

A man with a grey beard and a white cap, wearing a white and gold patterned robe, holds several red apples. He is surrounded by a dense background of red berries. Other people in traditional clothing are visible in the background.

DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

BY WOLE SOYINKA

DIRECTED BY MOJISOLA KAREEM

A UTOPIA THEATRE AND SHEFFIELD THEATRES PRODUCTION

LEARNING GUIDE

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MOJISOLA KAREEM

Director of *Death and the King's Horseman*

At Utopia Theatre, we aim to be the UK's leading voice and producer of African theatre. This production of *Death and the King's Horseman* embodies our commitment to showcasing innovative works that celebrate African culture and storytelling, and encourage authentic voices from the African diaspora.

By staging this play, we invest in artists from within the African community to develop their skills, gain valuable experience in a professional setting and empower them to share their unique stories.

Death and the King's Horseman contributes to a broader dialogue about African narratives, fostering a sense of community and connection that extends beyond the theatre walls.

We hope you enjoy the production.



THIS SYNOPSIS CONTAINS REFERENCE TO SUICIDE, VIOLENCE AND INJURY

The action takes place in the ancient Nigerian city of Oyo in 1944. The action takes place over a period of approximately seven hours.

The King of Oyo, also known as the Alafin, has died. It is thirty days since he died, and it is the appointed day of his burial. The King's Horseman, Elesin, walks through the streets with his drummers and his Praise Singer. As the role of the King's Horseman dictates, Elesin must complete the ritual of willed suicide so that the King can be successfully accompanied from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. It is vital that Elesin completes this ritual otherwise the relationship between the two worlds will fracture and chaos will ensue.

The marketplace is a busy and important location - it is where many important conversations and decisions take place. Elesin is well-liked there and he enjoys the attention of the women despite the warnings of his Praise-Singer to remember his duty. Elesin relates the story of the Not-I bird as a way of demonstrating that he is brave enough to face the duty he must complete. He demands new and beautiful clothes from the women of the market, and also sees a young, beautiful woman who he wants as his wife before he dies. Although the woman is already promised to the son of Iyaloja, the 'mother' of the market, Iyaloja agrees because of the great sacrifice Elesin will soon make.

Meanwhile, Simon Pilkings - the colonial District Officer - and his wife Jane are

preparing to attend a ball in fancy dress. They are wearing costumes called Egungun, which are masked costumes with ceremonial and spiritual importance to the Yoruba people. It is considered offensive and culturally insensitive for them to wear these masked costumes - they are appropriating a costume that they do not understand, but they are unable to appreciate why they are likely to cause offense. The native policeman Amusa arrives at the house and is horrified to see what they are wearing. He leaves as quickly as possible, after unsuccessfully asking them not to wear the clothing. He tries to explain what is happening with Elesin, but the Pilkings cannot understand his message, thinking only that a murder is going to take place. Joseph, their Christian servant, explains that Elesin must willingly die. The Pilkings are horrified and do not agree with this cultural event.



Pilkings realises that he has encountered Elesin before, and has been in conflict with him: Elesin's son Olunde wished to attend medical school in Britain and Pilkings helped him to do so, against Elesin's wishes. (Olunde should have inherited the role of King's Horseman from his father). Throughout the conversation, it is very clear that Simon and Jane have no understanding of the culture in which they are currently living, and have no desire to remedy that. As the sound of drumming grows louder and more intense, Simon sends a message to Amusa asking him to arrest Elesin and detain him, and insists that he and Jane will still go to the ball, particularly as the Prince (a member of the British royal family) will be in attendance as part of his tour of the colonies. The scene closes as they return to preparing for their evening's outing.

Meanwhile, back at the market, Amusa attempts to fulfil Pilkings' orders. The women taunt him for being controlled by a white man. Iyaloja enters and asks Amusa what right he has to interfere in the duties and ritual that they are trying to undertake. The women turn on Amusa and the officers who accompany him, snatching their batons and threatening violence against them. Iyaloja tries to keep the women calm as they continue to taunt him, but warns Amusa that he should leave. The women dance as he leaves, and Elesin appears carrying a white cloth bearing a blood stain as proof that his new bride is no longer a virgin. As he speaks, Elesin appears to fall into a trance and begins to dance. His Praise-Singer speaks to him, encouraging him into the trance. The drumming remains loud and insistent and signals that the horse and dog that belonged to the King



have been sacrificed. This means that the ritual of Elesin's own death is growing nearer.

The ball takes place at the Residency. All of the guests are wearing fancy dress and gradually they are introduced to the Prince. The Pilkings explain their costume to the Prince, who appears very interested. They are interrupted by the Resident who has received (and read) a note addressed to Pilkings. The note reports rioting in the market. Pilkings tries to explain what is happening but again, the conversation reveals ignorance rather than knowledge. Amusa and his officers arrive, and the Resident suggests that they have lost some of their attractive decorative uniform, which he assumes they would have liked wearing, demonstrating superficial priorities on the part of the Resident. Amusa is still reluctant to speak to Pilkings whilst he is wearing the Egungun, but follows after Simon who runs outside realising that it is midnight and therefore they may have failed to prevent the death, which was set to happen that day.

At the door of the Residence, a man appears: it is Olunde, Elesin's son. He is mildly critical of Jane's costume and mask, and comments that he understands that people like Pilkings (i.e. the British) have no respect for anything that is unfamiliar or different to their own culture. We are reminded that World War Two is still underway, but Jane feels only remotely aware of it, with little of the action reaching where they are. She reveals a very dismissive attitude to what is happening around her on a local and global scale.

Olunde explains that he had received a telegram several weeks prior, telling him that the King was dead. From this, Olunde realised that he would have to return home in order to bury his father because of the expected ritual. He explains that in trying to stop Elesin's death, Simon is preventing him from gaining the respect and honour that he should gain from fulfilling his duty. Jane tries to argue that the practice is barbaric but Olunde counters her claims by comparing her comments to the war that is taking place, and the destructive violence that is occurring across the world. He criticises colonial attitudes and the way in which the assembled guests are worshipping the Prince and dancing, apparently without a care in the world.

Olunde listens to the changing rhythm of the drums, which are still audible, and explains that they communicate the message that Elesin is dead. Jane breaks down and accuses Olunde of being savage, interpreting his attitude as a callous one. An Aide-de-camp tries to intervene, demanding Olunde tells him what's going on, but Jane eventually persuades him to

leave them alone. Olunde requests that Jane let him leave so that he can go and see his father's still-warm body (he was forbidden to see him just before he died, as per the ceremonial rules) and is keen to be with him now. Jane continues to demand answers about how Olunde's attitude can be one of acceptance, particularly as Elesin had disowned him when he went to England.

Simon returns and asks for the key to the Residency cellar where slaves had previously been held before being transported. He has a prisoner he would like to detain there. Suddenly Elesin appears, alive, and Olunde refuses to look at him, calling him 'Eater of leftovers'. Because Elesin has not died, he has betrayed the ancestors and failed in his duty.





Later, Elesin is in the cell with his wrists bound in chains. His bride sits outside the cell. Pilkings arrives, dressed as a police officer. He talks to Elesin, who tells Pilkings that he has destroyed his life, rather than saving it. Not only that, his actions mean that the harmony between the worlds of the living and the ancestors has been destroyed. Jane is heard calling for Simon, and he runs off to see what she wants. Elesin speaks to his bride, admitting that it is his own lack of will that has prevented his death, rather than being able to blame her or the white men for preventing him fulfilling his duty. Iyaloja arrives as Jane tries to tell Elesin that all of her husband's actions were well-intentioned.

Iyaloja accuses Elesin of betraying everyone, and says that she has arrived with a burden which is being carried up the hill to the Residence. She demands that he looks upon "the spectacle of [his] life" and tells him that she grieves for him. Iyaloja then turns angrily on Pilkings and asks whether he would treat the Prince according to the ceremonies of his culture, and tries to make Pilkings acknowledge his own hypocrisy and ignorance. Pilkings suggests to the Aide-de-camp that they summon a car to get Olunde out of town as soon as possible, but Iyaloja tells him that Olunde is already on his way to say goodbye.

A group of women enter, singing a dirge and carrying a long object, like a bolt of cloth. The Praise-Singer and a drummer have accompanied the group. Iyaloja tells Pilkings that the object is the burden caused by his interventions. The Praise-Singer makes his invocations and then reveals that the burden carried by the women is the body of Olunde, who has taken his own life to atone for his father's failures. Elesin loops the chain of his handcuffs/manacles around his neck and strangles himself. Pilkings unlocks the handcuffs and tries to resuscitate Elesin but Iyaloja tells him it is too late. Elesin has gone into the passage between this world and that of the ancestors but it is not an easy journey, particularly because it has been brought about by Pilkings' misguided meddling. She blames him for the death of Olunde, as well as what happens to Elesin.

The play ends with Iyoloja telling the Bride to think now only of the unborn, the suggestion being that the Bride is pregnant with Elesin's child.



ELESIN OBA

The role of King's Horseman is hereditary and without the intervention of Pilkings, Elesin's eldest son Olunde would inherit the role. However, Elesin Oba loves the material pleasures of life, and the attention of women, so he ultimately fails to fulfil his duty.

He is a great storyteller, speaking eloquently and with confidence. Because he fails in his duty, those who previously respected him now dismiss and criticise him. The character of Elesin can be seen as a warning to people, including political leaders, that power and status can corrupt and undermine us, causing a tragic fall from grace.



PRAISE-SINGER

The relationship between the Praise-Singer and Elesin is that of close friends. The role of Praise-Singer can include confidante and entertainer, but ultimately his job is to sing in praise of Elesin's greatness, bravery and power.

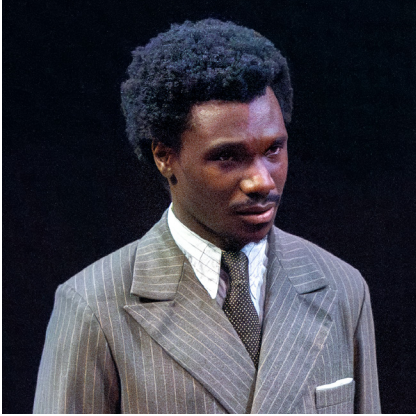
Notice that when Elesin is preparing to die, the Praise-Singer's job is to ease him into the trance that precedes his death. Towards the end of the play, the Praise-Singer criticises Elesin's actions, telling him that he has caused chaos and turmoil. He clearly feels betrayed by Elesin, telling him that "the world is tumbling in the void of strangers".



IYALOJA

Iyaloja is described as the 'Mother' of the market. She has a high status and is highly influential amongst the women of the market. She makes the decision to allow Elesin to marry the young woman who is already promised to her own son, to reflect her respect for what Elesin is about to do.

Iyaloja is a powerful woman, and more assertive (and effective) than any other women in the play. She can command people to follow her instructions more effectively than the Pilkings or the police, and she is the character who is most loyal to the Yoruba way of life.



OLUNDE

Olunde is a highly intelligent man whose desire to study medicine in England caused a rupture between him and his father, Elesin. He understands his role within his family, and has returned from England knowing that he will have to arrange his father's funeral following the burial of the King of Oyo. His time in Britain enlightened him to white and British culture, and he is eloquent in pointing out the hypocrisy in the behaviour he sees in Britain and in the colonial circle inhabited by the Pilkings. Because of his experience living in both Nigeria and Britain, Olunde could be considered the most enlightened and knowledgeable character in terms of cultural understanding.



SIMON PILKINGS

Simon, often referred to as Pilkings, is the District Officer - a colonial role within the government. He enjoys his status and his ability to give orders to others, such as Amusa the local sergeant.

Pilkings stubbornly avoids learning anything about the people whose country he inhabits, and has a very much 'us and them' attitude. He dismisses concerns about what we would now call cultural appropriation and although he and Jane claim that his actions are well intentioned, his involvement in trying to prevent Elesin's death brings about a much greater catastrophe. He represents a warning about ignorance, prejudice, and the issue of colonialism.



JANE PILKINGS

Whilst Jane does try to understand a little more of the Yoruba culture than her husband, she is still keen to fit in with the world of colonialism and a monarchy.

She is vocal in her criticism of Elesin's role and responsibilities and cannot make connections between this local incident and the wider context of war, particularly when she talks to Olunde about the boat captain's self-sacrifice for the greater good.



SERGEANT AMUSA

Amusa can be considered as someone who is Other in the play. He is a local policeman, rather than one employed by the British government. This means that he has much less status, and is not respected by anyone, including Pilkings and the women in the market. He is publicly mocked when he tries to insist on order in the market, and he ends up leaving before the women can beat him.

Amusa is not Yoruba but still understands that the Pilkings are offending the Yoruba culture by wearing the Egungun, and refuses to talk to them whilst they are wearing it because it represents death.



JOSEPH

Joseph is the house boy working in the Pilkings' home. He is a Christian, having converted to the religion, therefore being more like the white man who employs him.

Originally a Yoruba, Joseph does not attract much respect from the Pilkings and therefore is not totally part of one culture or another.



BRIDE

The Bride is the young woman who attracts Elesin's attention and he insists on marrying her as his final wife. She does not speak at all during the play, and she is a victim of Elesin's arrogance and insistence on having fine things.

She is left widowed and traumatised, with Iyaloja telling her to forget the dead, and think of the "unborn" instead.





HRH THE PRINCE

The Prince is not given a Christian name, but represents the monarchy and colonial power. Because of his role, he automatically has huge influence over his subjects - the white people at the ball that takes place at the Residence. In the same way that Elesin attracts attention and admiration amongst the Yoruba, the Prince's presence at the ball causes everyone to attempt to attract his attention.

Notice that the Prince does not speak at any point, but still wields power over everybody in his presence. His influence is also the motivation for people's behaviour (e.g. Simon) even when he is not physically present on stage.



AIDE-DE-CAMP

The Aide-de-camp attempts to interfere when Olunde and Jane argue. He is keen to avoid any kind of outburst or controversy, particularly in the presence of royalty.



OTHER CHARACTERS

Other characters will be played by musicians and the ensemble. These include Drummers, Women, Young Girls and Dancers at the Residency Ball.



DUTY

The role of King's Horseman requires Elesin to die 30 days after the death of the King. However, it quickly becomes clear that Elesin's love of life may prevent him from fulfilling his duty. Iyaloja warns him of this, particularly when he wishes to marry only hours before he is expected to die. It is made clear by several characters, including Olunde and Iyaloja, that if Elesin fails to fulfil his duty, the implications not only affect Elesin, but the entire community. There is already a sense of unrest, and whilst Pilkings tries to quash it because of the Prince's presence (therefore trying to fulfil his own duties), he is actually making the situation worse.

Iyaloja suggests that Elesin is being selfish in his wish to indulge in a new bride shortly before his death - it suggests that he is not fully committed to the ritual that will shortly take place. He has more interest in life than death, despite the implications for everybody else.



The audience is also encouraged to judge Pilkings' behaviour: he is acting out of self-preservation rather than fulfilling his wider duty within the colony. It is the presence of the Prince, and the impact on his own reputation that motivates him, rather than engaging with the community which he supposedly controls. The notion of self-sacrifice is alien to both Simon and Jane Pilkings, the latter talking to Olunde about a ship's captain that deliberately explodes his own ship in order to protect the people who live near the harbour. Olunde attempts to make Jane see the importance of acting for the greater good, particularly considering the number of people currently engaged in fighting in the Second World War, for the protection of humanity.

Olunde is the most dutiful character in the play. He has trained to be a doctor, and has the potential to enjoy a prosperous life in which he fulfils a duty to society. However, he is also very loyal to his own duties as the son of the King's Horseman - a role that he should inherit. At the end of the play, he sacrifices himself in order to try and restore harmony between the worlds of the living and the dead. This is at great cost to himself and to another section of society - those who needed his skills as a doctor. Soyinka is perhaps suggesting that duty is not without its own moral dilemmas and is not always the easy route, and presents the consequences of people's failure to fulfil their duty. This is particularly pertinent considering Soyinka's vocal criticism of people in power, whose corruption and dereliction of duty has dire consequences for the people they are supposed to rule.

WOMEN

Of all the women in the play, Iyaloja is the most powerful. She has a powerful understanding of Elesin's duties, and is keen to ensure that everything that should happen does so smoothly. She is unafraid of challenging Elesin's decisions, such as wanting to marry the Bride shortly before he is due to die. At the end of the play, Iyaloja is highly critical of Elesin's failure to die, and it is her that reveals that Olunde has taken his own life to atone for Elesin's dereliction of duty. Iyaloja understands that Elesin's failure has implications for everybody, not just him. She has taunted Amusa for leaving the Yoruba culture to work for the white men, and shows her own complete loyalty to the Yoruba belief system.

Jane Pilkings is, at first glance, in a position of power as the wife of the District Officer. However, her husband dismisses her concerns, even insisting that they still attend the ball despite Jane's suggestions that the situation with Elesin is much more urgent. Jane does, to some extent, try to understand Amusa's concerns, and she enters into debate with Olunde but she is completely powerless in her attempts to prevent further disaster occurring.



ATTITUDES TO DEATH

In the play, attitudes towards life and death differ between the Yoruba and the white Christian characters. In Christianity, all life is sacred and at the time the play is set, suicide was a criminal offence in the UK (It was decriminalised in 1961). The Yoruba, however, consider death - particularly for Elesin - to be honourable as well as inevitable. Whilst Pilkings considers the impending suicide to be a criminal and immoral act, Elesin's role as King's Horseman allows him to have control over his own death - what we would now call agency.

Through this conflict, Soyinka conveys the idea that interfering in other cultural belief systems can have disastrous consequences. Pilkings' interference does not prevent death, in fact it causes both Elesin and Olunde to die, and not on their own terms.



COLONIALISM

Wole Soyinka has written and spoken extensively about the danger of reducing our understanding of *Death and the King's Horseman* to being about a 'clash of cultures'. He is much more interested in the conflict experienced by Elesin which is caused by other elements of his life (his love of women and material objects, for example).

However, it is important to place the events in Oyo, Nigeria, within the wider colonial context: Elesin is held in a cell originally used to hold slaves before their transportation. The Pilkings dance to tango music in scene two, which contrasts sharply with the insistent drumming signalling events that are significant for Elesin and the Yoruba. The Resident, Pilkings and the Aide-de-Camp are very keen to present a united and efficient front to the Prince, giving the impression that they have complete control over the country. However, the audience can see that this is a facade: the way in which Amusa is treated by the market women, for example, suggests that the British are not in control and nor are they respected by the Yoruba people whose country they are occupying.



THE CONTEXT OF DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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Amusa's horror when he sees the Pilkings wearing the Egungun costumes occurs because of the religious significance of the garment within Yoruba tradition. It is constructed of several layers of fabric that represent the world of the living and of the ancestors who have already died. The Egungun allows the wearer to channel the spirits of the ancestors, and is worn at an annual ceremony which honours the dead. Therefore, Amusa's reaction of horror comes from his feeling that he is speaking to the dead. Amusa is a Muslim, not a Yoruba, and the Pilkings cannot understand why he is so upset by the costume. This reveals the Pilkings' ignorance of Yoruba culture: Amusa is able to understand cultures that are not his own, but ironically Simon Pilkings treats him with condescension and ridicule. The Egungun is only worn by men, meaning that Jane is committing two acts of insensitivity: she is neither the religion nor the gender of the intended wearer of the Egungun.

Death and the King's Horseman is inspired by real events that took place in Oyo, Nigeria in 1946. As in the play, the District Officer attempted to prevent the King's Horseman from fulfilling the ritual suicide duty associated with the role of King's Horseman. For dramatic purposes, Soyinka has transposed the action to 1944, when World War Two was still being fought. By situating the play in this period, it allows the playwright to raise wider questions about power, violence, control and colonialism.



WOLE SOYINKA HAS A RICH, VARIED AND EXTENSIVE LIST OF PLAYS AND BOOKS THAT HE HAS WRITTEN. THE HISTORY BELOW PRESENTS SOME OF THE KEY MOMENTS IN HIS CAREER, BUT STUDENTS WOULD BENEFIT FROM COMPLETING SOME INDEPENDENT RESEARCH ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT. ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT THE END OF THIS LEARNING GUIDE.

Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 and spent his childhood in Abeokuta, Western Nigeria. He attended Government College in Ibadan between 1946 and 1950, and won prizes for poems that he wrote, as well as writing short pieces of drama for performance in school. After leaving school, Soyinka spent two years working as a clerk in Lagos, and continued to write: his short stories and dramas were broadcast on the radio. Following this, he attended University College, Ibadan for two years before then studying English at Leeds University in the UK. Throughout his time at Leeds, he continued writing and performing in university events.

Although Soyinka began an MA course (studying the work of Eugene O'Neill), he did not finish the course. After reading his play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, the Royal Court Theatre (London) invited Soyinka to become a play reader - an offer which he accepted. Soyinka worked at the Royal Court for two years before returning to Nigeria in 1960. He had been awarded a research scholarship which enabled him to study drama in West Africa, during which time he wrote several new radio and television plays and formed a drama company called *The 1960s Masks*.

In 1961, Soyinka was writing scripts for a radio series called *Broke-Time Bar*,

and had wanted to include elements of commentary on politics and social issues. He was forbidden to do so, so he left. Over the next few years, Soyinka held a number of positions, which he rejected or resigned from, due to political reasons. In 1964, he was part of the attempts to overthrow the government of Nigeria.

Between 1965 and 1967, Soyinka actively and publicly questioned the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Nigerian government. When Chief S.L. Akintola won the election in Western Nigeria, Soyinka made a radio tape in which he questioned the validity of the election results. He held up a radio studio at gunpoint, demanding that the tape be broadcast in place of the victory address that was given by Akintola. He was arrested, but the court case collapsed. In 1967, Soyinka was detained for carrying out activities against the government: although he was imprisoned, he was not given a trial. He was released in October 1969.

1970 saw Soyinka travelling internationally - first to America and the Eugene O'Neill Centre, and then to the UK, following a period of wider travel. He became an Overseas Fellow at Cambridge University's Churchill College, having published three plays in 1973.

The National Theatre (UK) performed one of them, *The Bacchae* of Euripedes, in that year.

Soyinka's travels continued, this time to Ghana, where he took the role of editor of *Transition* magazine in 1974. He continued his political activities and frequently engaged in tense debate and disagreement with other writers and with politicians. In 1975, Murtala Mohammad rose to power following a coup that overthrew General Gowon as leader. At this point, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and *Death and the King's Horseman* was published. Soyinka also became a professor at the University of Ife. *Death and the King's Horseman* was performed for the first time in 1976, directed by Soyinka himself. His book, *Myth, Literature and the African World* was published in the same year.



In the late '70s and early '80s, Soyinka's political activism saw him criticise various targets, including politicians and proceedings in the law. For example, in *The Biko Inquest*, he acted and directed this play which is based on the law proceedings of the South African case of Steve Biko, a man who had died in police custody. He also criticised Shehu Shagari, who had won the Nigerian elections, aiming to expose injustices and wrongdoings. He was still prolific in writing new plays and other texts,

including a lecture called 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist', which he delivered in Stratford Upon Avon (the birthplace of Shakespeare) in August 1982. 1983 saw Soyinka returning to Britain once again in order to use British print and broadcast media to comment on the election corruption happening in Nigeria. Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and was also given the Commander of the Federal Republic (CFR) which is a high-ranking award in Nigeria. Between 1986 and 1995, Soyinka published *Art, Dialogue and Outrage, A Scourge of Hyacinths* (which was broadcast on BBC Radio 4), and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years - A Memoir*, whilst an extended version of *From Zia, With Love* (a play which was highly critical of corrupt military regimes) premiered in Italy. The West Yorkshire Playhouse (Leeds) mounted the world premiere of the *Beautification of Area Boy* in 1995 and Soyinka's work was gaining even more high-profile attention.

With this professional success came personal difficulty: Soyinka was exiled in 1996 under threats by General Abacha's military government. He was charged with treason, and tried in absentia. His play, *King Baabu*, was premiered in the USA in 2001, another play which used satire to criticise government dictatorships.

In December 2021, Soyinka published the novel *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*. In 2022, Netflix released *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* - a film adaptation of the play. The film, which is performed in Yoruba (and dubbed into English) is available to watch on Netflix, with a 15 certificate.

DIRECTING DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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MOJISOLA KAREEM

Director of *Death and the King's Horseman*

WHY IS THE STAGING OF THE PLAY IMPORTANT IN 2025?

Staging *Death and the King's Horseman* in Sheffield in 2025 is important for several reasons. The play explores themes of colonialism and cultural conflict, helping audiences understand and appreciate different cultures. Its themes of duty and sacrifice are relevant today, reflecting ongoing discussions about identity and globalisation. It offers a chance for students to learn about African literature and its global significance. The production can energise Sheffield's arts scene and inspire local artists. Involving the community through workshops and discussions fosters connections and has sparked meaningful conversations. Overall, staging this play can bring people together, encourage dialogue, and celebrate diverse narratives in an engaging way.



WHAT RESEARCH/LEARNING HAVE YOU DONE TO PREPARE FOR YOUR WORK ON THE PLAY?

Significant research has been undertaken to ensure an authentic and respectful representation of the play's themes and cultural context.


I travelled to Nigeria to source Yoruba attire, jewellery and props that accurately reflect the period and setting of the play. This hands-on experience allowed me to connect with local artisans and gain insights into traditional materials and styles that are essential for authenticity.

In addition to sourcing physical elements, we have been diligently researching to find the right actors who can embody the characters with depth and authenticity. This includes understanding the Yoruba language, cultural nuances of the roles and ensuring that the cast reflects the play's heritage.

Through these efforts, we are committed to honouring Wole Soyinka's work and bringing this powerful story to life in a meaningful way.

DIRECTING DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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YOU HAVE THE CAST AND A COMMUNITY ENSEMBLE WORKING WITH YOU. CAN YOU EXPLAIN HOW THAT CAME ABOUT, THE PROCESS OF WORKING WITH THEM AND HOW YOU HAVE INTEGRATED THEM INTO THE FULL COMPANY?

The formation of the community ensemble arose from our commitment to engaging with the Sheffield community, which is central to both the play and Utopia Theatre's mission. We recognise the importance of building relationships within the community and wanted to create a collaborative environment where local voices could be heard and celebrated. To achieve this, we held auditions and invited community members to join us on this creative journey.

Over the course of six months, we engaged the community ensemble in a comprehensive process that included learning songs and dances integral to the play. We focused on fostering a supportive atmosphere, where members could develop their skills and confidence. This journey was not just about rehearsing lines; it was about cultivating a sense of ownership and belonging within the ensemble.

To seamlessly integrate the community ensemble into the full company, we brought

them in at the start of rehearsals. This allowed them to work alongside the professional cast, fostering collaboration and camaraderie from the outset. The ensemble's contributions were invaluable, with several members taking on significant roles and lines, further enriching the production. The synergy between the community ensemble and the cast has truly enhanced the overall experience, making our play resonate deeply with its audience.

WHAT IS YOUR APPROACH TO REHEARSALS?

Our approach to rehearsals aims to cultivate an environment that emphasises storytelling and collaboration. Our rehearsal process is fundamentally workshop-based, focusing on creating a space where everyone's input is valued. Whilst we do have a text as our foundation, we begin with improvised sessions that allow the company to explore and experiment with the storytelling. This organic approach enables us to layer the text meaningfully, ensuring that each member's voice contributes to the overall narrative.

Daily warm-ups, including vocal exercises, are integral to our process. These are designed to build the ensemble's stamina and physicality, preparing them to tell the story in a dynamic manner. We believe that a strong ensemble voice is crucial to the authenticity of the performance.

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Collaboration is at the heart of our work. We analyse the text together, reinforcing the idea that everyone has an equal stake in both the storytelling and the outcome. This shared ownership fosters a sense of community and commitment among all participants.

Additionally, we gather as a company every Friday to share a meal that reflects the world of the play. This communal experience not only strengthens our bond but also immerses us in the atmosphere we aim to create. During these meals, we fill the room with music and sounds that resonate with the play, further enriching our collaborative experience. We also watch videos together to ensure we all share visual references that guide our creative vision.

Overall, our approach is deeply rooted in collaboration, shared experiences, and a commitment to storytelling that resonates with both the cast and our audience.

ARE YOUR CAST OFF-BOOK AT THE BEGINNING OF REHEARSALS?

The actors do not come to the process off-book. We intentionally avoid having them arrive with their own interpretations of the text. Instead, we prioritise a shared journey through the script, where we read and explore the play together.

This collaborative approach fosters a cohesive and organic engagement with the material, allowing the ensemble to develop a collective understanding of the characters and themes.

By learning lines within the context of our rehearsals, we create a dynamic environment that encourages exploration and discovery. This method not only strengthens the ensemble's bond but also ensures that each performance is rooted in a unified vision, ultimately enhancing the storytelling.

HAVE YOU ASKED YOUR PERFORMERS TO DO ANY PARTICULAR PREPARATION FOR THIS PRODUCTION?

The primary preparation involves reading the text, which serves as their foundation for understanding the play. To enhance their engagement with the material, we provided extensive research resources, including articles, videos, and other relevant materials that explore the world of the play in depth.

In addition to these resources, I scheduled individual meetings with the actors to discuss any questions they had about the text or their characters. This one-on-one time allows for personalised guidance and opportunities to address specific areas of interest or concern.

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I also shared additional materials for them to study, further enriching their understanding of the context in which their characters exist.

Overall, our approach is designed to empower the performers with the knowledge and insights they need to bring their roles to life authentically.

WHAT WORK HAS THE COMPANY DONE TO UNDERSTAND THE IDEAS CONTAINED IN THE PLAY?

To kick off our rehearsal process, we invited Dr Lekan Balogun, an expert on Wole Soyinka, to spend the first week with us. This invaluable opportunity allowed the entire company to gain insights directly from someone with an extensive knowledge of Soyinka's work and intentions.

Dr Balogun facilitated discussions about the themes and concepts within the play, providing context that enriched our understanding. The cast and crew were encouraged to ask questions, fostering an open dialogue that helped clarify the complexities of the text. This collaborative approach has been instrumental in shaping our interpretation of the play and ensuring that we are all aligned in our vision.

WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE TO TEACHERS AND PERFORMERS ABOUT TACKLING SENSITIVE THEMES IN REHEARSALS AND IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS?

Addressing such profound topics requires care and sensitivity, both in rehearsals and in everyday conversations.

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Establish an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions. Encourage open dialogue and remind participants that it's okay to share their feelings or concerns about the themes being explored.

FACILITATE DISCUSSIONS

Initiate discussions that place the play in its historic context and allows the cast and crew to reflect on their personal connections to the themes. This can help to deepen their understanding and empathy.

USE CONTEXTUAL RESOURCES

Provide background information on the cultural and historical contexts surrounding the play. Understanding the significance of the themes within the specific cultural framework can help performers approach the material with greater sensitivity and respect.

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PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

Encourage participants to listen to one another and validate each other's perspectives. This not only fosters respect but also helps build a stronger ensemble dynamic.

SEEK GUIDANCE IF NEEDED

If discussions become particularly challenging, consider bringing in a facilitator/specialist who can offer additional insights or support. An external perspective can enrich the exploration of the themes.





JOSEPH TOONGA

Choreographer of *Death and the King's Horseman*

After the initial meetings and doing some research, I watched the film and a previous production that was performed by the National Theatre in 2009. I wanted to get a strong sense of the world that we were heading into. I also heard some of the music that Juwon Ogungbe had composed. As well as reading the script, all of this research helped me to get a director's perspective of the play, and researching the dance style of the Yoruba allowed me to develop an idea of how we could keep it authentic, but also consider how to make it a little more modern as well.

It's a very grounded dance style, with lots of use of the waist, and a lot of gestures and dancing in synchronisation with others. The movement is low in its centre of gravity, and we try to create a sense of craving something that is above us. It's a mixture of people dancing as individuals and interacting with people.

There are two moments in the play that I particularly like for their inclusion of dance and movement. The first is the opening market scene. What you see is the closing down of the market for the day, and everyone just celebrates!

The combination of the music, the choir, the visuals and the dance, you really do feel like it's a marketplace. It starts the play in a brilliant way, which introduces the audience to what they're going to see throughout the performance.

Secondly, there is the moment when Elesin goes into a trance with his Praise Singer. The music is particularly important at that point. We've explored African diasporic movement for this moment, but also looked at hip hop to try to elevate a different language within it.

When we rehearsed the trance scene, we worked one-to-one with Elesin (played by Wale Ojo). It's important to work with the actor, and generate the movement with them rather than imposing movement on their body. We explored movement that felt comfortable, and then worked on how to elevate and push it further- whilst making sure they are still able to remember and deliver lines!

Wole Soyinka makes it very clear that creating a 'clash of cultures' is not an accurate way of interpreting the play.

CHOREOGRAPHY AND MOVEMENT IN THE PLAY

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For this reason we have the Yoruba dance, and also the tango and the waltz which are danced by the British characters, but they're never done at the same time.

Many of the cast are new to learning tango, and we've played on that. The colonial characters would have been learning those dance styles - they wouldn't necessarily be skilled at it. They are amateurs, and so that is reflected in our performance of the scene. When we introduced the tango in rehearsals, we wanted to avoid the hierarchy of different levels of experience - instead we saw it as a cultural activity in which the characters dance to feel good. Whilst we've kept the flavour of the tango and the waltz, it's more nuanced than simply creating a series of tango-style movements. I am lucky to know some professional dancers who are very knowledgeable about tango, so they've been very helpful sources of information.

My own background is in hip hop and breaking- I actually got into dance by accident. I later trained at London Contemporary Dance School, and have been working in contemporary dance and ballet in particular. I have made work for Richard Alston's company and was a Royal Ballet Choreographic Resident Artist, as well as working on projects with other high profile dance companies in the UK and abroad. I'm inspired by artists like Lloyd Newson, Bill T Jones and Wayne McGregor who take natural movement and take it further to create dance.

Choreography is not just about creating dances. It's about making physical movement that elevates a character and a scene. When you're working on a scene, you will know instinctively when there is a dance moment. It will come naturally. You'll feel it, or maybe the music will tell you. Maybe it's the monologue, or the way the scene has been developed, for example. Don't try to force dance, because you're a movement director. Movement direction is about allowing the dance to find a pattern, the way a character stands or how they walk across the stage. Sometimes it is as minimal as that.

We're always interested in what the body says that sometimes words cannot. That's what a movement director is there for - understanding what's being said without the words. You try to find movement and meaning. It's a common thing that people understand. People understand gestures and movement.

KEY TERMS

LLOYD NEWSON - Australian founder and former Artistic Director of DV8

SIR WAYNE MCGREGOR - Internationally renowned British choreographer and director

BILL T JONES - Award-winning American choreographer, author and director

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KEVIN JENKINS

Designer of Death and the King's Horseman

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SET DESIGN FOR DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN?

As you're looking at the stage we have two big pieces of Alari cloth that go diagonally from the corners- upstage left to downstage left, upstage right to downstage right. Then they scoop and turn up into a series of wooden planks, representative of wooden shelters or huts. There are a few things I thought about when I was designing that originally - considering the aspects of the 'unborn' as the Yoruba refer to them, then the ideas of present life and the after life. In the play, we are mostly concerned with the present and after lives. There is the reference to the unborn, with Elesin making his new bride pregnant, but I was trying to get a sense of Yoruba thinking, in terms of their belief system.

Fundamentally, the design is inspired by the fact that in the script, there is a reference to Alari being the cloth of honor. By placing this cloth on the floor, and then putting sand and earth around the cloth, the sand will move as people move throughout the play. It will therefore soil and defile the cloth of honor.

The cloth is very representative of Elesin and his status, and what happens in the play. One of those strips of cloth is painted to look like the costume that we see him in when he is dressed by the ladies in the market. We have had to source that cloth, and the scenic artists have done a really good job of replicating it on a larger scale. This cloth is Elesin's honor, that is then walked over and defiled by the events that play out.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS THAT YOU WENT THROUGH TO DESIGN THIS PRODUCTION?

The production's director is of Yoruba heritage, and is a check on everything that we have created in the production. In many ways, she is the first port of call for any cultural questions. In addition, there are the British colonial characters, so we have the expertise and experience in the room to look at each of the two different cultures.



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I spent quite a lot of time reading about Yoruba culture, traditions and beliefs. With Olunde coming on stage dead at the end, I looked at burial traditions, even though there is no time for those rituals to take place within the time frame of the play. I researched those things as a background. I've also looked at colonialism and the British in Nigeria because it is an interesting aspect of the play and its context. In the second scene, there is a big house that drops in, so I had to look at the architecture of colonial buildings. It is my understanding that a lot of those buildings were prefabricated in the UK and shipped over to their destinations. They have a very different feel to a Yoruba building. I looked at textiles such as Alari, Aso Oke and Adire, looking at how they're made and at their cultural significance.

WHAT OTHER SOURCES OF RESEARCH DID YOU FIND HELPFUL?

From a visual point of view, some of the best resources I found were from Yoruba heritage Facebook groups. People have posted photos on there which were helpful. If you just Google 'Nigeria 1940s', finding photographic references is very difficult. I spent a lot of time going through these images to find ones which were relevant and from the right period. We were trying to be as authentic as we could with costumes. It was very interesting during the costume fittings, as some of the cast had important knowledge. For example, knowing that

a woman in the 1980s might have worn their wrap in one way, but in the 1940s it might have been worn in another way. That's something that has been great about working with this company - especially those of Yoruba heritage - that they have this knowledge and experience. We've been very open to listening to that.

HOW DO YOU STORE YOUR RESEARCH? WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TO WORK WITH A LOT OF RESEARCH MATERIAL?

I keep my information digitally. I do have one sketchpad: I don't have a pad per show anymore. I tend to just have one pad, and I just work through it chronologically. I try and make sure I put a title at the top of the page that I will recognise - just something visual that will help me go back and find it. I've got a section for Death and the King's Horseman, partly where I've analysed and pulled the script apart, and partly where I've found information out from specific things. For example, I went to a workshop at Nottingham Playhouse where they had a workshop on Yoruba fabrics, so I went with one of the wardrobe team. I learned context about Nigeria as well. It was really useful to go and widen the breadth of where I was getting information from.

Generally speaking, I have research on my laptop, because so many those images were found going through Facebook and other online sources.

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THE COSTUMES THAT THE PILKINGS WEAR ARE VERY SIGNIFICANT. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THOSE?

Egungun costumes are used as death masks and the Yoruba people would wear them at commemorative events - for example after the death of a significant person. In Nigeria, you still find places where they annually wear these costumes: it's a cultural tradition. The Egungun have a carved wooden piece that goes on the head with a string that ties around that and a massive cloth that hangs off it. The costume has a base fabric, and lots of decorative panels - patterned fabrics with trims. Some have woolly, fluffy trims, and some have gold trims. As the people wearing them dance and spin around, they flare out, and look quite dramatic. There's a crocheted or woven panel down the front so people can see out.



WHAT SKILLS HAVE YOU AND THE WARDROBE TEAM USED TO CREATE THE COSTUMES FOR THIS PRODUCTION?

A lot of research has been done, particularly to ensure authenticity and that costumes such as the Egungun can be worn safely during the performance. There are also costumes such as the police uniforms that we don't have much reference material for, so we've done our best to extrapolate information from what we've seen in photos. We've tried to be as true to Nigerian costumes and fabrics as we can, as well as being faithful to the period in which the play is set. Sometimes it can be hard to rely on photographic images, because cameras don't always do full justice to colour for example, so when something unexpected arrives, we have to adapt and make adjustments as much as possible.

Sarah, our wardrobe supervisor, viewed a lot of YouTube videos on how to tie head wraps, and then tried to work out a way to ensure that everyone felt secure and comfortable in their costumes. We aim to make sure that everything appears authentic, but there are also practical elements to consider, as well as the fact that some actors may be less familiar than others with wearing the clothing that appears in the production.

Adaptability, openness and multi-tasking have all been invaluable skills during the design and making process for this play.

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HOW DID YOU CREATE COSTUMES FOR THE COMMUNITY ENSEMBLE?

Fundamentally, they are market women and some market men. We've pulled together a range of research images of women in the 1940s wearing different wrappers, fabrics etc. I did a series of group costume drawings just to give a flavor of where it was going. Then we started their fittings. Their costumes are relatively simple, but are treated to look like they're part of the world with everybody else.

KEY TERMS

ALARI - Thick, woven cloth worn by the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria

ASO OKE - (pronounced a-sho-kee) Cloth worn for ceremonial events, eg. weddings, burials/funerals

ADIRE - Dyed cloth made by Yoruba women

THE THEATRE GREEN BOOK - Initiative supporting the theatre industry to achieve net zero and sustainability in practice

HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CHALLENGES DESIGNING THE SET AND COSTUME FOR THIS PRODUCTION?

Designing for *The Crucible* is always a challenge, because sometimes stage directions are written for a proscenium arch stage. When you get to Scene Four, we open with the presentation of the Prince and a big ball, but then the scene moves into some private aside conversations. We've had to find a way to be able to move that ball, so we still feel like it's going on, but isn't taking up the main performance space where we need the main dialogue and action to take place. In that scene we open up the upstage area, and we have people still moving and dancing. They're providing the visual set of the ball going on, meanwhile the main thrust stage is used for the conversation between Jane and Olunde.

The costuming for the ball scene was a challenge as we had a limited budget. We've been fortunate to utilise the wardrobe store at *The Crucible*, so we've mixed and matched some interesting outfits. This meets some of the elements of *The Theatre Green Book*, because we're utilising existing costumes.

The importance of communication can't be over-emphasised. Not just between myself and Mojisola, but also the rest of the team. It's my responsibility to make sure it matches the vision of what was intended.

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CASSIE MITCHELL

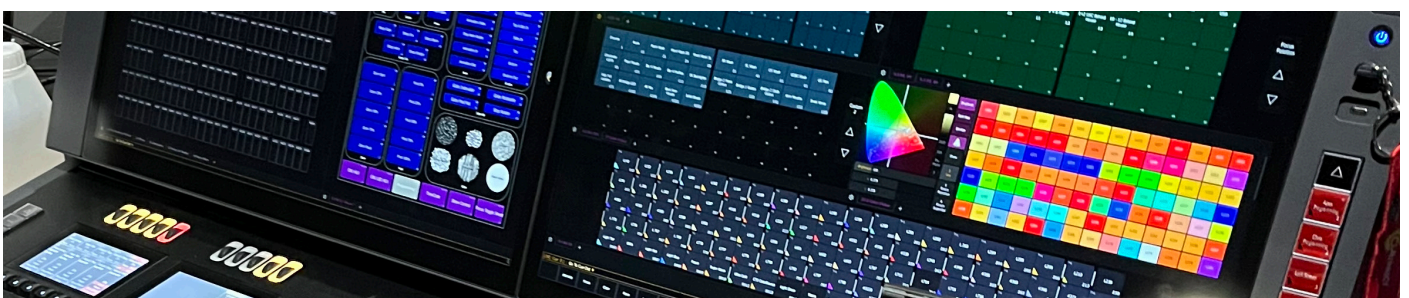
Lighting Designer of Death and the King's Horseman

WHAT ROLE DOES LIGHTING PLAY IN DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN? HOW DOES IT CONTRIBUTE TO MOOD, ATMOSPHERE, PLOT AND THEMES?

The lighting has an important role to play in setting up each scene. We have five main scenes throughout the play which take us between a marketplace at different times of the day; the home of the district officer; a masquerade ball and a jail. Each change is done through the setting and the lighting. The scene changes themselves are important for lighting, as we must make the transitions through time and space seamless but clear. There are also many moments in which the atmosphere changes but a large lighting change is not required, at which points subtle changes in the lighting can help push the story forward and give a sense of the changing atmosphere.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF CREATING THE LIGHTING DESIGN FOR THIS PRODUCTION? WHAT ARE THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF THE PLAY AND THE SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE SPACE?

The process began with lots of conversations delving into the themes of the play with the Director. This really helped to make sure we were both on the same page from the very beginning. I was then able to move forward with thinking about the lighting more specifically as the set design emerged and we had a more concrete idea of what the play would look like. The performance space has some challenges in that it is on a thrust stage. This changes how the play is lit as it must be done for people to see it from all angles.

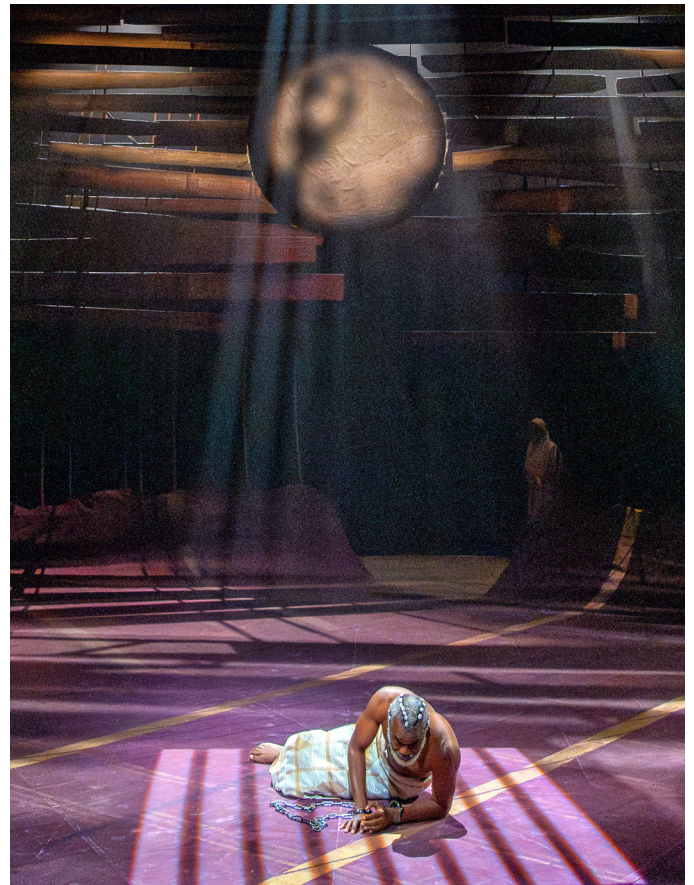


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WHAT PREP TOOK PLACE WHEN DESIGNING FOR THIS PRODUCTION? WHICH PARTICULAR THEMES, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE YOU WANTED TO HIGHLIGHT, AND HOW DOES THAT COME THROUGH IN YOUR DESIGNS?

One of the themes that has been interesting to me throughout the process is the passage of time. The events of the play hinge on an event that must take place within a certain timeframe one evening. The play opens in the evening before this event is due to happen, and finishes in the early hours of the next day, so the play happens over approximately seven hours. Some of the techniques we are using to show this passage of time are the inclusion of a sun in the the set in the first scene, and a moon in the last scene. It will also be down to me to show this movement of time through lighting - starting in the hot, bright sun to finishing the play in moonlight.



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JUWON OGUNGBE

Composer and Music Director of
Death and the King's Horseman

WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSIC IN DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN?

A lot of the music in the play is in the script because the playwright has already suggested that it should be there. Music is heard for various reasons, especially for ceremonial atmosphere because the traditional ruler or King has passed away, and they're going through a season of mourning. Because of that, there are rituals happening in different places and music is being heard from various sources, like shrines and other places too.

As well as this, because the King's Horseman is going to follow the King in death, he has a kind of entourage. With the entourage there are musicians, people following him, singing and giving him courage.

When the play opens, it's closing time at the market, but Elesin arrives with his entourage and there's music as a result of that. Then, Elesin notices a young woman who he wishes to marry, so another ceremonial aspect is present here.

In Scene Two, the Pilkings are going to a ball. As the scene opens, they're dancing the tango dressed in Egungun costumes. This music is very different to what we have heard in Scene One. Within that scene, the Pilkings are told by Amusa that Elesin is going to die by suicide, so the Pilkings become more conscious of the drums and the rituals and ceremonies that are happening, which sound different to anything they've heard before. There's music going on outside, as well as inside the Pilkings' house.

The third scene returns to the marketplace. The wedding ceremony has happened, so Elesin consummates his relationship with the bride. The policemen (including Amusa) try to interrupt what's going on. The market women blockade the police's way and there's a victory dance when they succeed in chasing Amusa away. Elesin emerges and goes into a trance. There is a lot of music that happens around this.

In Scene Four, the Prince arrives at the residency and the ball. It's set to a police brass band, and the guests are dancing a waltz.

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Olunde has a conversation with Mrs. Pilkings and asks her to step outside, where they hear drumming that would be played at a particular stage of the Horseman's ceremony. Olunde believes that because the drumming stops, it means that his father has died, but in actual fact, Mr. Pilkings has sent people to intercept and stop Elesin from taking his own life.

The music is therefore extremely important not just for mood and atmosphere, but also narratively. There are certain points, such as when the drumming stops, that are important to the plot of the play.



CAN YOU TALK US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING THE MUSIC FOR THE PLAY?

All of the music in this production is original.

We started working with the community ensemble last summer. We saw them regularly, and I brought songs for them to learn. They also started getting into the idea of dancing to the music, so we were building a repertoire of songs. Some were folkloric, and some were things that I composed.

There were some workshops that happened, in which some of the other performers were also involved. In our production, we have someone who actually comes from a background of praise singing, so she has contributed in extemporizing and singing things. There's a whole vocal text that is coming from her.

It's a very intricate process, with different layers of building what we're working with. Then, of course, there are those moments like the tango and the waltz, fanfares and so on. I compose them in the same way that I'd compose anything else: what I like to do is to start with the choreography in the room to get an idea of things like tempi, atmosphere, mood, and ambience with the performers. Then, I build from that so that it feels congruent with everybody who is involved in that process.

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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE IF THEY WERE TO WANT TO STAGE SOME OR ALL OF THIS PLAY?

I think they would need to have some knowledge of the Yoruba musical idioms. Nowadays that's not as difficult to find or to source as it might have been in the past. For example, you could Google examples of singers and performers who do that type of music and listen to them on Spotify, just to get a feel for that. With all the AI tools that we have now, you could also use Suno, and ask it to simulate that type of music so you at least have a starting point.

These AI sources, such as Suno, that can at least put you in the right direction. So for example, if you wanted to make up songs that were somehow helping to tell the story, nowadays you could easily use ChatGPT or similar and say, "could you give me some lyrics in Yoruba for a song? This is what I want my song to say". Then, from there, if you want to hear what those words sound like, you can go into Google Translate where you can hear how those words are meant to sound, and you can make simple songs that can facilitate some of the storytelling that way. I do think you do need people that play drums to do it, though.

It's important to say that I haven't really used this method myself because there's so many people in the company that have the knowledge and information we need, including the musicians and some of the actors,

The words contained in the music are also important: Yoruba is a tonal language That's important to know - not every African language is like this. That's why the tradition of talking drums or the hourglass tension drum is so fundamental to Yoruba music making, because it goes with all the inflections and tonality within the speaking of the language. I know drummers from other West African cultures who say, "I wish I could speak Yoruba, because then I'd be able to play the talking drum more effectively".



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CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ERA IN WHICH THE PLAY IS SET, AND HOW THAT IS REFLECTED IN THE MUSIC?

One of the key things is that it's set in the 1940s. People have an idea, I think, of music from that part of the world now, based on what they've heard in recent times, such as the afrobeats style. There are possibly some connections between the sounds that were made in those days, and the music of the likes of Burna Boy, that young people hear and dance to now, but it's not that world at all.

ARE THERE ANY CONNECTIONS MADE IN THE MUSIC BETWEEN THE YORUBA CULTURE AND THE COLONIAL CULTURE IN THE MUSIC YOU HAVE COMPOSED FOR THE PLAY?

The way the story unfurls itself, there aren't any particular moments where there's overlapping or bleeding into one thing or the other as such. There's the incongruity of the Pilkings wearing Egungun costumes and dancing tango, but there's no crossover into the drumming for example.



KEY TERMS

SUNO - Artificial Intelligence that assists users in creating or generating new music

AFROBEATS - Generalised term for music that originates in West Africa, with Yoruba and Ghanaian influences

BURNA BOY - a Nigerian singer, songwriter and producer, born in 1991

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LEE AFFEN

Sound Designer of Death and the King's Horseman

WHAT ROLE DOES SOUND DESIGN PLAY IN DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN?

The sound design is the sonic storytelling in a play. Whilst it can be used to give the audience a sense of place, what's more exciting for a sound designer is that it opens up the realm of subtext and in the case of this show, it offers an insight to a character's mental state. We've used this in Death and the King's Horseman to gain a glimpse into the mental state of Elesin. There are sounds that he can hear that give a sense of another world which is calling him. This is a huge part of this play and drives a separate narrative that the audience can hear.

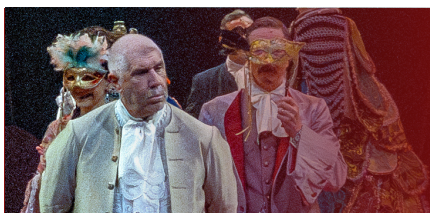
HOW HAVE YOU WORKED ALONGSIDE THE COMPOSER TO CREATE THE WORLD OF THE PLAY?

There are lots of live drums within the show, with a lot of patterns that have been created specifically for the world that we're in. I worked with the Composer and the drummers to record some of these to add an authentic Yoruba texture to the piece. The recorded drums give us a sense of a wider world, a sense that there is more going on than just what is literally happening on stage.



PERFORMING IN DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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JIM STEINKE

Performer in Death and the King's Horseman

JIM STEINKE, A FORMER SHEFFIELD COUNCILLOR, WAS INSPIRED TO GET INVOLVED AFTER WORKING WITH VARIOUS COMMUNITY GROUPS IN SHEFFIELD FOR MANY YEARS AND TAKING VOICE PROJECTION LESSONS YEARS AGO.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING PART OF DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN?

This will be the first time on stage for me, I've never acted before and I'm feeling excited about the opportunity. I really like new challenges and this is a great chance to learn something new - especially later on in life! It feels such a privilege to be on the Crucible stage helping to portray such a powerful story.

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIOR CONNECTIONS TO DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN?

I may be one of the few people to remember when Death and the King's Horseman was performed years ago in the UK and I've seen it a couple of times. I'd describe it as a life affirming play and there's already a real buzz about staging it in Sheffield.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IT MEANS TO HAVE A NON-PROFESSIONAL CAST MADE UP OF SOUTH YORKSHIRE RESIDENTS?

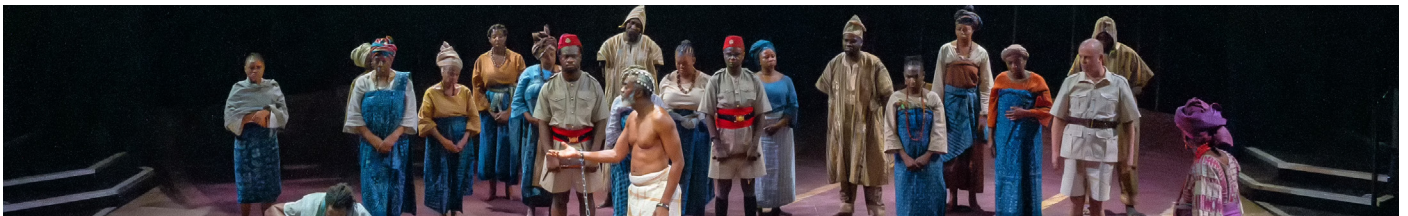
The fact that Utopia Theatre gives locals the chance to be part of something like this screams volumes about what type of organisation it is. It is so important to celebrate local talent and I hope this opens the doors for people to carve out a career or a hobby that fits with their purpose and ambitions.

My role is also to encourage people of all backgrounds from across communities of Sheffield to come along and enjoy this play. It's a significant, complex and powerful story deeply rooted in African culture, which resonates with wider audiences in so many ways.

Whatever your background, there will be something in this play for you!

TEXTUAL EXPLORATION - CREATING A TIMELINE

Creating a timeline, using either Post-It Notes or index cards, can help you determine where the peaks and troughs of tension, mood and atmosphere take place. You might like to use adjectives to describe each scene, or the different moments within each scene, to inform your choices as an actor or director. Identifying on these moments will also help your lighting and sound designer when considering transitions, scene changes and adjustments to intensity of sound and/or light.



COMPARE AND CONTRAST - ELESIN'S DOWNFALL

At the beginning of the play, the expectation is that Elesin will fulfil his duties as the King's Horseman. The play is relatively short, with only five scenes, but the man of power, respect and significance experiences a terrible downfall very quickly. One way to ensure that this descent into shame for Elesin and chaos for the other characters is convincing, is to compare and contrast the key speeches made by Elesin in Scene One and Scene Five.

Look closely at the Not-I speech that Elesin makes (p.10-p.13 in the Methuen Student Edition of the play). Consider how the actor playing Elesin should use his vocal, physical and facial expression to deliver the speech. Workshop that scene, with some people playing the role of Elesin, and some directing the scene. You may wish to include the character of the Praise Singer, or you may prefer to simply focus on Elesin at this point.

Once you have fully explored this speech, look closely at Scene Five, in which Elesin is shamed by Iyaloja and others who visit him. In particular, look at the speeches made by him which begin with "My powers deserted me..." (p.74) until " I shall speak my message from heart to heart of silence." (p.82). What do you notice about the change in Elesin's language, and the structure of his speeches? Choose one or two of his speeches within this section to explore ways to convey the breaking of Elesin's spirit. Again, you can choose to work solely on Elesin's character or you can also have an actor playing Iyaloja, whose strength and anger will contrast sharply with Elesin's weakened demeanour.

Once you are happy with your rehearsed scenes, you may like to share your work with other people in your class as a work-in-progress performance. You can then evaluate your work, and that of other people in your class, justifying your creative decisions and analysis of the playtext.

Death and the King's Horseman is a play that is rich with cultural and historical references. Understanding those references will build a strong foundation for students to understand the themes and issues raised in the text beyond a superficial level.

Using reliable sources for research is very important, particularly because of the sensitivities surrounding the play's themes and origin. Teachers can allocate any of the following topics to students to support their exploration of *Death and the King's Horseman*.



RESOURCES

- A detailed description of Yoruba culture can be found [HERE](#).
- This United Nations [ARTICLE](#) introduces the history of Yoruba people and discusses the work of filmmaker Toyin Ibrahim Adekeye.
- The geography of Nigeria is explained in this National Geographic [PAGE](#), designed for young people.
- This BBC [PAGE](#) explores present-day Nigeria, as well as presenting a helpful timeline of the country's history.
- [BRITANNICA](#) explains the colonial history of Nigeria.
- The [BLACK PLAYS ARCHIVE](#) has a page on Wole Soyinka, which is a great starting point for independent research, and this CNN Interview captures Soyinka discussing his work.

The Utopia Theatre production was originally performed in the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. This theatre has a thrust stage configuration and therefore presented both opportunities and challenges to the design team.

Choose a design role from the following options:

- Set design
- Costume design
- Sound design
- Lighting design

Once you have chosen a role, form a team with people who have chosen the other three roles and create a 'theatre company'. Your role is to create a design concept for the production. Create a five to ten minute presentation in which you present your design ideas with full sketches and justifications for your ideas. Your teacher might like to run this activity as a competition for the best presentation.

Make sure you include the following details in your presentation:

- Choice of stage configuration. You may also like to identify a specific theatre venue or you can create a fictional one.
- A moodboard or PowerPoint presentation in which you communicate your understanding of the social, historical and cultural context of *Death and the King's Horseman*.
- Detailed references to the sound and music requirements in the play, with clear references to Wole Soyinka's stage directions.
- Discussion of how the set and costume design is integrated, and complementary ways in which you will aim for sustainable design practices as suggested in *The Theatre Green Book*.

REMEMBER THAT ALL OF YOUR DESIGN SKETCHES SHOULD BE IN FULL COLOUR AND CLEARLY LABELLED. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE CLEAR CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE RESEARCH THAT YOU HAVE DONE AND THE CREATIVE DECISIONS THAT YOU HAVE MADE.





Chairing a discussion about important topics is a fantastic life skill to develop. Each person in your group should choose a different statement and 'chair' a debate or discussion within the class.

The themes below are inspired by aspects of the production that have been discussed in this learning guide, but you can also create your own statements inspired by the production and what you have discovered about the work of Wole Soyinka.

- Death and the King's Horseman is as relevant today as it was when it first premiered in 1976.
- The impacts of colonialism are still being experienced today.
- It is vital that theatre companies engage with their local communities.
- The Theatre Green Book encourages sustainable practices in theatre but there are still a number of challenges, particular when presenting plays from less familiar cultural contexts.
- Drama and performing arts students should take a more active role in seeking out productions of rarely-performed plays.

LEARNING EVALUATION

Your teacher will provide you with some large Post-It Notes. Using one Post-It per idea, write down all of the different things you have learnt during your exploration of Death and the King's Horseman. This could be (but isn't limited to):

- A specific performance skill that you have improved whilst workshopping scenes from the play.
- Cultural and historical information about the relationship between Britain, Nigeria and the Yoruba culture.
- How costume communicates character for a particular role in the play.
- How music is used to create mood and atmosphere.

LIVE PRODUCTION REVIEW - TOP TIPS FOR A GREAT RESPONSE

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BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT WHAT YOU SAW

When you're writing about a production that you've seen, you need to convey a sense of engagement, knowledge and enthusiasm about the theatre experience that you had - even if you didn't like a particular play.

A great tip is to record a short voice note straight after seeing a production to record all of your immediate reactions. This is the best time to record all of your thoughts and ideas, opinions and evaluations because you'll still be in the moment. It can be very difficult to regain that strength of response once you get back to school.

Once you've got that recording, you can then use it to help you construct notes, sketches and even full paragraphs about what you saw, and then refine them to create excellent written answers. Interviewing your friends and classmates on the way home (with their permission if you are recording them) can be another way of capturing people's responses that can form discussions later.

USING WHAT/HOW/WHY

Whenever you're writing about a production you've seen, it's helpful to use a WHAT? HOW? WHY? structure to make sure that you're meeting the demands of the question.

- **WHAT** did the actors/designers do?
- **HOW** did they do it?
- **WHY** those choices were made and **WHY** it was or was not successful, in your opinion.

EXAMPLE

In the scene where Amusa arrives at the Pilkings' bungalow, the actor playing Amusa used gestures to convey his fear and horror at seeing what they are wearing. When pointing at Pilkings, his forefinger shook, and the actor used a wide-eyed facial expression and slow backward steps as if to get as far away from the couple as possible. This was successful, because it conveyed Amusa's horror at the cultural appropriation of the Pilkings: they are ignorantly wearing clothing (Egungun masquerade costumes) that has significance for Yoruba people who believe that the masks represent ancestral spirits. The difference between the Pilkings' confident body language and dismissive tone of voice, and Amusa's constant movement and trembling made me dislike the Pilkings for remaining so ignorant about the country and culture that they were living in.

LIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEW - TOP TIPS FOR A GREAT RESPONSE

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MAKING YOUR DESCRIPTIONS CLEAR

The person reading your work may not have seen the production, therefore a good rule of thumb is that your reader should be able to act out or draw what you are describing. A good way to check this in your answers is to ask a friend to act out what you've described. The rule is that they must **ONLY** do what you have written down. Once they've done that, go back to your answer and add the detail that you need to make your writing clearer.

You can do the same task when describing the visual design of the production: read out your description and ask your friend to sketch what you describe. Compare what you saw with what they sketched. How accurately have your words conveyed what you saw on stage? Remember that when you're talking about set and costume design, you can use sketches but you must remember to label them. Make sure that your work is accurate, and practise sketching the set and/or costume at speed so that you can create clear work under exam conditions.



BE CONFIDENT WITH SCENES FROM THROUGHOUT THE PLAY

It's very tempting to only focus on knowing one or two scenes in the play very well, but to make sure that you can confidently answer any question that you're asked about a production, make sure that you can discuss a range of different scenes from throughout. This will also help you to demonstrate your understanding of how characters, settings and plots develop over the course of a play, and how those changes are communicated to an audience.

USE TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY

When writing about *Death and the King's Horseman*, you have the opportunity to use a lot of theatre-based terminology. This helps you sound very knowledgeable and also creates a much clearer and more concise answer.

Death and the King's Horseman also requires you to know certain terms that are specific to this story - for example, the Pilkings wearing Egungun costumes. Make sure that you read the script of the play carefully, learn the spellings of those terms and practise explaining what they mean in your writing. Throughout this guide, we've included key terms and definitions to help with less familiar ideas or information.

LIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEW - TOP TIPS FOR A GREAT RESPONSE

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CREATE A CAREFUL BALANCE BETWEEN CONTEXT, DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

When we are writing about a production we have seen, it can be tempting to include everything we know. It takes a lot of time and effort to find out about social, cultural and historical context, for example, so it's understandable that you might want to include it all. However, when you're writing a live production evaluation, you need to make sure that all of the information that you are including is relevant to the question that you are answering.

For example, if you're tempted to include a lot of biographical detail about Wole Soyinka, who wrote *Death and the King's Horseman*, ask yourself "how does this help me to answer the question?" This might then lead you to mention the period in which Soyinka wrote the play and why it is relevant today, as well as any information about what Soyinka's main intentions or messages were in writing the play.

Another top tip is to create a three sentence summary of what happens in the play. This can then be used at the beginning of any written response to briefly introduce the plot of the play. Your reader needs to know a little bit about what happens, but don't fall into the trap of spending all of your time telling the story.

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR VISIT

Death and the King's Horseman is a play that is rich in dialogue, music, dance and design. Rather than trying to capture everything about the production, it's a good idea for you or your teacher to allocate different responsibilities to each person in your class. Suggested areas for different people to focus on are outlined on the next page. You can then use these headings to give feedback in lessons, or to create an online document to which everyone uploads their notes.

REMEMBER THAT ANY ASSESSED OR EXAMINED WORK MUST BE IN YOUR OWN WORDS, SO YOU SHOULD NOT SIMPLY MEMORISE THE NOTES THAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE MADE.

You won't be able to take photographs during the performance, so allocate the task of sketching the different sets and costumes to those who are confident and skilled in doing so. It's always worth making your own sketches, and then adjusting them as you compare notes and discuss the production in more detail.

You might also like to club together to buy a theatre programme, which will contain more information about the production. The [UTOPIA THEATRE WEBSITE](#) is also a helpful resource.

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ACTORS WHO PORTRAYED STRONG RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHARACTERS

- Elesin and the Praise Singer
- Jane and Simon Pilkings
- Olunde and Jane Pilkings

HOW COSTUME CREATES A SENSE OF CHARACTER

- Elesin's initial entrance to the market in Scene One, and his subsequent changes into ceremonial costumes.
- The use of Egungun by the Pilkings
- The way in which the sense of belonging is achieved in the costumes of the women in the marketplace
- Military uniforms of both the British and Nigerian characters

MOMENTS WHERE SOUND WAS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT

- Scene One: the marketplace
- Scene Two: the Pilkings
- Scene Five: the procession as Olunde's body is carried to the Residency

EXAMPLES OF WHERE MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE WERE CREATED THROUGH ACTING OR SOUND DESIGN

- Amusa's attempts to stop Elesin's suicide
- Elesin's trance
- Olunde's arrival at the ball
- The Prince's arrival at the ball
- The revelation of Olunde's death

AN ACTOR WHO USED THEIR PHYSICAL, FACIAL AND VOCAL SKILLS TO CREATE CHARACTER

- Iyaloja
- Elesin
- Olunde
- Jane Pilkings
- Simon Pilkings

EXAMPLES OF HOW THE SET WAS USED TO CREATE DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

- The ball at the Residency
- The marketplace
- Elesin's cell
- The home of Simon and Jane Pilkings

The Methuen Drama edition of *Death and the King's Horseman* is published by Bloomsbury and contains comprehensive notes and information on the play, and the playwright. (ISBN 978-0413-69550-5)

The [BLACK PLAYS ARCHIVE](#) provides details of Soyinka's significant range of plays.

The Future Histories is an independent archive for African, Asian and Caribbean performing arts. Their website can be found [HERE](#).

The Guardian's theatre critic Michael Billington wrote this [ARTICLE](#) about *Death and the King's Horseman* and its importance in the theatrical canon.

