Robert Serumaga and the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre (1968-1978)

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Activism and Innovation

By

George Bwanika Seremba

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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To my grandmother Sasira Naava, Nabakungulu
and my great Uncle: Bro. Stephen Bwanika.
To you, who took your leave and now rest among the ancestors; it is to you both, that the earlier dissertation is dedicated and so, too, is this book, with profound gratitude.

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Front cover: Charles Godfrey Buyondo in a scene from *Amayirikiti*/ *The Flame Tree*, there are also two bodies of victims of wanton murder on the stage. The clearly visible one is: Agnes Sabune (downstage of the other actor). The image, like the others from the same play, was from the production at the Mickery Theatre (Amsterdam), in 1974. Courtesy of Charles Godfrey Buyondo and Stephen Lwanga-Kabuubi.

Back cover: author's image, courtesy of Kathleen Lantos Photography.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Actor, playwright and scholar: George Bwanika Seremba was born in Uganda. It is there that he went to school all the way through Makerere University Kampala where he earned his primary degree. In December 1980, having barely survived a botched execution at the hands of the Military Intelligence he eventually fled into forced exile in neighbouring Kenya, before resettling in Canada (1983). He has performed in numerous plays, including his own *Come Good Rain* for which he won a *Dora Award* for the (O*utstanding New Play*: 1993). He was also nominated for the Irish Times' *Best Actor* award in Dublin's Calypso Theatre's production of Athol Fugard's *"Master Harold" ... and the boys*. He has at the same time performed in several movies as well as television.

Seremba holds an MPhil and a PhD in Theatre Studies from Trinity College Dublin. This monograph, indeed, began its life as his PhD thesis. His own plays include *Secrets of the Savannah* (2007), a radio play he wrote for Irish Radio (R.T.E) and *Mama's George* (2008), as well as a longer play: *Napoleon of the Nile*. *Come Good Rain* is his second full-length play, and certainly most successful, to date. It has, in fact, been produced and performed by the author in Canada, the USA, the UK, Israel, Ireland, and most recently the German cities of Stuttgart as well as Leipzig. At the last count he had performed it over 300 times since the earliest performances in Toronto many years ago. It is the same play at the core of the two completed volumes that make up his memoir: *Wanton Boys* and *The Sunbird Sings Again*.

Seremba has lectured in the U.K. and Ireland. He has been a visiting scholar and also held the IWP fellowship (2013-2015) at Brown University in Providence (RI). He also served as an Assistant Professor at Case Western Reserve, Cleveland (Ohio). He continues to lecture, particularly in Germany. His essay "Myth, Mythopoeia and Robert Serumaga's *Majangwa"* was published in Afta's peer-reviewed journal: *APR* 9.2. (2017). He recently contributed a chapter: "The Emblematic Legacy of Robert Serumaga's Abafumi (Storytellers) Theatre Company," for an upcoming Routledge Handbook on Post-Colonial African Performance.

He has a number of other essays ready for publication as part of his next book; just two will be mentioned and they both began as conference presentations: "Censorship, Protest and Resistance; Signification as Sur-

vival in Uganda's Golden Age Theatre." (Paper presented as part of a panel at the ALA in 2021) and, "On Language, Writing and Exile: A Post-Colonial Perspective." He also continues to perform and write for the theatre.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project had crossed my mind as far back as the early 1990s and even before that. But probably never more so than in the period I just alluded to. Rather ill equipped in certain respects, at the time, I was, nevertheless, graced with what I presumed to be a rare opportunity and privilege of looking at a final draft of some material on Uganda's theatre. It was written for a professor at a University in North Toronto. On reading through the pages, I was instantly convinced I had missed something. There was absolutely no mention, whatsoever, of Robert Serumaga. I checked the empty tray of my fax machine then phoned the people who had sent me the material. I was wondering if they had skipped a page or two. There was a glaring omission in what they had sent me. They had omitted a man whose work and indelible contribution, which—if ignored, would render the Uganda section of that upcoming Routledge publication anaemic and suspect. Whatever this "tome" was, at that time it was presumably the first of its kind of source on African Theatre, past and contemporary. There were absolutely no missing pages, I was told. The gaping hole was now confirmed to be real. I expressly let them know that anyone familiar enough with the landscape of Uganda's theatre would have reacted the same way I had, regardless of the glittering list of experts at Makerere University who had put this all together. It seemed unethical to me, highly problematic, and far below the bar of intellectual rigour or even good faith. I was not only mystified and confounded by the grim discovery, but frankly saddened and rather irate. Thanks to my African God of serendipity, there was someone I knew who had actually just moved into the city. He had, indeed been one of the original group of 11 actors that Serumaga recruited for his acting academy and his Theatre Company, the Abafumi (Storytellers). He would certainly be a very valuable source. Serumaga had single handedly put Uganda on the Theatre map of the world on the strength of his play: *Majangwa*, but the work he subsequently did, together with the Abafumi Theatre Company is what, in many ways, earned Uganda an enviable place among the global theatre community of the day. I mentioned all that to the professor. I also made him aware of the fact that the actor I suggested to him had also kept significant archival material that covered the entire span of their beautifully peripatetic existence, just to validate or back up my assertion a little more. I then got on the phone and

explained to the actor what was at stake, and that he would be contacted in fairly short order. If the professor and his team had gone ahead, only with the pages I had characterised as incomplete, they would have done a gross disservice to plenty of people; to the theatre, their very own cause and, in a sense, perhaps even to the scholars'. Those who had co-authored the contribution had deleteriously left Serumaga out of an archival account of Uganda's theatre to which he rightly belonged; probably deeming him, in their redoubtable wisdom; to be irrelevant to a project of that magnitude. An intervention had been made, however miniscule. I was assured things would be rectified. I was also consoled by the fact that one of the contributors whose name I had seen on the list would never have deliberately left Serumaga out of the pioneering tome and resource. I was convinced she would in earnest have that sub-section ready on her own in just a matter of days. I tried to forget the episode, but it also started making me wonder about going back to school. That to me would be a fail-safe way of ensuring more comprehensive alternatives to counter anaemic accounts, such as this submission, and any other occlusions of individuals, plays, directors, actors, playwrights of notable distinction and magnitude; even those who might be far less sung or celebrated, but equally crucial players. Who would do that, and why?

A few years later, on a Saturday afternoon in Ireland, I would grab the book off the shelf in a bookshop across the street from Trinity College Dublin. I had one quick look at the section on Uganda's theatre and started smiling. For a moment, my mind flashed back to my apartment in Toronto and my fax machine, to the phone call I made and my small but fortuitous intervention. I flipped through the pages on Uganda and, "Lo —and behold," as the saying goes, I was looking at photographs that included Serumaga and the Abafumi, in an entire sub-section. One that thankfully got into the big book because someone thought it was worthwhile running —what was considered to be a final draft, by an African actor and playwright who made his home in Toronto, but also happened to have been born and bred in Uganda. Not all the credit for that intervention was mine, of course, but I was proud to have been a part of it. I paid for a copy of the book and kept the receipt. I was teaching an acting class and I desperately needed it for one of my courses. We were, among other things, adapting and making a play and were drawing largely from some of the pioneering work that Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company had done.

Yet more time passed. I was now a post-graduate student at Trinity College. I had been there long enough to earn myself an M. Phil degree in Irish Theatre and Film Studies. In the course of my work, I had, among other things, been immersed in a great deal of Critical Methodologies and

Cultural Theory, thanks in large part, to an array of distinguished scholars at the Samuel Beckett Centre (School of Drama) and the College at large. It is those men and women who had enabled me to get to the point of working, as I now was, towards another degree— the terminal one, as some call it. I recalled that earlier intervention. I was, in various respects, now on the verge of another one. This demanded a lot more than thumbing my way through a few pages of a section bound to be in a reference book and making a few phone calls to raise an alarm by alerting the editors about a crucial omission, then urging and convincing them to rectify the problem. But what had begun as a mild intervention had sparked a desire in me. That desire had finally gone beyond wishful thinking. Things were also far less nebulous, having had the opportunity to do more analytical thinking and acquire more critical tools. The time has finally come, to get things done.

I am preparing to write a PhD dissertation on Serumaga's work. I feel elated but, depending on the day, I am sometimes unnerved and assailed with doubts about the daunting task. That fortuitous intervention may have receded into memory but I could not quite erase it. The time has come to find out more facts behind that glaring omission. Who would have been behind it, and why? A number of articles and books I have read, so far, have made me wonder even more whether that omission, just over a decade after Serumaga tragically passed away, was far more than a mere coincidence. There are also times when I wish that it was just a coincidence and there was absolutely nothing more to it. In a number of the few publications I have come across at this early stage, however, Serumaga seems to be mentioned mostly in parenthesis or just slightly more. Many of these African and Africanist scholars who mention or cite him tend to be on their way to presumably more lofty individuals and contributions to Uganda's theatre. This does not augur well in my opinion. Something has to be done before I wake up one day and find Serumaga's immense contribution as well as those of a number of his peers, reduced, not just to being mentioned in parentheses, but mere footnotes or traces that had left enough imprints but still teetering on the verge of disappearance. I also have a legitimate unease stemming from some of the scholars that seem to have paid any significant attention to Serumaga; they sometimes appear to be arguably read by the work. At the very least, someone ought to point that out. This has to change. But I still have reason to assume that there's obviously a lot more material that affirms his contributions as well those made by his peers. By affirmative critiques, I certainly do not mean I am looking for cheerleading, totemic praise-songs either, nor do I have any wish of turning this into an exercise in the hagiography of the man's body of work

or that of any of his illustrious contemporaries; in an age that appears to be worth celebrating in and of itself and, of which Serumaga was a vital part.

I have made a solemn commitment to delve as deeply as I can into Serumaga's work—warts and all. I just have to maintain a healthy distance, and then engage in the— sometimes, rather cold and clinical analysis. I suspect that in the process, I might also find an explanation that will help me understand what appears to be an indifference, marginalisation or even a kind of jaundice that may have led to that occlusion which so disturbed me back in the early 1990s. In a matter of weeks, I will be on my way to the University of Leeds. Trinity College certainly enjoys a first edition library in which there is much to be found. My needs from Leeds are more immediate; material largely embedded in certain texts, periodicals and journals— some of which have been out of print for quite a while—and were printed outside the UK or Ireland. Leeds is an iconic institution for many Africans in literature and the arts at large. Some of the biggest names in African literature/s did go to school there. I am thinking of Wole Soyinka, who attended Leeds as an undergraduate, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and even a former professor of mine at Makerere who, like Ngũgĩ went to Leeds as a graduate student. Once upon a certain time I had also seen myself doing graduate school there, but my path ended up being a different one, in part, because I was forced to flee and ended up in exile. Be that as it may, after my six weeks or so on the "hallowed" grounds of the University of Leeds, it is also my hope, that I will be able to look at certain people in the eye and declare that while I never was enrolled at Leeds, I did finally get there; spent enough time to pay the deserved homage and furthermore, actually did do some substantial research there.

In the afternoon, on the very day I arrived, I was able to get a quick tour of the famed campus. I also learned that I was there officially as a student, not a scholar. While I would be free to use the library, I would not enjoy any borrowing rights. This meant much longer hours at the library, but it was not about to dampen my enthusiasm. That is what photocopiers are for, I thought to myself. The shelves in the African literature section were certainly well-stocked, including play-texts, and a lot more of everything else I wanted. The Roberts library soon became more than a home to me. So, too, did the Stacks —deep in the bowels of the building —which I was to frequent just as much as the photocopiers and reading areas. My temporary residence was outside the metropolitan area and nestled somewhere in the green hills, the ridges and valleys that sometimes reminded me of Nunguni (Kilungu). That, being the name of the place, I had once taught and lived in Kenya; my first (professional) stop and also home as an exile. But as I went back and forth on the buses in Leeds I became increas-

ingly conscious of being in West Yorkshire. That meant something else had been conferred on me. I had also earned the right to say I was close to the birthplace of the famous Brontë sisters: Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. I wondered whether there would be as much interest in them among the Africans who treasured Leeds. It had also been my hope that during my time at Leeds, I would finally be able to frame the final question that my dissertation will subsequently attempt to address. That I did. It was one of a few eureka moments along what was going to be a much longer road. There were items which I already knew were just not available regardless of the bountiful library. Most of those I hoped to find in Uganda; at my *Alma mater*— Makerere, particularly in the Africana Section of the library. That would be a good few months further down the road, though. The plan was to return to Trinity. I needed to do some more work with all the material and, Makerere called for a number of other things to think through and prepare myself for.

Towards the end of my time as an undergraduate at Makerere—the period leading up to and through all my exams, was one in which — I was constantly on the run from sinister agents of the State. Amin had fallen in April 1979 but the euphoria that accompanied his political demise would be short lived. In just two months (plus some change), his successor was unceremoniously stripped of his office and forced back into exile. Uganda and even the campus were instantly changed. Makerere—a microcosm of the ever-fractious State in many ways— became extremely polarised. Though not necessarily by design, I ended up turning into one of the leading voices of dissent. I had stood up to be counted. Pretty early in the final term of my final year, the hunt was on, for me. I eluded the hounds, but as the exam season approached, the hunt had gathered far more momentum. I inevitably found myself with a relentless need for anonymity and cover; including many a night spent in safe-houses, away from the campus. I could not avoid the need for the library and that library did serve me well. It was one of the most ideal places to hide and also get my work done. The exams made it even more crowded. The vast majority of my fellow students were unaware of the strange, unannounced, regular, unsavoury elements that had stalked and forced me out of my residence in Lumumba Hall. In spite of the polarisation the student body had suffered, I had a feeling the not-so-secret police would be somewhat unnerved by arresting or abducting me in a setting and circumstances that would put their own safety at risk. I had outrun my destiny, but no one can do that forever. The worst was to unfold much later and my ordeal would begin at Makerere, where, I once thought I had outrun the hounds of the State. This story is well documented in a play that will be cited in the main text, so there is no

need to dwell much further on it. Suffice it to say that there was, therefore, an emotional angle to Makerere; in fact, more than that. I would be faced with vivid spine-chilling memories, long scrawled over my body and emblazoned by numerous scars; securely locked into the vaults of my psyche and embedded deep in the tissues of my muscle memory. It would call for a certain kind of discipline. The bulk of the 6 weeks I planned to spend in Uganda would be spent at Makerere. Thanks to my preparations, a few rituals and the grinding routine, I ended up being well able to handle it. It also helped that my father kindly dropped me off each morning and drove me back home at the end of the day.

Nairobi (Kenya), my first stop in exile many years ago, was to be the next destination. I only planned on spending a few days there, if all went well, and I suspected it would. Soon after my arrival, the very first person I met behind the reception desk of the Jomo Kenyatta Library, on the main campus of the University, had graduated quite recently from Leeds Metropolitan University; down the hill from the University of Leeds. Leeds was still quite fresh in my mind. I was looking for two journal articles and she directed me to a much smaller library, closer to the student-halls of residence. I also had planned to interview someone in African Studies. He was unavailable and I was frankly not that eager to meet him. I decided to just make do with his journal article. It was a Friday afternoon and I was flying out of Kenya on Monday. My next home for the coming week or so will be the new British library in London, just a very short walk from King's Cross Station. There is also a much smaller library further away, around Chalk Farm, I believe, which has a lot of newspapers from the entire Commonwealth on microfilm. I am sure I will get all the help I need to find it. I also need to pick up a number of articles on Serumaga and the Abafumi from the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden which will also give me a chance to check out the bookshop at the Africa Centre. One day soon, I can now say that with hardly any fear of jinxing myself; I will be back to Trinity College and my dear *auld* Dublin. One can plan, but then there is that thing called life —which can intrude in various ways. Life did intrude in a good way. I finally returned to Dublin but had to take the good part of a year off to perform on stage and also appear, for about 7 months, in a popular show on Irish Television. Regardless of all that I still felt that those intrusions, good or bad, would not deter me from the commitment. Either way there would be a dissertation— not just completed, but done, and also finally defended. I completed it in 2007; the defence was scheduled for early March 2008.

During my busy but short stay at Leeds I would not have had any inkling about this, but Martin Banham, an icon to many African and African-

ist scholars, and Professor *Emeritus* at Leeds, was to be my external Examiner. I could not have asked for a better one. In his lengthy academic career this humble, iconic figure had taught many that were to become luminaries in their own right. Among them was my former professor and good friend, the late Rose Mbowa. Incidentally, Banham also brought some sad news to my defence. Just before the formal procedure began he solemnly informed me of the loss— just two weeks before the event—of another good friend; playwright, academic, mentor and fellow exile: John Ruganda. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and said a brief heartfelt prayer on the news of the passing of the Chief, as he was popularly referred to by many in Nairobi. I had to save my grief for a more suitable time.

With the defence and official submission behind me it was time to look for a job. I did find one in Cleveland (Ohio) where I arrived quite early in January 2010. But life had intruded and in just two weeks I was calling on my ancestors and the Gods of Africa, desperately invoking them to help me cling to my dear life. Lengthy hospital-stays followed; including intense, touch-and-go–moments, during various spells in the Intensive care units (ICU's). After some time, I was able to function and for the most part get the work done. It would take 5 more years to really turn the decisive corner. That would happen at Brown University where I was also a patient at Rhode Island hospital. Whenever I had been able to, I had done some research during my time at Brown; where I was attached to the department of Literary Arts and for a brief spell, later, to Theatre and performance (TAPS). Most of my time was spent working on a memoir which would eventually turn into two volumes. There had been a sense of urgency —with my life hanging in the balance, particularly in Cleveland. I had taught, but there was neither time nor extra strength to do more. I had also been thinking about the dissertation as far back as Cleveland and my goal of turning it into a book. I took it so seriously that one of the first things I had done while in hospital in Cleveland was to ask a very good friend to accept that task if the intrusion ended in a full stop, to please help turn the dissertation into a book. While at Brown, my topmost priority was my memoir and a play. I was to devote myself to the book in 2015. I had gone through three major surgical operations and had really turned the proverbial corner.

I put a lengthy pause on any other writing until the book was completed. It is also during the same time that something I had not devoted as much thought to as I ought to have done began gnawing hard and take its toll on me. It was the exasperating search for a publisher. After my lengthy illness and lengthy stays in Cleveland and Rhode Island, I finally returned

to Canada. The search for a publisher was extremely far from a walk in the park. I suspect many post-colonial academics and writers in general can relate and certainly know the agonies, condescension, hypocrisy, double-standards and even the outright abuse that far too many encounter. On rare occasions, sometimes, multiple things can converge in one's favour. They nearly had for me, when— buoyed up by Banham's very favourable verdict on the dissertation, and that of my Internal Examiner; I printed and mailed a copy of the final dissertation to an Africanist scholar, editor and publisher somewhere in Europe. I phoned him two months later to follow-up. He informed me that he had read the first 90 pages. He began by telling me about my punctuation, which was clearly lacking, particularly in the first two chapters. He then told me he was willing to move to the book-phase. But I had to assure him I would purge the book of a number of lengthy passages about Uganda's Milton Obote, an authoritarian who steered Uganda's ship of the State on two different occasions. I have chosen to withhold names or provide any more specifics but that was to be the last time that gentleman and I spoke. We were, as the Americans would say—done. Behind his not-so-veiled command was something even more sinister than censorship. I had devoted myself to deconstructing Uganda's insidious nationstatism and its equally pernicious effects even on scholarship and performance analysis — Serumaga's work, included. I felt strangely sorry for that hyper-loyal Africanist, nationstatist cadre. Several years later, in the fall of 2015, I asked about him on the side-lines of a conference in Los Angeles. I suspected he would be around for that kind of gathering. It is then I learned about his passing. I did mutter the proverbial "RIP." I had never known the man, but applauded his contributions as an editor as well as a publisher. An offer that may come rather hastily is sometimes also pretty far from that proverbial walk in the park. Even if that Afrianist had still been "with us," I would never have reconsidered my decision to walk away, in spite of the agonies that I was about to endure in the process of getting this book published. I had returned to work on my memoir but kept on looking and contacting publishers in Canada and elsewhere. Late one night, I came across a review of a book by a Ugandan professor. It sounded like a good read. I wrote down the name of the publisher in the U.K. It probably says something that, after the initial back and forth with that publisher and sending them whatever they demanded, the acceptance email sadly ended up in my spam as opposed to the inbox, which meant yet another year of anxiety. Let me just say that I am truly and deeply grateful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing and in particular, to Adam Rummens.

Although this material has been reworked, adjusted and updated, wherever I felt the necessity to do so, this monograph certainly began as a PhD dissertation at Trinity College Dublin. It is an examination of the work of Robert Serumaga, one of Uganda's most notable playwrights, and, what I have designated as: the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre (1968-1978). The key issue is the question of individualism, including its extreme form — solipsism, on the one hand; and activism or a social conscience on the other. The monograph also examines the question of theatrical innovation in Serumaga's five official plays.

There are several other things worth noting. Not least, that this book is a substantial deconstruction of nationstatism; from its genesis, transplantation to Africa by the European colonial masters and its catastrophic failure in Africa's post-Independence era. The monograph also casts the same, unrelenting critical gaze on the ruling histories of Uganda, in general, as well as the historiography and performance analysis. Where and when they are verifiably lacking or do fall short, they are exposed as tainted, flawed and even mortally compromised by the ferocious post-independence nationstatism. A nationstatism that blinds some scholars and commentators to Obote's hegemony, the bloodletting, stark brutality and censorship— in their analyses of Serumaga's work. Those ailments and afflictions that first surfaced under Obote were to dramatically escalate during the subsequent tyranny of Idi Amin. In addressing the key issues stated heretofore, the book also diagnoses what amounts to a pathology of the post-colonial African State. This is a neurosis whose astronomical and prohibitive toll is mirrored in virtually all of Serumaga's work and that of most of his Golden Age peers; sometimes referred to as: the class of 1968.

Chapter 1 is a comprehensive introduction that begins with Serumaga, a figure whose life was brutally cut short in exile. It takes the reader all the way back to his formative years, his schooling —in southern Uganda, specifically, in the autonomous kingdom that was later turned into the province of Buganda. The biographical introduction continues through Serumaga's student years in Dublin; providing an opportunity for a rewarding glimpse into his multiple roles as an actor, playwright, director, as well as the theatrical innovator he was to become. The historical context against which his plays unfold is of equal importance. So, too, is his dramaturgy; one that increasingly demonstrates the wealthy, traditional heritage of his early years and indigenous culture, from which he and others had been alienated due to colonialism and Christianity. It is worth noting with regard to the plays and craftsmanship, that both are—at least in part—a result of the turbulent history of the traumatic and tragic post-Independence era. In particular, the battle of Mengo, the subsequent coup,

of May 1966; as well as the hegemony that was to characterise Obote's entire reign, followed by that of Idi Amin. It is that rampant inhumanity that Serumaga unequivocally responds to, depicts in several ways, indicts and condemns.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theatrical precursors and context in this post-colonial setting. A great deal of the chapter is about the theatre as a medium which was introduced as an alien, transplanted, Western cultural sign and the nature of its reception; one characterised by the struggle of the budding artists and playwrights, to turn it into something akin to their own. Through tapping into their cultural heritage/s; the alien and syncretic sign was incrementally and ultimately indigenised. The chapter also examines the notable role played by the Radio, which came to Uganda in 1954, in the planting of the seeds for the eventual popularisation of the theatre in general. The colonial department of Social Welfare, Makerere University, Makerere's Inter-Hall drama competition, the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre (MFTT), as well as the other predominantly multiracial and multicultural institutions and organisations that played significant roles in nurturing the sprouting seeds which would yield the spectacular bumper crop that was to be harvested in the fullness of time, are all accorded their due attention. There were, of course, many an illustrious individual in this process; individuals, who were fighting a lot more than an alien cultural sign. Among those whose roles cannot be overemphasised is Serumaga. It is he together with a number of other key individuals ─ who played significant roles in this painstaking and, as the book will show, agonising journey towards what was to eventually become: the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre.

Serumaga's work is approached in chronological order starting with the very first of his plays: *A Play*, in chapter 3. *A Play* may, perhaps, lag far behind some of the more accomplished and even lofty works that were to follow, but it is nevertheless, important. It provides a number of valuable clues and insights into his idiom, dramaturgy, and thematic concerns that also characterise his more accomplished plays.

Chapter 4 focuses on the second of those plays: *The Elephants*. In it, Serumaga graphically examines the wounds and ailments his country and the continent are plagued with. The relentless psychological toll of the post-Independence horrors takes centre stage as its effects are manifested and played out even among those that presumably escape or survive these largely intraterritorial horrors. Serumaga also makes incredible strides in his development as an artist as he grapples with his chosen medium, getting increasingly closer to mastering his craft. In this as well as the previous chapter, the question of individualism and solipsism, with activism on

the other side of the rhetorical coin, all remain just as central. So, too, is theatrical innovation.

There is also some time devoted to the unnecessarily binarised ways of reading which sprung up at the sister universities of Dar es Salaam and Nairobi; versus, what some could only see as the old or even— ancient, formalist, and much reviled English school at Makerere. Some readers may also garner a few more valuable insights into the general history of Uganda, some useful glimpses into the entire region, and the literary, theatrical and analytical history of the period. If I may say so, much of that literary and theatrical history can— by virtue of this pioneering book, now be found by making one, single stop.

Chapter 5 focuses on *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*. This is a fictional roadside duel between a husband (Majangwa) and wife (Nakirijja) team of real entertainers who once plied their ignoble trade along the streets of Kampala's townships. Their—once, noble art had long turned into pornography, but that, too, is no longer viable. They look back at their sordid past as they struggle to take stock, account and perhaps even find a way forward. The odds, particularly against the eponymous Majangwa, are virtually insurmountable. Much of the populace is itself mired in a similar place; wilting and waiting for some kind of hope and redemption under the scorching heat of dictatorship and inhumanity.

Deemed by many, to be the finest of Serumaga's scripted dramas; *Majangwa* is an extremely important and deservedly celebrated landmark in Serumaga's *oeuvre*. If *Majangwa* took Serumaga close to the top of the artistic mountain, it is the two subsequent, non-scripted dramas, which got him to the summit. This was, at least in part, due to his constant desire to experiment and innovate as well as indigenise. Serumaga was like a man possessed in his pursuit to indigenise and in some way own the syncretic medium he so loved; as he cried out against the multiple agonies inflicted on a hapless nation under the yoke of dictatorship. He was also not known to spend unnecessary time basking in the glory of achievements and triumphs, earned through distinct accomplishments, such as *Majangwa*, which actually turned out to be the last of his dialogic or scripted plays.

Chapter 6 tells more of Serumaga's story in terms of his vision, the relentless quest to indigenise his theatre as well as his pursuit and rationale for his own company and a professional one, too. This is also the story of Serumaga and his 1972 company the Abafumi (Storytellers) whom he recruited, trained and collaborated with as well as directed; in the making and realisation of his final two unscripted dramas, starting with *Renga Moi* (*The Red/Valiant Warrior*).

After months of study, research, experiment and immersion into the science of the art of acting; the first of Serumaga's largely unscripted, semiological dramas: *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*) opened in Kampala later the same year. They would continue to perform *Renga Moi*; enjoying phenomenal success on tour in Nairobi, Belgrade, Bogota, Frankfurt, Puerto Rico, Poland, France, Italy, and elsewhere. By 1974 the Abafumi added another play to their repertoire; the second of the two ritual dramas ─ *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*) which opened on the road. Rehearsed in Kampala but behind a thick veil of secrecy, in graphic and animated detail *Amayirikiti* was to give the audiences a rare view of the killing fields that Amin's genocidal rule had turned Uganda into. They had, understandably, given no public performances of *Amayirikiti* in Uganda.

The full story is told in the same chapter, of Serumaga and his company very reluctantly accepting to perform *Amayirikiti* back home in Kampala. The Abafumi were painfully aware of the calamity and tragedy that had befallen many of their fellow artists at the time. To them, this meant the regime had gotten too perilously close to decoding their own signification, too, however concealed and camouflaged. This would also turn out to be their final performance in Uganda. Within days of giving what was indeed, a command performance, they all fled to Kenya where yet more controversy awaited them.

The slow fade to black back in their homeland had really begun with the brutal murder of playwright Byron Kawadwa, followed by the murders of a number of other theatre-artists. Their hasty and timely exit from the country did save them. Their exile ensured them of their lives and safety, but not necessarily their livelihoods. The lights would fade out on the Abafumi as a company, not long after the curtain unceremoniously came down at home, on a period that would eventually be rightly regarded as the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre.

A theatre in which, for Serumaga and most of his peers, regardless of how much they all mined into their past and their heritage, the thematic concerns were contemporary, urgent, matter-of-life-and-death concerns. Those consternations and legitimate anxieties were, sadly, the rhythm of life through that entire decade. The result was an aesthetic steeped in camouflage, distancing, evasion, but also characterised by sharp, severe rebukes and critiques by the artists— to the extent one could continue to resist but also attempt to ensure one's survival. This in my view is and was clearly not the place for escapist indulgences, through exuberant declarations and affirmations of individualism or even its more extreme form— solipsism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a Nairobi hospital, in September 1980, Robert Serumaga's life came to an abrupt, brutal and tragic end. Serumaga had returned to Uganda in April 1979, as a member of both the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) and its military arm: the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). Serumaga had fought in the war against the genocidal dictator, Idi Amin. He was a Field Commander of the Uganda Nationalists Organization (UNO) forces. His was one of the groups, among those that started their early combat missions behind the lethal, enemy lines of Amin's military. Before that it was as an actor, director, and playwright that Serumaga had earned his reputation in Uganda and the rest of the world. Immediately after the liberation war, in April 1979, Serumaga served as a cabinet minister in the first post-Amin, provisional government, only to find himself forced to return into exile in Kenya, after the fall of Professor Yusufu Kironde Lule's short-lived interim government, in July of the same year. It is in Nairobi (Kenya), that Serumaga died a little more than a year after his second, and what was to become his final exile. Serumaga was a very popular and much-admired figure in and outside Uganda. His acting, directing and playwriting had indeed earned him an indelible reputation, not only in Uganda, but many other parts of the world, too. To those artistic achievements, add yet one more equally memorable distinction: his role as a freedom fighter and field Commander who had abandoned both the pen and the theatre for an AK47 rifle, to fight alongside his fellow Ugandan exiles and the Tanzanian Army in the liberation war that eventually freed Uganda from the genocidal nightmare of Amin's rule. It can be said without using any hyperbole that Serumaga's artistic and military credentials must have been a constant source of unease to many powerful individuals in Uganda, such as Cabinet Minister Paulo Muwanga and the army chief of staff, Brigadier David Oyite-Ojok; considered by many to have been Obote's right-hand man.

By September 1980, Obote, Uganda's former President had finally returned to Uganda after eight years of exile in Tanzania. Amin had been overthrown in the liberation war (1978-1979). In December 1980, Obote

was to win a gerrymandered and rigged election. Serumaga had known this only too well, and it was a major reason he opted to wage another liberation war. It was the gun that Obote and his cohorts would use to win a landslide at the ballot box, and it was only the gun that would dislodge them from office. It was the gun that would put an end to the hegemonic leadership that had afflicted Uganda virtually since its Independence in October 1962. That hegemony had begun with Obote, and no doubt, his return to Uganda in 1980, ensured it would continue with him. Forced into exile once again, Serumaga was determined to stop that hegemony, and this time, his contribution was to be even more all-consuming than in the earlier (1978-1979) liberation war.

But in September 1980 the life of this articulate, immensely gifted, popular, international figure, formidable and implacable foe of Obote and his supporters, had abruptly come to an end, in the very prime of his life. Whether or not, Obote or his key stalwarts in the Ugandan government had played a part in the events that led to Serumaga's brutal and premature death, we shall probably never know with absolute, evidential certainty. On the streets of Nairobi and even more so, back in Kampala it was alleged, and not without compelling reasons, that he had been poisoned. The official cause of death was an aneurysm. Through the next few days Serumaga's family, friends and a good number of Ugandan exiles, fellow artists, and some of the officers and men under his command at the time all gathered together at a house in the leafy Nairobi suburb of Kirichwa Gardens. In accordance with tradition, they had gathered to offer condolences, to mourn alongside the immediate family, to console them and to pay tribute to Serumaga and the cause he had lived and died for.

Back in the land of his birth many more Ugandans, particularly, those from Serumaga's home region of Buganda kept solitary vigil in the privacy of their homes, no doubt hoping, that those ideals for which he had lived and fought would sprout, flourish, and indeed become an inalienable feature of the political landscape of a free Uganda. In accordance with the customs of the land they would also have hoped and prayed that Serumaga's remains would one day be returned to the land of his forefathers. Only then could they properly and publicly mourn his tragic loss, salute the legendary artist and formidable freedom fighter and hope that his spirit would finally rest in peace.

But the artistic community, particularly within Ugandan theatre, had also suffered an equally grievous loss: a loss that would certainly be felt for years to come. Curiously and regrettably, Serumaga's full story has not been told, to date. However, some attention has been paid to his work. Scholars such as Margaret Macpherson, Rose Mbowa, Andrew Horn,

Joanna Kamanyi and a number of others, have written a foundational body of work. Kamanyi's contribution is primarily in her M.A. thesis. [1] A lot of what Rose Mbowa has written on Serumaga can be found in two more recent books, one devoted entirely to Uganda and the other to Africa at large. [2] These publications are crucial, but also long-overdue. So, too though, is a comprehensive study of all of Serumaga's drama and none has been published, thus far.

Over the years, both before and after his death, there has only been one published essay solely devoted to Serumaga. In the other cases, he is discussed as part of larger studies of East African/Ugandan theatre. Uganda's place and contribution in the annals of the world's theatre would have been substantially less and probably taken longer to be noticed, were it not for Serumaga. This should not in any way be read as diminishing the contributions of other Ugandan playwrights such as John Ruganda and Byron Kawadwa.[3] Kawadwa, Serumaga, Ruganda and a number of others wrote a lot of their plays around more or less the same time. But, particularly in terms of this period of study (1968-1978), it can be safely posited that it is Serumaga who almost single-handedly put Uganda on the theatrical map of the world. In his essay, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Robert Serumaga", the Africanist scholar and critic, Horn, makes more or less the same point. He starts by noting that among Serumaga's peers in the whole of East Africa, there is none more familiar to overseas audiences than Serumaga. "This is a result not only of his dedication to the theatre but of his extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, a commercial and publicity sense at least comparable to his acting, directorial and writing talents."[4] Horn singles Serumaga out, not just among Serumaga's fellow Ugandan playwrights, but also from the entire region of East Africa. Indeed, the praise seems to become more unequivocal as the essay progresses. The essay is by no means a paean to Serumaga. There are quite a number of issues about which one is bound to beg to differ with Horn. A key case in point is Horn's primary concern and hypothesis in relation to the key issue: "Individualism and Community", in Serumaga's work, for example. There are a number of other areas that may spark disagreement and they are not necessarily caused by "negative" views or critiques—certainly not in all the cases. Whether or not one agrees with Horn, his essay still provides the most extensive attempt made so far in the analysis of Serumaga's work. In a rather ironic way, there is a genuine but also strange indebtedness to it, an inevitable acknowledgement of a kind, but probably most of all, the essay helps in precipitating a need for the unfettered, deconstructive, postcolonial readings. There is also no doubt that more academic interest could definitely spawn more productions of Serumaga's plays.

Of those plays, Serumaga's *Majangwa: A Promise of Rains,* has continued to enjoy regular productions. Kenyan audiences, for example, have been accustomed to seeing remarkably regular productions of it. There was a lengthy ten-year gap in that history from 1994. In January 2004, the seasoned Kenyan director Tirus Gathwe directed a Gikuyu adaptation of *Majangwa*. Gathwe's production provides even more evidence of the popularity and enduring nature of a lot of Serumaga's work. But sad as it is to say this, Serumaga and his work could soon be reduced to little more than a footnote. The two books that were alluded to earlier and Horn's contributions may all be available, but the material itself is reprinted. Horn's essay, for instance, first appeared in *African Literature Today* in 1982.[5] And again, in a number of those sources, Serumaga is mentioned almost in parenthesis, the man and his work are acutely under-served, if not misrepresented. I should point out that in the years since the initial work on this book was done there has been some more academic interest in Serumaga's work. Samuel Kasule's 2013 book: *RESISTANCE AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY EAST AFRICAN THEATRE* does devote some space to Serumaga. It certainly is a more than welcome addition to the study of Uganda's theatre during the turbulent times Serumaga and his contemporaries endured, and even beyond. This is an important contribution to the theatrical and academic landscape in Uganda and, to an extent the entire East African region. Kasule has to be commended even for the large number of playwrights upon whose work he shares his insights. For his ideas on the performance space; which include the well-known enclosed and purpose-built venues, but also go well beyond those confines. The performance of authority and power, some of his theoretical sources and the comparative approach; and his readings of a great deal of the theatre he examines under the rubric of counter hegemony or resistance. This is a significant addition to the sources of further insights and knowledge on the post-colonial scene and beyond.[6] A scope of that breadth almost invariably leaves virtually no room for more depth with regard to, in this case, Serumaga and a number of other playwrights of the same magnitude. This is, of course, not meant as a critique of the author.

The world theatre community also needs to know Serumaga as an innovator who extended the possibilities and frontiers of performance. And one whose contribution and legacy encompasses theatre as an art, in general, and perhaps even more importantly, the theatre as a Postcolonial African aesthetic. Uganda itself needs to re-acquaint itself with the man and his work, if for no other reason because of the dire state some of its theatre has been in since, around 1978. The medium they may take for granted now had its pioneers, and, trying to find out what it is that still

makes their contributions relevant, may help the more recent practitioners to master their own craft.

The Early Years to School

Before going any further, one of my sources on Serumaga happens to be his son. They also happen to share more than two names. Since he is a very significant source, I need to make a distinction that will, I hope, help prevent an unnecessary murkiness in the citation. From here on in, Robert Serumaga (Jnr.) will be referred to as Kalundi. The citations will read: Kalundi R Serumaga. His father, Robert Serumaga, being the subject of the book will appear as he usually does: Serumaga, Robert. I should also point out that Kalundi was, for a number of years, the Artistic Director of the Uganda National Theatre in Kampala. He spent over 8 years in exile, mostly in the U.K. and finally returned to Uganda with an M.A. in Film Studies. I now wish to return to the subject of the book.

Robert (Bellamino) Kalundi Serumaga was born on the 6th of January, 1939, in what is generally known as Masaka or Buddu. Then as now, Masaka was part of the region of Buganda.[7] For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with this part of the world, *Buganda* is the region, and *Luganda* is the language spoken. The people are the *Baganda*, and the singular form for that is *Muganda*. Robert Serumaga was a Muganda. His father Thomas Kyakwambala Serumaga, was a Catholic by religious affiliation. So, too, was his mother: Geraldine Namatovu. His father is described by Serumaga's eldest son (Kalundi), as having been "an important County chief, […] for nearly a decade."[8] At the time of Serumaga's birth his father was in his sixties and anecdotal evidence from school friends of Serumaga's, suggests he had lost his sight by then. The parish priest of the area, who hailed from Italy, suggested that the new-born child be named after Roberto Bellarmine who was canonised into sainthood on 6th January, 1939, the day of Serumaga's birth; hence the name Robert and Bellamino. Kalundi was a name traditionally chosen after one of Serumaga's ancestors.

In his relatively brief, self-authored bio, as these things are referred to in the theatre (provided to me by Kalundi), it is noted that Robert Serumaga lost his father at the early age of four. It is also said in the two-page bio that soon after that, "he and his mother were forced to leave the dead father's home."[9] The newly widowed Geraldine together with her son left for her birthplace of Villa Maria in a different part of Masaka. It is to his mother, his maternal grandparents and presumably his mother's five sisters, (one of whom was a Nun) according to Kalundi; to whom he "attrib-

utes" a great deal of his success. Serumaga's father was, no doubt, a wealthy individual but his own part of the vast estate would not be given to him until the age of 18. Geraldine was a schoolteacher by profession and Serumaga notes she resumed her work to earn the money that would pay the young Serumaga's way through his school years.

From the tender age of four through virtually all his teenage years, "he learned how to live with next to nothing; what it meant to be hungry, deprived; and to find truth and love in languages beyond the material trappings of life."[10] One begins to have a sense that the tragedy, the wry humour, inhumanity, greed, loneliness and despair that would later emerge as recurring themes in Serumaga's work were not the result of an academic or passing knowledge; but rather, experienced first-hand by that fatherless child who was to "father" the man and the playwright he would eventually become.

Given the fact that this was a patriarchal society Kalundi also observes thus, about his father: "He was to have little real contact with his [paternal] side [of the family] until […] well into his late teens."[11] One presumes, too, that this would have been the same time that he received his share of his father's estate. The loss of the father, the absence of that part of the family in his most formative years after what looks like an acrimonious parting of ways, would all no doubt have exacerbated a palpable loneliness. Loneliness would become a key theme in Serumaga's work.

Perhaps, due to the presence of a nun among those who brought him up, after his primary school, Serumaga spent two years in a Seminary, only to reach the conclusion that he was not really cut out to be a member of the clergy. He subsequently went to St. Henry's College, Kitovu. On account of what he describes as a serial kind of incompatibility with school principals, Serumaga never did stay long enough at Kitovu. Kalundi sums it up in one word: "insubordination." He did, though, finally complete his secondary school at St. Mary's College, Kisubi, which, just like St. Henry's, was run by the Brothers of Christian Instruction. There then followed what is now known as a gap-year which he spent ferrying commuters as a "long distance" public-taxi (*matatu*) driver. In the meantime, Serumaga had also won a scholarship to study at Ireland's Trinity College, the University of Dublin, in 1959.

Over and above the scholarship Serumaga had also met his soon to be partner. Her name was Delphine Zinunula. She, too, was born and bred in Masaka, specifically in Kalisizo, relatively close to Serumaga's birthplace of Kabwoko. Her mother Sarah Ndagire was a much-loved matriarch who was quite well known in Kalisizo and even beyond— perhaps, just as much if not more than the Serumaga's. In fact, both families were among