in Eugene O'Neill, that I think you might take notice of that. But, it's fascinating to look at the plays that he had to study for examinations. He did Cambridge Overseas [examinations] then went to the University College of Ibadan. The college [syllabus] included Bernard Shaw's plays [and also] JM Barrie's plays. So obviously, he was very familiar with those texts. And then he went to Leeds, and there was a very active theatre group. I think it was particularly important that the professor of drama called Frederick May, he was very interested in Italian theatre called "commedia dell'arte". Have you done much of that?

Zodwa: *No.*

Gibbs: Well, I think that when you look at it you will find that it's popular theatre. It uses stereotypes, it uses masks and I think Soyinka found that there were parallels [with his own Yoruba theatre]. And he liked cultural coincidences: he liked to find links between things. I think he was influenced by Shakespeare in various ways and he read a lot of Shakespeare. He did a world drama course with George Wilson Knight and you can see the kinds of things that Knight taught in *The Golden Labyrinth*. He looked at classical, Elizabethan and contemporary drama. Knight also taught a course on Ibsen that Soyinka took. He was preparing for exams and he was a sort of person that read and reacted, he did not just absorb. So we should find him reacting to those traditions.

So he responded to things.

So -- um -- then you can look at the plays that he wrote, you can look at
The Lion and the Jewel, the Swamp Dwellers and I think there are all kinds of sources reflected in these -- um -- The Dance of the Forests. I have written on that. "Grafting is an Ancient Art" is one of my papers in which I look at the way in which he brought together different traditions, a bit like a gardener bringing one bit of plant and grafting it together with another bit of plant. It's a huge topic and it goes on, every time he writes a new play you think uh ... I have seen that, there is a bit of that or that, so he's responding very widely to a whole range of influences.

Zodwa: So he does not stick to one source.

Gibbs: No I don't think so! No, You've got to see him in terms of [partly] marrying two traditions. He did a talk on that in 1960 in the interview that we called, "African Writers Talking" where he talked about bringing together Europe and Africa. So one can speak very broadly in those terms, but that's part of the excitement! The trouble with us researchers is we get an idea in our heads and say, 'I can see the influence of [this or that artist] here' and we get very excited about the influence of [that artist] and other people may not follow our arguments at all. That is the trouble. We get obsessed by these things.

[Pause] He can still be seen as the post World War II dramatist the same way as Osborne, Wesker and Pinter [pause].

Zodwa: Has he ever responded to the far reaching effects of World War II in Africa?

Gibbs: Well yes! Because the major influence of World War II was the independence; those [African] soldiers who went to places like Burma to fight they met Indians, they were fighting against fascism and they were fighting against imperialism -- German imperialism-- so they got back home and said we must continue to fight! But this is partly a question about African history -- you must read some more on African history. But I think so far as Africa is concerned, World War II is important in giving great emphasis to the independence movement. But have you read Aké?

Zodwa: Yes I have.

Gibbs: You've heard about the troop movements in West Africa talking about Hitler. So you can see that too contributed to the influences that he felt. I suspect that there were economic influences as well. I suspect they must have been important too [pause].

Yes, we call it World War II but this is partly a Eurocentric thing to do. It did have implications for other parts of the world. There wasn't a tremendous amount going on in West Africa [but] my wife remembers that as little girls [in Ghana] they were to collect copra, the husks of coconuts.
There was a demand for that. There were even drives to collect metal
gold cans to turn into aeroplanes. In Ghana there was a big RAF base in
Tagoran which had a lot of influence on Ghanaian theatre and
performances because the musicians that entertained there... I’m not sure
about the Nigerian situation [on this issue].

Zodwa: 
Did his works ever reflect the war that was going on around the same as
does some of the British playwrights such as Wesker and Pinter?

Gibbs: 
So... yes. Now why do you want him to write about the war? He was
only five years when it started.

Zodwa: 
What was Soyinka’s major preoccupation as a young man in England?

Gibbs: 
I can’t immediately think of anything. It is however, interesting to look at
what concerned him while he was a student; South Africa! Right on the
top of the list of his concerns! His first plays were about South Africa, he
used to sell anti-apartheid pamphlets.

Zodwa: 
I often wonder why he had such a preoccupation about a country so far
away from West Africa? Is it because he responded to issues near and far
beyond an immediate personally defined environment?

Gibbs: 
You could say that. It was actually the spirit of the time in the continent.
Was it the Malan government that had just imposed the apartheid system?
But 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 white. 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, you know the story?

Zodwa: 
All too well, yes.

Gibbs: 
So, these were small but very painful experiences of the racism [of the
time]. I hope you will perhaps bring to your study a South African
perception regarding Soyinka and his writings and general participation in
socio-political issues?

Zodwa: 
Perhaps. It remains to be seen in the development of the argument in my
thesis. A younger African researcher like myself, living in the sorely
compartmentalised 1990s decade may find puzzling this seeming preoccupation of our forebears in issues far and beyond their immediate geographical territory.

Gibbs: Quite sad, isn’t it?

Zodwa: I agree. I seem to get the impression that three decades ago, Africa and all its ills and good aspects belonged to Africans irrespective of imperially imposed border demarcations. Perhaps that way, one may begin to understand what lay behind all this commitment in Wole Soyinka to focus on a country that was beset with problems at the time, albeit a country not labelled Nigeria, on the map?

Gibbs: And furthermore, on the aspect of background influences, it’s helpful to read what he has written about himself in Aké; about his father in Isára, and again about himself in Ibadan. Although you must be aware that he conflates and distorts and sometimes it is a little bit misleading. But it is helpful to see him as the product of a missionary life. Think of his father, a schoolteacher and Christian, his mother related to the Wenikute royal family; her father had actually been to London, preached at St. Paul’s cathedral, recorded songs in a London recording studio and founded the Obekoute Grammar School which was a nationalist school, in fact. [It was sort of established on the motto:'](imitates some persona) ‘We don’t want these white teachers distorting our young men. We want them to grow up as Igboetes’— which is not really Yoruba [Soyinka’s paternal clan base]. This attitude [of self-preservation] was the focus of the Igbo community [from which his mother came]. So that is the [cultural] background! And I imagine that again South Africa respectively, might link it up with the people who went to Fort Hare and -- and --

Zodwa: Lovedale, perhaps?

Gibbs: Yes, Lovedale mission etc.; those kinds of people who were influenced by the CMS missionaries in the case of the latter, so they had Anglican influence. So that was the kind of background he had -- a --

Zodwa: Miles apart from the experiences of some of his Royal Court contemporaries it seems.

Gibbs: [It was] quite different from that of his contemporaries. Wesker was Jewish of course, Pinter was Jewish too, you see. So they did not have these experiences with the white people as did Soyinka. You can bear me out yourself, you are now here in London and Bristol; you are finding some surprising things about white people. I am sure you are shocked how badly some of them speak.

Zodwa: It’s quite fascinating, and shocking at the same time.
Gibbs: (General laughter) Some of them speak with quite strong accents. The fact that you can't understand some people. Again South Africa is a special case in many ways, but in West Africa, my wife's experience is that most of the missionaries and teachers were very strict. They approximated BBC English and they didn't tolerate any dialect or sub-standard forms; they were very particular and correct. Whereas when you come here you find that English people are speaking the English language very badly (Chuckles).

Zodwa: (Joins in laughter) That is correct. It is quite interesting actually; you get such a shock at times.

Gibbs: You do! (more laughter) Well, that must have shocked Soyinka as well. At that stage people say he had an RP accent [this means received pronunciation, or formally acquired English pronunciation popular amongst tutored speakers of English, a BBC accent], and in Aké he describes listening to the radio, imitating the BBC [presenters] and if you listen[ed] to the radio, and the way they spoke in the 40s, it was much more formal and very different from the way they speak today. The kind of English that was encouraged (imitates highly affected British accent) was very very British. "Here is the news!" They didn't allow anybody with a regional accent on the radio, as a rule. And so, Soyinka cultivated this very strong RP accent, which he's lost over the years. He has relaxed a bit more and he speaks a bit more like other Nigerians, but in a sense, that's where he's coming from.

Zodwa: I recall seeing in one publication Wole Soyinka carrying protest posters in some kind of a march with some members of the Royal Court. Just what did he have in common with the people like Osborne, Bond, and Wesker?

Gibbs: In some ways they were at the Royal Court Theatre together. Have you seen this book? (shows a copy of Richard Findlater's At the Royal Court Theatre).


Gibbs: Good! One good thing about this book is that it gives a thoroughly compiled list of all the productions, dates and who did what etc.

Zodwa: So is one safe to imagine that when the angry wave of John Osborne swept over Britain, Wole Soyinka was also there to share in that experience?

Gibbs: Well, Soyinka wouldn't have been there for that (refers to Osborne's

Gibbs: Yes, in 1958, Osborne had staged his debutante play. In fact, Soyinka mentions some of the productions he saw. He hasn’t actually mentioned *Rule on the Rainbow Show* by Errol John, the very first play by a black playwright to make a major impact in London at the time. It had won an *Observer* Playwrighting Competition and it was a very powerful evocation of Caribbean life. Certainly Soyinka must have seen it -- some of the people who featured in this play include Joluny Secca for instance, Lionel -- *(struggles with surname pronunciation)*.

Zodwa: *Ngakane.*

Gibbs: Is he still alive?

Zodwa: *I believe so -- I haven’t made his acquaintance formally, but one of his nieces is a friend with whom I studied at Michigan (USA).*

Gibbs: Good! He would be somebody to talk to; he would have very useful memories of Soyinka in the 50s. Has he returned to South Africa?

Zodwa: *I believe so; but the last I saw of the relatives I referred to earlier was when they had returned to South Africa from the United States.*

Gibbs: Thinking about it just now, you could look at who was in Soyinka’s play, *The Invention*, and see what other plays they’d been in. In fact, it didn’t require many blacks. Olu Suwane did not actually feature in this play, he worked in the radio. And I don’t know any of the others.

Zodwa: *I have always wondered why this play [The Invention] has never been published, even in revised form. Your comment on that?*

Gibbs: Soyinka has tried to bury it! I’ve got a copy for you; did you manage to get yourself a copy? *(He hands her a copy of the manuscript).*

Zodwa: *Not at all. Thank you; I highly appreciate this.*

Gibbs: Its publication -- eh -- this is not a very good play. But it is set in South Africa. I think he talks about trying to run a place -- about South Africa and finds it very difficult. This is a very interesting theme -- what did the outsiders write about South Africa -- [in contrast with the insiders] you know what the insiders said about the country; Mphahlele, Mzamane, Lewis Nkosi and so forth. [Taking the history of *The Invention* as *exempla gratia*], we see the outsiders trying imaginatively to see what it
would be like to live under apartheid. And angry, they try to stir some people up, to take action [against the white regime]. That is an interesting issue. But coming to plays to stir people up [from a distance] that is an area you might want to explore. Have you heard of the play Eleven Men at Hola Camp: 19 July?

Zodwa: *(They both break into laughter) Yes. That is the production in which Soyinka refused to participate ... (more laughter.)*

Gibbs: He refused to make one entrance. He had taken part in a number of improvisations but he wasn’t happy. You are right, he refused to take part. It’s [the play] about Kenya, and Hola Camp was a Mau Mau detention centre. A number of people in London at the time participated, like Bloke Modisane.

Zodwa: *Yes, I have heard of him.*

Gibbs: You have heard of Bloke? It would be marvellous to interview him too, Zodwa. There was also Johny Secca. And many others. Bloke was the one who upset him [Soyinka] by dragging him out of the wings of the theatre to come and take part in the performance. [From this] you can see that he was involved in many of the activities at the Royal Court. Clearly you have been reading about the Royal Court Theatre.

Zodwa: *More than I can assimilate, lately.*

Gibbs: It gets to that stage, unfortunately. Well, they used to meet ever so often there. Initially at a house in Flood Street where Ann Piper lived. -- I have written to all these people and I have letters from them saying, “... well, he did come sometime”, “... a good friend of the family, he was...”. *(More to himself) Who was it who said, “Soyinka used to come to the parties and dance, and didn’t so much pitch up at the improvisations ...”?*

Zodwa: *(In disbelief) Oh.*

Gibbs: Yes, there is a book by Johnston in which he describes some of the activities [at the Royal Court].

Zodwa: *Professor Gibbs, I was wondering what the atmosphere was like there -- what the fundamental ethos of Devine’s “temple” was -- if you can comment on that? What is it that Soyinka and all those who participated in this renascence gained? Was the Royal Court just a convenient meeting place or a warm family for the theatre makers?*

Gibbs: Family ... I suspect the word family is rather too strong for some of these people. And when you say “a meeting place”, well -- how often did they meet? What Soyinka has said is that it allowed him access to the theatre.
So, he could go in and watch productions; even watch rehearsals. He describes in *Ibadan* sitting at the back and watching Arthur Miller talking to the director. And that amazes me, I can’t believe it because there was no time when he was at the Royal Court and Arthur Miller was also there.

**Zodwa:** That’s quite an enigma then!

**Gibbs:** Truly baffling! However, the other people he mentions, like Samuel Beckett, well they did put up productions while he was associated with the Royal Court Theatre. But he was always living his own life, he was always sort of hanging loose; he was earning money at the Royal Court by reading the scripts, making comments on them. He was also earning money at the BBC! I have written quite extensively about his contacts at the BBC. He (technical fault) in there, he didn’t just wake up at 9 o’clock and go to the Royal Court. He had regular recording sessions at the BBC. At one stage he was the presenter and a linkman for “Calling West Africa”, so he earned about £5.00 a week. Sometimes they would send him off to Ashford and North Wales to do interviews. So looking at his finances, he was earning money from that. Occasionally, he would go along to the Royal Court, especially when there was a chance of sneaking in the back and seeing a rehearsal.

In fact, he had money to put up a production. There was a financial incentive. And you must imagine, here is a young man, with a BA [degree], he’s doing a bit of teaching, what they call co-teaching, he’s living part of the time, with his girl-friend who is pregnant. She is also teaching part time, she is in fact a more regular earner in some ways. In *Ibadan* we hear that he goes to Paris and he can’t get in because of a visa. So he goes back [to London] and he borrows money from the girl-friend and goes back to Paris with a visa. Borrowing money from the girl-friend—and she of course became his first wife. (Quietly) He’d be very angry with me for this portion of the interview.

**Zodwa:** Understandably!

**Gibbs:** He’d think that I’ve invaded his privacy. He does n’t like references to his private life.

**Zodwa:** I have noticed that.

**Gibbs:** Where did you notice it?

**Zodwa:** Evidently not from a one-on-one interaction seeing that I haven’t yet spoken to him, but from the interviews that I have watched and read in print, Soyinka successfully keeps the subject of his personal life and close family out of the discussions. Regarding marriage, for instance, I have never thought he was married and a family man—you see he never really
talks about his private life. Whenever he refers to family, it is in a broad sense and somehow takes you back to his parents and other relatives. To me it's like he does not want the world to get too close to this side of his life.

Gibbs: I mean, he usually describes himself as “married with children”. He’s had three -- his two previous marriages. And he writes in *Ibadan* about the girl he made pregnant, he describes the child of independence. So he indicated the independence of October 1st 1960, that’s when the child was -- was conceived. But this is very private piece of information, to anybody! To tell the world when your child was conceived is invading your own privacy.

Zodwa: *For sure!*

Gibbs: And -- and yet he is very secretive about his wife and children. And yet at this time he was to some extent quite dependent on his wife’s income.

And of course, income is important. The fact that, as Findlater says, there was a bit of money for a production, meant that he could go ahead and do these things. And it was the same for Wesker, Pinter and Osborne. You don’t have to be a Marxist to worry about money. We all worry about money. You can see that in fact the Royal Court Theatre was putting money into productions and I suspect, [as] Osborne was a great success, they had money and they put some of that money into drama [productions]. It is the same thing actually with Achebe. Achebe has probably made quite a lot of money from *Things Fall Apart*, which sold very, very widely. And the African Writers Series was able to use a lot of that money to promote other writers who had not sold so well, [or] who may have sold only five or ten copies. So there, the same kind of financial [assistance was available] you see.

Zodwa: *Would you explain to me a bit more about the reading that he was doing at the Royal Court? Was it something like reading in character, reading a character’s lines in a play or ....*

Gibbs: Oh, no! No!

Zodwa: *Or perhaps it was more in the line of editing and evaluation of ...?*

Gibbs: Evaluation it was! You see, Devine had set up the Royal Court as a writers’ workshop. So he invited scripts; particularly after the success of *Look Back in Anger*. This I suspect influenced Soyinka, he felt that the theatre is a forum for which to write. So he sent in a lot of scripts. Initially, John Arden was working at various [technical fault] at the moment it’s a bit vague, I can’t remember ... there are discrepancies. But lots of scripts were coming in, they needed somebody to look through and
decide if there was any good in them [or not]. Soyinka sent in *The Lion and the Jewel* and Ann Piper said 'this is very good'. They considered producing it but -- I can imagine them trying to produce it with the actors they had -- they did not have the actors. Soyinka also went to William Wanamaker -- he is the man, now dead -- whose dream it was to rebuild the Globe Theatre on the south bank.

**Zodwa:** Actually I have seen the rebuilt Globe Theatre

**Gibbs:** You have? How is it? How did you get there?

**Zodwa:** A friend of mine, my high school English teacher took me there. It is alluring! The reconstruction is not quite complete but you get the feel of it all, without doubt -- the three tier-gallery, the juving stage and so forth. I was quite thrilled by it all.

**Gibbs:** Good! Well, William[Wanamaker]'s daughter is still alive. They [Soyinka and Wanamaker] corresponded and he describes how excited Soyinka was by the news of the reception of his play. And Soyinka describes some of these interactions [in *Ibadan*]. He got together a group of his friends, they met in one another's flats, they gave a reading of some of his play in the process of the discussions with -- it got clearer that these [Royal Court] people were not able to help actualise Soyinka's dream; so there was no question of putting on *The Lion and the Jewel* in 1958 or 59. It was only until in 1965 that the Royal Court brought together a more suitable cast to stage *The Lion and the Jewel*.

**Zodwa:** But I believe it had been written much earlier than 1965?

**Gibbs:** Oh yes! Oh yes! This was the play that had opened the doors to the world [for Soyinka] and one of the few plays that, having been sent in to the Royal Court, somebody said 'this is very good'. Most of the time you see, plays were said to be bad and Soyinka has been interviewed about this and he says most of them were often very tedious, very similar plays about the kitchen sink dramas, in the Wesker mode. All right, in different ways the dramatists addressed the theme of ....

**Zodwa:** The dramatists have addressed the theme of the unacceptable "now" in different ways. Soyinka for one, has asserted African nationalism by excavating a pre-colonial cultural past as the basis for purging the society of the evils of cultural imperialism. Would you say that Wesker's more narrowly focussed premise (setting and characters) is a microscopic approach to the same end, that is, the exorcism of society's ills from the past?

**Gibbs:** African nationalism? I would rather say pan-Africanism -- wouldn't you?
Zodwa: Well, do you mean like writing about the goodness there is in the African?

Gibbs: Although he would never allow you say “the goodness there is” because there is badness as well, there is humanity, in other words. Well, even though certain negritudists would go around asserting [the African goodness] -- but he says, “we are! We are in all our complexities! We don’t need to assert anything”. It’s only those people who ... the deracinated? Frenchmen who say, “I’m proud I’m African!” He has always tried to be comfortable with himself. So, of nationalism -- I would say that is a tricky one. But he does go back to assert certain values that he describes as African. But you ought to look critically at those because, quite often, they are [more] Yoruba, than African. They are not shared by the (inaudible) in Ghana or the Yeols in Kenya or Zulus in South Africa.

In a way, this is a very interesting one because you have [Leopold] Senghor for negritudism, Soyinka for anti-negritudism. In 1977 when they had Festac [a festival of arts and culture for the whole continent held in Zambia] -- this was the second celebration and of course Senghor was [also invited] this was the celebration of African neGritude. When it came to the selection [many questions were asked, such as] ‘Who should we allow in? How black do you have to be? Can you be Arab?’ And in fact, they sent Soyinka to Senegal as a special ‘ambassador’ to talk these things through. They met as artists and intellectuals, [they] came to some agreement. They respected one another even though they had differences. This is a fascinating topic, even though it is not necessarily very important to your thesis.

Eh-h- Wesker and Pinter -- oh no! You don’t want to ask me about Wesker!

Zodwa: Well—eh — O.K. But I merely wanted to ask your opinion on the issue of how they deal with the “now” the sociopolitical situation around them. I know, for instance, that no two writers can address the same issue the same way.

Gibbs: I suppose if you talk about politics broadly, it would be fascinating. I think Pinter has become political. He is very concerned about censorship -- his play, Silence, is about Turkey. Wesker, obviously is political socialist. But I haven’t followed [his] recent works, have you?

Zodwa: What I have noticed is that all the three dramatists seem to have shifted [in mood] from their earlier stance. They all seem to have a political statement to make -- they seem to be more political than they perhaps were earlier.

Gibbs: Well except of course if you take, for instance, Eleven Men Dead at Hola
Campbell if you take *The Invention*. These were very political. [Tracing the level of mood change in Soyinka] is one of the things that are very difficult. You try to work out a certain scheme [without much success]. And then you discover that in 1959, Soyinka wrote a poem, damning the French for exploding a nuclear device in the Sahara, he was writing about racism in America and in Britain. And he would deny that.

... One of his poetic plays was conceived at about the same time. This was somewhere in 1957/58, he was writing apolitical poems as well as *The Lion and the Jewel*. And of course, *The Lion and the Jewel* does have political relevance to Nigerian independence. So, I wouldn’t like to give the impression that Soyinka is becoming more and more political. However, in his most recent works he obviously feels tremendous pressure to be topical. And [as it may be seen in] *Beatification of Area Boy* -- I don’t know if you have read that -- ?

Zodwa: *In fact, no. I only got a copy for myself in London the other day. I haven’t read it yet.*

Gibbs: It’s obviously part of his campaign against [President] Abucha. I will make available some of his earlier plays. Some of these earlier plays, like *The Night of the Hunted*, which was never published -- never even finished to his own satisfaction. Zodwa, it would be marvelous to go back to these. But I still feel *The Strong Breed* is his best play. I admire many of the others.

Zodwa: *I was struck by the manipulation of theme in a very recent work that came just before Beatification of Area Boy. When I look at From Zia With Love, it seems to me he was not done with the subject matter then he carried it over to The Scourge of the Hyacinth.*

Gibbs: Yes, yes. They are basically cousins aren’t they?

Zodwa: *Yes! Why does he not write one complete play and conclude the subject of interest instead of dragging it over to another play?*

Gibbs: I think circumstances dictate that. I don’t know if you’ve read *A Requiem for a Futurologist*. A lot of the things that you are complaining about [can be asked about this play and] *Die Snii Dr. Reverenda Godspew*, which was, if you like, a radio version of *A Requiem For a Futurologist*. I believe Soyinka is an oral performer. Hence he is aware that when you have a different audience you therefore need to vary the material slightly to [address the interests] say, of an oral audience. And so, every play exists in different forms as you well observe in *From Zia With Love* and The Scourge. As you can see, Soyinka is a very profound individual; there are many interesting subjects that can be pursued in connection with his writings and activities.

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Zodwa: That is quite correct. But for now, I think we can end here. Thank you very much for all that you have shared with me.

Gibbs: Thank you, too.

Appendix B3 Conducted in Monument Park Pretoria: Wednesday 23 September 1998.

Interviewer: Zodwa Motsa
Respondent: Alain Ricard

Accession Number still to be supplied by the University of South Africa Library.

Please note: Part of this interview has been edited to focus on the subject matter being discussed. This transcript will not always correspond to the details with the audiocassette.

Zodwa: Professor Ricard, thank you for granting me this interview again and not minding that you are doing it for the second time in three years. There are a few questions I would like to pose on Wole Soyinka. I know that you have done a lot of research on Wole Soyinka. What are your impressions of him as an artist?

Ricard: He is a very great artist and a great writer. And I think [that] is very important the drama is really-- is sort of making -- as he said to me once,-- [it is ] like a sculptor you see as you sculpt with human bodies and words. I think that he has a very wide artistic range of expression. And I have always very much liked his approach to drama because of his relationship to all the arts, that is very important.

Zodwa: I am aware that in his earlier plays, the young Soyinka’s interests were not on just local Nigerian issues but they covered a wide range—actually continental issues. Could this be something that was happening with all the writers at the time or it was something that was within Soyinka himself, to be worried about situations even beyond his own territory?

Ricard: There is something I wanted to talk to you about even before we started, concerning his earlier works -- the period you are interested in. [mechanical failure ...] I think because very little research has been done on that time, the end of the 1950s in England, the Angry Young Men. So, your topic in this sense is original and it is going to bring something new and the other thing, just to answer your question -- what has always
interested me has been the Soyinka as a Nigerian. Because I read Soyinka before going to Africa and so I found his books and I read them. I really liked his plays. I think they acted as a guide for me to go to Africa; [works] by a West African. I stayed in Togo for two years and quite often I would go to Nigeria. I went to Ibadan, that was in 1970, and on my way to Ibadan I would drive across the Benin border -- I drove across a town called Abeokuta which means standing under the rock. And Abeokuta always impressed me because it is a real town, an old town with lots of people, lots of houses sprawling around a big rock. It has a life as an old town, and you see the idea is that it is an old town dating back for over a century and a half to two centuries, may be. That was also very original. So, there is a town culture in Abeokuta, as well as in Ibadan.

Zodwa: Oh-oh?

Ricárd: And then I started reading human anthropology studies [where I found that] Yorubas are famous for having had a town culture. They lived in towns and I think the fact that Soyinka is from Abeokuta -- he is from Aké and Aké is a suburb of Abeokuta -- it is part of Abeokuta. We did a film with him in 1990. We started the film in Aké, in Abeokuta where he had his office and he had a house built in Abeokuta. Abeokuta is 100km from the border and 80km from Ibadan. So it was 180km to go across from the border near the sea [Abeokuta] then to Ibadan. There is a town not far from the coast where there has been a lot of exchange with people from all over Africa and with Europeans.

And it is in Abeokuta you know, that they started the first paper [newspaper] in Yoruba in 1957. So in this way, the people of Abeokuta are very cosmopolitan, in their own way -- [they are] literate, interested in politics, and very open towards the rest of the world. They are a very elite -- I don’t like the term -- they are the elite Yoruba intellectuals, a [community] that has its own intellectual milieu and political ambitions.

Zodwa: So it is not tribal in nature then?

Ricárd: Oh no! Not at all. It is not the world of the village, it’s not the world of the court like that of northern Nigeria. It is the world of the town, close to the sea with lots of influences from the missionaries, influences from the traders -- and all kinds of people come across to Abeokuta. So there are a lot of lines of communication in Abeokuta.

Zodwa: Quite amazing!

Ricárd: And then in 1990 -- it is very interesting -- I met him [Soyinka]. By the way, I met him I was with my wife actually, six months ago!

Zodwa: Ah! really?
Ricárd: Yes! In Paris! And my wife had never met him, so I introduced her to Soyinka—he was in Paris. And yes, I am very proud to tell you this—it was in December 1997—last December. This was the 50th anniversary of the genre Presence Africaine, and Soyinka stayed there for two days chairing the conference. I was supposed to speak about the Presence Africaine, and they gave [me] a written speech and I was so glad in fact. He was chairing the panel in French and I spoke in English. I spoke after this man -- Manu Dibango -- you know, this great man from Paris.

Any way, why was I talking about my pride in this ...? Oh yes! yes, he told me that he had started building this house in Abeokuta. ...

[The discussion has been abridged, it relates to the general culture of the Yoruba, dating back two centuries]

It is a Yoruba town -- the streets around the rock, the roads, the architecture -- it is really wonderful to see. You go to different areas and you get the quarters of the dyers, you get the quarters of the people who prepare different kinds of food, it is quite interesting. So there is certainly a town culture. And as I say, Abeokuta, Aké [being his mother’s side] has the distinction of being close to the sea, close to Ibadan, close to other countries [in the west]. I don’t know if this answers your question, but I want to say he has always been a man that lived in the centre of many different things, not in a village cut off from the rest of the world.

Zodwa: It certainly does answer my question. Actually this trend of our discussion suggests to me that perhaps we can talk a little more about Soyinka. I want to hear more about him, hence I will not follow this order of question on the paper.

Ricárd: Sure! Sure! Go ahead.

Zodwa: I want to hear more about his activities lately. You may know that I have been frantically trying to have an interview with him.

Ricárd: Yes, I’m aware, I understand your frustration.

Zodwa: I have spent a good part of the past three years trying to find Wole Soyinka. James Gibbs in Bristol gave me his son’s address in London. I did not feel at ease about approaching the son because I didn’t know how personal that contact address was. Furthermore, it was at a time when I was about to return to South Africa So I didn’t really get enough time to pursue that lead. Where is Wole Soyinka? Where can I get him? Is it feasible to try and contact him for an interview?

Ricárd: No! No! To be frank, I don’t really know [where he is]. I was surprised
that he was at this genre Presence Africaine anniversary. He had said he 
would be there, nobody was sure and there he was for two days. Nothing 
was certain, but he was there in UNESCO in Paris for all this time. So I 
didn’t ask his address (which I don’t have) But I know he is in America, 
at a university in Atlanta called Emory University. You know, I think 
someone who could help you is there in America -- mhm -- mhm --

Zodwa: Do you mean Abiola Irele?

Ricárd: Yes, Irele.

Zodwa: I am on e-mail contact with Abiola Irele and have had a very good 
session, talking to him. Do you think he can help?

Ricárd: He is a very nice person. He certainly would know Soyinka’s whereabouts 
because he is a good pal of his. And also you could try Biodun, Biodun 
Jeyifo.

Zodwa: Biodun Jeyifo? I have heard of the name? Where can I find him?

Ricárd: He teaches at Cornell [University] in America. He did a very good 
introduction to Art and Outrage -- the essays of Soyinka.

Zodwa: Oh, Art, Dialogue and Outrage.

Ricárd: That’s it! -- a very erudite introduction. Yes anyway, to answer your 
question, try Emory university -- sometimes UNESCO -- sometimes....

Zodwa: (Getting the joke) Sometimes he is here in Cape Town!

Ricárd: Right! He was here in this Durban thing organised by the French.

Zodwa: From your knowledge of Soyinka, do you think if I were to write him he 
would respond or it would be just a waste of time? There are some things 
I would have loved to discuss with him before my research is concluded.

Ricárd: I -- I -- tend to think ... You know I met him when I did not [expect] to 
meet him. When I did my book I did not want to ask questions. I met him 
randomly by chance so to speak. I met him through other channels. May 
be you are better off not meeting him. You will certainly meet him 
someday. I would say for now, do your thing, finish up your research, 
don’t think that he knows all the answers to your questions.

Zodwa: He may not!

Ricárd: No, he may not. Just think of him as an institution detached from what 
you are researching on.

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Zodwa: More like Shakespeare who lies quietly in his grave while research on him goes on?

Ricár: Right! More like Shakespeare. You cannot get Shakespeare anywhere. It is probably a better approach and in this sense you probably be able to establish a better rapport with him; when you meet to talk casually about questions that interest you, but on a different footing.

Zodwa: I agree.

Ricár: I think when you put yourself on the footing of asking questions about somebody, you sort of provoke a reaction.

Zodwa: I get your point.

Ricár: Ya! People tend to pull away and close up, you see. The relationship is sort of biased, it is too loaded if you are asking questions. If you ask me questions about him, it’s okay, but if you asked him questions about himself ah -- ah! My experience with him has been that he just doesn’t like that.

Zodwa: I see. And thank you for that.

Ricár: But I’m sure you will meet him. He will read your dissertation -- send him that -- and see what develops from there. You should meet him some day.

Zodwa: It is my dream.

Ricár: Ya -- ya. Some day it will happen; he is a very nice man. He is fine.

Zodwa: Thanks. Well, I just wanted to get your opinion on something. But if you feel you are not in a position to comment on it, that is fine with me. I want to know more about the period Wole Soyinka spent with George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre. After he left Leeds -- the academic world -- he went to London to pursue what I call the practical aspects of drama. Do you have anything to say about that period, what was going on there, or you feel you are unable to comment so expertly?

Ricár: I feel I may not comment. The only thing I can say is that there is this Brechtian/Court influence. You see George Devine was a real great Brecht person. But that is about it. I really feel I may not say anything beyond that.

Zodwa: There is another period which I would like to hear about, but it is not in England. It is back in Nigeria. After the Nigerian independence, Soyinka wrote a lot of revues and sketches. When I go through that material I feel he was not at his best as an artist. I am referring to such works as
Before the Blackout. *It seems to me he was very eager to put across a theme and he forgot about some of the theatrical attributes that embellish a work of art. So, when I compare some of these works with, say, The Lion and the Jewel, The Lion and the Jewel comes out a jewel, for instance – excuse the pun. What I want to ask is, should political demands justify artistic negligence, because I think that is what is happening in this case?*

Ricárd: No they shouldn’t of course. Ya I agree with you about the revues of Mr Soyinka. I – I was never really interested by those. But I think what he was doing there was to rally up people, round them up for a specific immediate cause.

Zodwa: *Did he succeed in doing that and how were these revues received by the public?*

Ricárd: I don’t know. What fascinated me was that he created groups—he created theatre groups; so there was a lot of activity and he has always been involved in that kind of thing — what you may call guerilla theatre.

Zodwa: *Guerilla theatre? That’s an interesting concept.*

Ricárd: But I’m really not very familiar with those years. As I said, I’d rather learn from you — what you think of these revues? Do you think they are too fierce, political pieces?

Zodwa: *Well, to me they appear too didactic, too blatant.*

Ricárd: I’m glad you are telling me this because I read them after I had done my first work on Soyinka. I admit I wasn’t very impressed by these works, to be frank.

Zodwa: *The thing is I’m trying to focus on his minor works*

Ricárd: Well, I think that is very important, I think it’s important. But you say when you compare these with *The Lion and the Jewel* you ..., you...

Zodwa: *You can’t really think they come from the same writer.*

Ricárd: Exactly! Ya!

Zodwa: *When you look at his drama, what are the most outstanding theatrical techniques? Do you really deal with drama? I think you deal with more than just drama per se in your research on Soyinka.*

Ricárd: You know, to tell you a story, I wrote this book on him many years ago without ever seeing one play. I had never seen anything of Soyinka’s.
And to date, I have seen only two plays.

Zodwa: *On stage you mean?*

Ricárd: On stage. I have seen *Death and the King’s Horseman* in Lagos, and I have seen *Brother Jeru, The Trials of Brother Jeru*.

Zodwa: *Wow! That must have been hilarious!*

Ricárd: Indeed. Look, I have seen just the two so far, and that is not much. Have you seen any production, yourself?

Zodwa: *I have seen performances of The Lion and the Jewel and The Road.*

Ricárd: I see. Well, in all these, what has impressed me is the use of language. I think it is wonderful! I think Soyinka showed the capacity to handle different repertoires -- the creativity and inventfulness -- that was absolutely amazing.

Zodwa: *I agree with you because, when I read the reviews even from as early as the late 1950s in England, theatre reviewers remark about his mastery of language.*

Ricárd: That is true— even the capacity to move from one register to another and— and -- write so realistically in each. That is what Femi [Ososifan] says. He says he [Soyinka] has invented a kind of theatrical language. A kind of theatre speech that seems to be modelled on Yoruba speech [idiom] and yet it is English. And he composes -- Femi says -- he has composed a lot of songs in Yoruba for his own plays. So in that sense, he is also a Yoruba composer, which I think is an important element -- the element of composing in his own language. I think it’s a remarkable capacity to mix these things and create something. *Brother Jeru*, in this regard is very hilarious. When you see the various registers: the Bible, as well as the street as well as traditional Yoruba and pidgin English. This capacity! I cannot think of any writer who is so versatile and so capable of these changes of register.

In this country, he reminds me of Fugard. Fugard is a remarkable writer, as you know. There is something of this nature too in him -- this change of register. But Fugard has a touch of lightness about him, -- except in his last play. I don’t know if you have read it yet -- *The Captain’s Tiger?* But it’s true what they say; I think it’s Biodun Jeyifo who says Fugard, Soyinka and -- the other one is a Tanzania guy, I wrote a book on him -- Ibrahim Hussein! It’s true that they have a capacity to switch registers. But I think Soyinka is by far the best. It is an incredible range! That is the dramatic technique I see. And I think it is wonderful; it has a veneer of so many different layers.

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Zodwa: I see. In our first interview few years ago, you mentioned that there is some kind of Irish influence on Wole Soyinka -- that you perceived certain similarities between his drama and Irish drama -- if I remember well. Would you kindly expand on that?

Ricárd: Yes. Again going back to my meeting with Soyinka as a “book” and not as a person, I enjoyed reading his drama -- for some strange reason, and I was a great -- heavy reader of drama then, if I may say so. I was reading [Federico] García Lorca the Spanish [playwright] for instance, reading Brecht and [others]. You know reading Brecht and Chekhov was a lot easier. That was the time I read Synge -- the first play by Synge. And I was struck -- eh -- that was some thirty ago -- reading Soyinka for the first time. Remember that I did not know English that well. So I came to America, I learnt it [English] while reading his drama. So I read Soyinka and I had read Synge before. I was really struck by [Soyinka’s] use of the universe, the creation, poetry and myths -- all these were fused together.

The universe, you see, in the European dramatic tradition-- in French in fact-- you don’t have much of that. That is why it interested me. You see in contemporary French drama, very few people have written about villages, about myth and so forth. There is none of that. But then I was attracted by the Irish dramatists’ capacity for dialect, use of language, myths, village life -- the sheer capacity to create a very strong universe centred upon the village. That is where I love Lorca, the Spanish work and I felt Soyinka was exactly in that mould [sic].

So I am talking to you as someone who is in comparative literature. You also get Pirandello, an Italian dramatist. So these people have been able to write about village life, giving it a mythical dimension, a universal dimension. And in French, very few people have been able to do that. I came from that perspective when I noted the similarities.

Zodwa: I see. That dimension of the presentation of life is not strong in your literature?

Ricárd: Not at all; in fact in drama there are very very few writers who do that. So you see, that’s the thing that attracted me to Synge as well as to Soyinka -- in a very universalistic [comparative] perspective, you see.

Zodwa: I get your point. Before we close our discussion, I would like to ask one last question. I would like to know your views on the life of Wole Soyinka, particularly when you consider what he is doing now. Is he still writing or has he left the “stage” to go into politics full time? What do you think about the relationship between the writer as an individual, the gospel of commitment, I mean writing committed literature, and the state?
Ricárd: I think he is still writing. He recently published a play entitled -- I forget the title --

Zodwa: *Eh --The Area -- The Beatification of Area Boy or something like that.*

Ricárd: Yes, something like that! I think he is still writing but at the same time he is very much involved in Nigerian [mechanical fault] mobilising the world to boycott Nigerian oil. So he was making a lot of speeches on that recently. But my position is that he has always wanted to create some kind of a space within the state, within society for people to express themselves and speak freely. It's interesting that I asked him the very same questions you are asking me.

We were talking about politics and he said, "-- Ah politics -- I have too much of a hot temper. I cannot stand stupidity. So I cannot just pretend that something is not stupid when it is stupid." So he said, "Politics is not for me because I'm not that kind of a person." So I think he is trying to exercise -- a self-appointed ministry of freedom, freedom of speech, of thought and so forth. I think in that sense it is commitment to things that are not strictly political -- it is commitment -- to --

Zodwa: *To ideals, maybe?*

Ricárd: To ideals! In that I agree with you. I can see you noted my points about George Orwell. I can see that kind of intellectual ideal in them both. Well, I am not too familiar with British literature nor with British society, but I still think there is this left wing anarchist element in him, an anti-totalitarian stance. It is very individualistic but at the same time also marked by this need to organise movements but never to depend completely on them. That is where some people in Nigeria would complain about him -- that "Soyinka is a fantastic critic but he does not want to be put in a [political] party, he does not want to do any politics."

Zodwa: *And yet he doesn't see himself in those terms?*

Ricárd: No! But I think there is some kind of parallel with Orwell. Because he launched a struggle against a totalitarian state. And in Africa, some states have had totalitarian tendencies. He makes a very good case where he discusses the language of the state versus the language of the writer [*end of Side A*].

So the need for the language to retain its vitality, its dynamism and creativity -- not to degenerate to a point of the static organised idiom of the state, the writer, the poet has to take the side that advocates vibrant energy and life. There are things to be said, things to be defended. So you find that the writer is defending his autonomy, you see, autonomy and sometimes solidarity. He is not putting himself in an ivory tower to say,
“you are there, I am here and the rest of the world can crumble, it is none
of my business.”

Zodwa: Nor is he picking up a gun to go to the bush to fight.

Ricárd: No. He thinks that the best weapon to use is what he know how to do
[implicitly, the weapon of language]. So it is a difficult position
[balancing] autonomy [with] solidarity. And sometimes he has to be very
critical of the deadlock of language -- these empty political expressions.
Maybe people need that [critical perspective], maybe people should
change.

Zodwa: That is true. These are very interesting thoughts. I am just thinking
about his very active role as a writer, the period you are probably most
familiar with, the 1970s. Here he wrote some sketches again such as
Before the Blow Out, The Green Revolution and others. Do you recall
these?

Ricárd: I am not too sure I do. But continue.

Zodwa: These are not very major writings. I was just wondering if he was not
recapturing what he had done earlier because in the early 1960s, he
wrote sketches to address specific popular concerns and now in the
1970s, after his return from exile he did the same.

Ricárd: I think you are right. I agree with your view of recapturing something.
It could be that he was reviving his connections with a whole lot of sectors
-- the students, fellow academics and other followers -- not only an
audience or the theatre actors. He perhaps needed to reconnect with
people so that they may act -- creating a sense of purpose as a matter of
urgency -- for the struggle. He was perhaps not trying to hook himself
with an audience but practitioners, he was trying to be relevant.

Zodwa: I will reserve some of these questions because I ... .

Ricárd: No! No! You can go on. I may not answer all of them but I find the issues
you raise very fascinating. Go on.

Zodwa: I may? Thank you. I have this fixation when I look at his life in England,
especially works like Telephone Conversation, some prose works he wrote
there, one of his early plays and the like. It is a documented fact that
racism at the time was rife in England. When he took his very first play
to George Devine to put up, George Devine must have said it was fine,
it could be performed because it went through rehearsals and ultimately
production. But, the production was a flop, it was a fiasco ....

Ricárd: By -- by the way which one was it?
Zodwa: The Invention.

Ricárds: [It is] The Invention?

Zodwa: Yes. Incidentally, it is a story about apartheid in South Africa. It is a very interesting prophecy because it is set in 1976, which is the year there were decisive uprisings here in South Africa. But this [play] was futuristic because he wrote it way back in 1959.

Ricárds: And the prophecy is about ...? You will excuse me, I haven’t read it.

Zodwa: To me the story bears a very major prophecy because it is about a rocket from another continent hitting South Africa in 1976, some twenty years to come and disturbing the whole comfort zone of racism based on colour. And indeed, twenty years later, a major shake-up occurred in this country when black students rioted — there was an uprising and the country has never been the same. But my concern is that although the production may have failed because of a technical slip, George Devine never had the patience to put Soyinka up again. This, having seen the play, having had it go through rehearsals, having seen how controversial it could be in its forthright treatment of the theme of racism. I want to motivate the view that he was segregated against because there were many other young playwrights of British origin who were not such successes but George Devine nursed them and put them back on stage time and again, he helped them through until they were more established.

Ricárds: Mhm?

Zodwa: My argument is that he was segregated against; that is probably why there is very little research in that period.

Ricárds: But -- but on the other hand -- all right, I see what you mean. But I think you could take [another] other view in the sense that if you were in George Devine’s place; you are in 1959, Nigeria is going to be independent [soon] so the best thing for George Devine to do is perhaps to push Soyinka back to Nigeria. Because maybe the problem was that he saw that he [Soyinka] had invented a dramatic language that was really rooted in Africa.

Maybe there was an element of that, they [the British] couldn’t make use of ....

Zodwa: Or perhaps his drama didn’t make much sense to the British of the time?

Ricárds: Or actually, I'm trying to say in The Lion and the Jewel he tries to create a dramatic idiom that has the Nigerian song and dance and so forth; there is some morphological invention. So I think that probably that is where

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his strength lies -- the song, dance, and language. So I really don't know, that is one idle thought just trying to put up myself in George Devine's position.

Zodwa: That is fine by me; I am really glad to hear that view to counterbalance my own. I am certainly glad to hear.

Ricárd: But it's still a viable argument that if there was racism -- fine, state it! But he [Devine] might have said -- "... but you have created a [different] dramatic idiom. So go back to Nigeria ..." I don't know. Whereas in trying to succeed on another ground in London was not quite sensible -- maybe the best place to succeed was ...

Zodwa: ... back home.

Ricárd: That is why I would be more [circumspect]. Because sometimes you cannot make the assumption that success means succeeding in London. Maybe Devine felt it was best to decolonise him -- to say, "Listen, what you are doing is fine, but why don't you ..."

Zodwa: Go home! (general laughter).

Ricárd: So you see because I've often had to care for students from Africa, African student trying to succeed on French terms. And I don't think that's the best way. I always say don't succeed in French terms, but succeed on your own terms and then be recognised afterwards. Don't be obsessed with succeeding in foreign terms.

Zodwa: Yes. I see your point.

Ricárd: Because then it is like putting yourself in a very ambiguous colonial position -- and then it will take a lot from you to get rid of that. Then it might generate some kind of bad feelings, resentment and the like. But of course there is a great literary existential team and some people have the potential and capacity to -- to -- that is certainly the case with Soyinka -- and Kabuka, a playwright friend of mine from Togo, from Africa --. They have the potential to make great [reviews] of what they are. "So, go back to your culture and make the best of yourself instead of trying to stay in a big city, in London or Paris or in New York."

Zodwa: I see. It would kind of reverse the whole colonial--I mean the end of colonialism if he had to stay on and become a small British man.

Ricárd: Exactly! But, on the other hand, there were lots of people who couldn't go. There were a lot of South Africans who could not go back to Africa; but at least he could do better in Nigeria, so he had to ...
Zodwa:  ... go back home!

Ricárd:  And especially because -- I say this because in the European left circles it is an issue, especially in France today, they think that there is a sacred right for every African to go and live in France -- a thing with which I totally disagree. They make it as if it is the greatest thing that could happen to an African.

Zodwa:  Quite pathetic!

Ricárd:  I -- I think it's not a progressive position to take.

Zodwa:  Not at all! It is very patronising.

Ricárd:  I think it is not politically correct to say what I'm saying, but you see -- but people in France may not agree with me. They may say, "Why do you want to send them back to Africa?" But in the case of young people with talent, you want them to grow and bring a lot to their own society, and not stay and try to succeed with an anti-apartheid play in London in 1959 (laughter) -- there were enough South African exiles already [in London at the time], why take the Nigerians as well? (general laughter).

Zodwa:  Well, that is a very different view and I really appreciate your input because it is good to hear as many views as I can get.

Ricárd:  Well, it's just an angle -- looking at the same thing from another angle.

Zodwa:  Yes, yes. I need those angles because it is very easy to be swallowed up with mine and that is not good for this kind of research.

Ricárd:  It is also because your analysis is placed in the context of North, South, Black, White. But sometimes you can also look at the same thing in terms of Africa, African culture and so forth.

Zodwa:  And perhaps in terms of the ideals of the Commonwealth.

Ricárd:  True. And sometimes what may seem progressive at a certain time may not be so progressive at another time.

Zodwa:  All right. Quite true.

Ricárd:  And things are changing. You see, the angles don't stay static.

Zodwa:  Very true. Well, I -- I have exhausted all the points I thought I would discuss with you; -- not unless you've got anything to add.

Ricárd:  No! Not specifically. Except that, for me it's been a very interesting
discussion because I think that a writer’s work is about [different] readings. I think it’s interesting what you have said about *The Invention* and I think it’s important to have [varied] interpretations of a piece of work — your reading here as a Swazi scholar and mine there as French — I think it is quite interesting. I was interested by all these angles.

Zodwa: Well, it was a great pleasure for me to be able to speak to you once again, and thank you so much for everything.

Ricard: My pleasure! And good luck!

Interviewer:  Zodwa Motsa  
Respondent:  Lionel Ngakane

Accession Number still to be supplied by the University of South Africa Library.

Zodwa:  Dr. Ngakane, I am grateful to you for agreeing to talk with me about Wole Soyinka. My interest is in this writer's activities in London in the late 1950s to mid-1960s. I am aware that you featured as Baroka in the Royal Court production of The Lion and the Jewel. Was this the first play in which you worked with Wole Soyinka?

Ngakane:  The Lion and the Jewel was the only play by Wole Soyinka which I participated in. In fact, I was a late replacement for the lead role of [the] Baroka.

Zodwa:  What was it like to work with Wole Soyinka — as a person and director?

Ngakane:  The play was not directed by Wole Soyinka but he was on hand throughout the rehearsals. He worked closely with the director. I was fortunate to have him as a close friend, making it easy to discuss with him the finer points of the character of [the] Baroka. It was not easy for someone from South Africa to understand the culture and language of a section of Nigerian society. It was very helpful to have this friendship but that did not interfere with the work at hand.

Zodwa:  What was life like for all of you in England at the time? Were there any glaring instances of racism within the Royal Court theatre itself?

Ngakane:  One has to understand that there were not many productions in theatre, films, and television that had roles for Black actors and actresses, thus it was not simple for them to maintain themselves and improve themselves as artists. Regarding racism at the Royal Court Theatre, one could not accuse the theatre. There may have been individuals who had never been exposed to working with Blacks, but they soon had to learn.

Zodwa:  In my reading on the playwrights at the Royal Court I have found one thing that has always struck me as peculiar. Most of the playwrights are not keen to be perceived as a group of people that had any strong bond or warm relationship. I am referring to comments that have been made by writers like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker in different interviews. Would you say that these sentiments reflect the true atmosphere there at the time that is, no strong cords but each person lived for himself? Or a totally different culture existed among the Africans?
Ngakane: To be a playwright, one is obviously living a solitary life, a life of ideas, of one’s philosophy, one’s vision of life. Thus no two writers can collaborate. They may have the same philosophies, but the presentations of these philosophies can never be the same. The same applies to African writers, they may have the same goals, but their history and their culture will compel them to take different routes to reach the same goal.

Zodwa: When I consider the failed production of The Invention in 1959, the suspicion that Wole Soyinka was a victim of racism cannot leave my mind. Your comments?

Ngakane: The failure of the production of The Invention could be due to several reasons. First, the play was [probably] not suitable for the Royal Court Theatre at the time, the subject and the setting. Second, there was no director at the Court who had any empathy with the play. Finally, perhaps the play was not considered good enough.

When one considers the year 1959, one has to think about black playwrights at the time, they had to struggle to get the recognition they deserved in what was still a hostile environment, not only for writers but for the black population of Britain.

Zodwa: Some hold the view that Soyinka’s The Invention and the other two plays (The Lion and the Jewel and The Swamp Dwellers) could not be staged at The Royal Court in the late 1950s because they were artistically inferior — not good enough for an English audience. What are your impressions of the skill and workmanship in Soyinka’s plays?

Ngakane: 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. It was when African literature began to be exposed to a wider audience that drama also began to get a limited British audience. The question is, does Africa drama have to follow the traditional English drama, or [must it] introduce and support its creativity? I support 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 story telling, with a sting.

Zodwa: What would you identify as the most memorable effect of the Royal Court Theatre on people like yourself, Wole Soyinka and other non-British artists who interacted with George Devine or his successor?
Ngakane: The most memorable effect on the Black actors and actresses who have had the privilege of working in theatres such as the Royal Court is the realisation that the quality of one’s work is what matters more than the skin colour. What seems to be needed in the theatre is the training of black artists and writers, and the creation of a black theatre.

Zodwa: You received very warm praises from the English media for your acting abilities in The Lion and the Jewel. How did you perceive these reviews? Did you perhaps find them sincere or patronising? And would you tell me more about the relationship between the British media of the time and the theatre, especially the foreign actors like yourself and others.

Ngakane: The praises one received from the English media were most flattering, but one realised that one was merely at the start of a long haul. Fortunately for me, I had other ambitions and acting was merely one of the ingredients that were essential for me to achieve what I really wanted, being a film director.

Zodwa: I am aware that some members of the African fraternity living abroad perceived themselves as a unit, such that people like Wole Soyinka had no problem fighting against the malady of apartheid in South Africa, despite that they came from another part of the continent. Was this the general spirit amongst yourselves or it was just peculiar to Wole Soyinka?

Ngakane: Apartheid was a curse to black people, especially to black people living in Europe. What was happening in South Africa could be seen happening on a smaller scale in Europe, hence the strong anti-apartheid stance of people like Wole. This battle against apartheid was part of the greater battle against racism internationally.

Zodwa: Do you suppose there is still room for African drama in English to be staged in a non-African cultural setting like the English speaking world?

Ngakane: There seems to be no reason why African drama should not be staged in all English speaking countries and other countries where African works can be translated. It is through our works -- literature, art, drama, and music -- that we can all begin to understand one another.

Zodwa: Are you still involved in acting and what advice would you give to young theatre enthusiasts?

Ngakane: As I mentioned before, I never intended to be an actor, but I had to try and understand acting and other facets of the creative world to be able to produce films. To the young theatre enthusiasts, your support of the artists is most important, and the theatre is an important window to look at life.