

The Stage as Pulpit; Contemporary Practice of Theatre for Religion in Kenya

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Abstract : Theatre and religion have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship from time immemorial, each transforming in different epochs and into different forms of practice but gaining from each other's growth. Despite the fact that religion has more or less looked at the theatre and its dramatic rituals with distaste, the two human engagements have had dynamic and reciprocal relationships. In Kenya, there is an emerging innovation and transformation of theatre for religion in which churches and sects are consciously developing a youth wing that is vibrant in theatre practice. The imagination that youth and children derive pleasure and vibrancy in theatre has led to a lively competition among churches that is now creating a new form of theatre in Kenya. This has given rise to a practice in which art engages the religious not at the spiritual level but at the social-cultural level. Thus theatre is finding itself in sanctums that it had been banished; not for its own sake but as a tool for keeping the youth nearer the church if not the church. This article analyses findings of a study carried out in December of 2017 among theatre festivals for the Catholic Church held in Kitui School, Kitui County, and the Methodist Church of Kenya festival held in Ntemwene Church, Nkubu, Meru County, Kenya. One of the findings of interest was that while they were not theatres of religion nor religious theatres since they did not fuse the religious rituals with the dramatic rituals, the festivals never the less qualify as theatres for religion for they link the former to the latter. Secondly, while they claimed to be youth or children theatre festivals, they lacked youth-centredness nor child-centredness associated with such. Thirdly and most importantly the style of dramatic execution ranged from bibliodramatic to secular drama with Christian messages. Fourthly, by this stroke of acceptance in formerly forbidden sanctums, theatre is re-inventing itself back to its 'old' nature and function. It may be argued conclusively that this sprouting movement of theatre for religion may be comparable to the Jesuit Theatre fronted by Ignatius Loyola but clothed in modern African theatre practice.

Keywords : theatre, religion, theatre for religion, social constructs, socio-cultural

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