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La Délinquance Idéologique: Sony Labou Tansi and the Political Love Story of Romeo and Juliet

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, (*La Résurrection Rouge et Blanche de Romeo et Juliette- 'The Red and White Revival of Romeo and Juliet'*) by the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi. It examines the consequences of a focus on the political frame of the narrative. Sony's version is an indictment of a monstrous and hyper-violent political system in which the only choice left is the manner of one's death. Sony uses the play as a means to interrogate a society that focuses on the political fetishization of violent dictatorships and nihilistic choices. With a radical shift in focus, Sony's work also requires the audience / reader to consider the necessity of theatre and, by extension, the power under which it operates. Sony's language in this adaptation gives the story of Romeo and Juliet, a post-colonial framework as well as an urgent political message. The analysis concludes that the adaptation presents the conventional love story as a political tragedy of the post-colonial condition.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Congo, Sony Labou Tansi, political theatre, Romeo and Juliet

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1. Introduction

The article discusses an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by the Francophone Congolese writer, Sony Labou Tansi. The script of *La Résurrection Rouge et Blanche de Romeo et Juliette* (The Red and White Revival of Romeo and Juliet by Sony Labou Tansi (1990) was published in the French journal, *Acteurs* as a special supplement. The play has recently been performed by a group of French and Senegalese students, and was read at the Comédie Française in 2015 as part of a series of events commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Sony's death. Sony's version is an indictment of a

monstrous and hyper-violent political system in which the only choice left is the manner of one's death. With a radical shift in focus, Sony's work also requires the audience to consider the necessity of theatre and, by extension, the power under which it operates.

Sony Labou Tansi (real name Marcel Ntongi) was born in Bas-Congo, in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo and moved 'across the river' to Brazzaville when he was twelve where he remained until his death in 1995. He considered himself "Kongo", an ethnic description which transcends the

designations of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo nation states which date from independence in the early 1960s. The idea of a pan-Congolese way of thinking, which in his later writings came close to a form of tribalism, is one of his key concerns. At the same time, his conception of his relationship with France, and Europe in general was not a smooth one; in some ways he was part of the post-independence paradox that so many writers have encountered. He relied on funding from sources directly or indirectly linked to the French government, and despite criticism, chose to work within those parameters. Many of his plays were written and performed for festivals and competitions which were at least partially government funded, such as Radio France Internationale and the Festival Francophone de Limoges. Sony's perceived concessions towards the Republic of Congo's ex-colonial power and its structure of funding for the arts meant that he attracted both attention and criticism from his peers in Congo and in Europe. The balancing act that many writers face between artistic integrity and dissemination of their work remained especially acute in Sony's case. As a result of his political activism, (he was elected a deputy for an area of Brazzaville), he had his passport confiscated on several occasions and, towards the end of his life, was unable to seek medical treatment abroad for AIDS-related illnesses.

2. Literature Review

Research on Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly in translation in Far East, has been recently explored by scholars like-Luong, N. (2015); Luong, V. (2016a), Luong, V. (2016b). However, in the case of African context, it has led to different interpretations due to different socio-political scenarios. After the independence was achieved, many writers,

Congolese and others, had to confront a more complicated sense of themselves in the new political order. Their work began to move away from the overtly political *cri de coeur* of the colonized subject who wanted to be recognized on his own terms. Writers who had been educated in their own countries, and did not rely on a colonial education, began to challenge their current situations primarily through language. Examples include the novels of Ahmadou Kouroma and Yambo Ouologuem as well as the plays of Huges Serge Limbivani and the philosophical writings of Achille Mbembé.

Mbembé (2001) has been one of the foremost theorists of post-colonial societies in Africa. In his essay (and later book), 'Notes on the Post-colony', he documents how African novelists have portrayed their corrupt societies through the use of a model of the Bakhtinian grotesque. His work explores the tropes of excess, both digestive and sexual, that authors such as Sony use. Mbembé argues that the regime of violence forces Sony into a parodic acceptance which is manifested through the figure of excess. He also identifies an obsessive concern with fecundity and the connection between children and subjects as controlled beings. The features of autocratic rule, for example mass ceremonies and rituals, use rhetorical devices such as repetition and hyperbole which are also used by Sony but for the opposite purpose: to dispel the myth-making of the dictator and satirize its ruling style.

Phyllis Clark-Taoua (2001) connects the literary motifs in Sony's work with the censorship that he faced, she argues that the lack of plot-driven narrative and the fluidity of time and space add to the sense of repetition which the political order creates. She writes "one notices a sense of spatial disorientation, a fusion of disparate genres...and the use of pastiche and parody



to subvert authority.” (p.213). She supports the claims of Mbembé that under a post-colonial dictatorial regime, the citizen-writer finds even the most rational concepts of time and space are undermined by the larger than life figure of the leader. Sony's reaction is to use parody in excess as well by describing the absurd as natural.

Virginia Coulon (2003) addresses the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* as a direct indictment of the South African situation in the period immediately preceding the fall of apartheid. In her article, she argues that the context serves a double purpose in allowing Sony to comment on a contemporaneous African situation as well as to point out parallels with his own country. It was dangerous during the early 1990s to comment directly on the fluid political situation in the Republic of Congo and Sony had no desire to risk exile or arrest. He had to choose a setting which was close enough to remind his audience of current events whilst appearing to critique an unpopular regime in another country.

On the political nature of *Romeo and Juliet*, both Jerry Weinburger and Peter Herman have made convincing arguments concerning authority and civil duty. Weinburger in particular has analysed the tragedy of the lovers as a failure of all authority figures to fulfil their basic duty to keep people safe: the figure of political authority, the Prince, the parents and the Church all contribute to the tragedy of the lovers. In this reading, Shakespeare's play becomes less concerned with unkind fate and more with a kind of collective failure of leadership.

3. Methodological Analysis

Sony's work is a mixture of hallucinogenic narrative and biting political satire. He wrote with a sense of urgency, describing his project as seeing tomorrow

with the eyes of today. His novels and plays do not promise an easy experience of African exoticism. They are violent and absurd with a stunning disregard for the human body which is subjected to all manner of indignities. Yet, he remains relentless in his desire to make readers take notice, to disturb their sensibilities and to promote compassion and sensitivity where there appears to be only cruelty and corruption. The form of Sony's work is not a realist depiction of post-colonial Africa. Rather, it veers between a questioning of whether to write at all and a perceived inability to produce anything more than a series of screams.

The *métis* (mixed) model is also present not only in Sony's relationship with sponsors and patrons but in his connection with the French language, a site of contestation but also a site of individual self-fashioning. Sony creates a sort of hyper-French, replete with neologisms and fractured word play. In the autocratic state, language is over-used in certain ways to bolster and protect the powers that be; to create a prestige that is lacking and to reinforce the notions of control and inevitability that are necessary for the state to remain in charge. Sony's language plays on the absurdity of these statements and becomes a means through which he can step outside of the language and point at the futility of its supposed certainties. For Sony, this use of language is a direct political comment on the *mochisme* (rottenness) that he perceives around him.

La Résurrection Rouge et Blanche de Romeo et Juliette-The Red and White Revival of Romeo and Juliet is set in South Africa in the early nineties. The racial mixture is overt; the cast list has the characters identified by race or racial mix. The tableaux into which Sony divides the play, and which he uses in several other

plays, speaks to stasis not action. It is more like a series of snapshots than a narrative. We can assume that the audience (in France) had knowledge of the Shakespeare play and it is unclear if the play was ever performed in Congo, in Sony's lifetime or since. Sony's play is so different from the original that it seems only to retain a 'whiff' of Shakespeare (as Sony put it) that comes from the character's names and their thwarted love story. There are certain pieces of dialogue (Romeo and Juliet's soliloquies) and characters (such as the Nurse) which call Shakespeare's play to mind, however the audience takes from Sony's play the monstrous absurdity of a political system that venerates violent death.

In the first scene, 'Tableau 1' a Montaigne talks about cultivating some legitimacy stating that "law is the thermometer of civility" (lines 15-16, Author's Translation). The law appears as a ghostly voice, a spectral force which appears and disappears without any obvious rationale. The nature of its appearance and its 'apparitions' colour the law itself. Colour is another key motif in the play, both in the explicit racial casting, as well as the blue and red colours that the members of each house wear, in a clear nod to gang allegiances. There is an illusion of the rule of law but being seen, behaving in a certain way, is most important. One Montaigne describes politics as "the art of snacking on the future in small pieces" (Scene 1, lines 47-8), the implication being that one's political actions affect one's future wealth in both material and political senses. What happens to the law in a dictatorship is an overwhelming focus on documentation: proofs, parchments and depositions. The Prince figure (the voice of authority) can only speak through other voices. He is as mute as the law which has to be articulated

through other voices, in a sense, the voice of reason is present yet endlessly deferred and mediated.

In the scene 'The Second Morning' the trappings of the law are presented: the ghost dressed in "the law's colours", a bugle, the declamation of what is on the parchment and the violations which have been committed, "addition to the basic law of March 22nd – May disposition. Exposure to banishment with loss of job, goods and nationality. Contraveners of the law on co-existence, notably articles 15 and 16, lines 3, 4 and 5." (Scene 2, lines 9-11) The Prince speaks only through a spokesman, never directly. Every time a fight breaks out, he wanders around in the aftermath, gives his 'decision' through a spokesman and another fight begins as the two sides continue to apportion blame. At the end of his tether, the Prince decides on a tennis match in which the winner can claim the loser's goods. The loser relinquishes his nationality and is banished. The collocation between civil war and sport is used several times in Sony's work. Here it is a tennis match, in another work, a football game. There is much to be said on the parallels between dictatorial rule and competitive sports, not least in the area of permitted and ritualized violence. In *Les Parenthèses de Sang*, the announcer compares life in contemporary Africa with a football match which moves "between two forms of violence in which all the players are covered and the referee is insane. The announcer tells us...that the only possible partner to whom one might pass the ball is the audience" (Miller, 136)

The power of hatred is a force that crosses boundaries. Romeo desires an exit from the hatred in which he is trapped, he views Juliet as both a way out and a precursor to continuation of the violence. During his first conversation (with Balthazar), he is not pining for a woman but



for an end to hate “I’m dying to love while all around me enflame and cultivate hate. Everywhere smells of iron, fire and powder.” (Scene 4, lines 27-9) It is Balthazar who reminds Romeo that Juliet thinks of him and that he can go to make love to her at the Capulet party that evening. The feud feeds off itself so that every death is another reason to continue and every death leads to a further death. That is why Romeo yearns for a way to love, an alternative to the vicious cycle of death in which he is trapped, “she [Juliette] sends some rays of hope to lift up my broken body. She extinguishes this weariness in which my soul is bogged down” (Scene 4, lines 35-6).

There is an interesting distinction between the Capulet parents; Papa Capulet tries to dampen his wife’s hatred while she accelerates it. It is unusual to find hatred portrayed as a female emotion especially in such a violent manner. However, this is a repeated theme in Sony’s work: Chaidana in the novel *Life and a Half* is a vehicle of resistance to a series of inept leaders. She manages to kill many of them through sex, binding love and violent death inextricably to political resistance. Although women suffer from many and varied forms of violence in Sony’s work, they are also its perpetrators and have to share responsibility for the cyclical violence that pervades his novels and plays. Papa Capulet tells his wife “hate finishes by being tedious and boring” (Scene 5, line 35) but she revels in it responding “this hate fits me like a velvet dress.” (Scene 5, line 44, only at the end of the play does Juliet’s mother show any remorse, collapsing over the news of Juliet’s death. Sony’s inclusion of hate appears as a feminine characteristic, which is passed from generation to generation in a kind of intrauterine flow and adds to the

sense of political violence as an unending and interminable cycle.

Absurdity and hyperbolic violence against the human body and by extension, the body politic, is at the heart of Sony Labou Tansi’s work. This creates a fascinating issue for the translator, who is forced to maintain both the intelligibility and the hyperbole of the original. This is not a great play, however. It has little narrative drive and less character development. It certainly is not an arresting drama in the same sense as *Romeo and Juliet*. We are never quite sure enough about how much of the characters’ profession of love is valid or how much is an expression of regret at their useless and violent society. There is no confusion or last minute rush to Juliet’s grave. There are a lot of insults thrown by members of each family and then almost as much concern with love as with death. The ‘love that kills’ is one of the key motifs of the adaptation. Romeo’s delay in returning to Juliet, for example, is held responsible for her death-like swoon. The feud gets even more ridiculous when the Prince’s tennis match intended to settle it brings it to a sort of climax. In one scene, a whole list of deaths from disease and natural causes are blamed on the other family’s devilry.

Despite the characters of the Prince and the Voice of authority in the play, there is no sense of reason operating within society. Every action is a reaction to the previous set of insults, injuries and deaths. The aforementioned characters, the only ones not racialised in the casting, might be assumed to represent the law as objective and universally applicable. However, Sony’s treatment of them as disembodied voices makes them more distant and removed from the other characters. The lack of power shown in the law is one of the key elements in the play. The Prince attempts several times to force the

participants into a set of behaviours; his threats and actions are referred to yet ignored. One example is the tennis match which is purported to bring a final end to the feud. It takes place as a grand spectacle: the crowd wear palm fronds and shout, flags wave and there are “100 music pieces, 100 hymns, 100 slogans”. The match lasts for a day and a night until finally Romeo is defeated and sentenced to banishment. Despite Balthazar’s appeals for clemency the sentence is carried out yet the feud does not dissipate. In fact it intensifies as the match has an incendiary rather than placatory effect.

Another strand of analysis is the role of ‘l’amour qui tue’, the love that kills, which Virginia Coulon (2003) sees through a lens of martyrdom. Romeo dies by his own hand just as in Shakespeare but not because Juliet is dead; he kills himself as vengeance for all the deaths that have preceded his, part of ‘un amour sacrificiel, un amour martyr’, “a sacrificial, martyrish love.” (Coulon, 2003, 14) The role of martyr in the Congolese context is one that Sony elaborates on in an interview with his *metteur en scene*, Guy Lenoir: ‘nous avons dans le monde de Congo, un réservoir, une sorte de mine de martyrs. Il y a un grand nombre des gens qui sont morts chez nous depuis le XVe siècle: Beatrice du Congo a été brûlée comme Jeanne D’Arc l’avait été, simplement parce qu’elle était nationaliste’ (ibid). (We have in the world of Congo, a reservoir, a sort of martyr’s mine...there have been a large number of people who have died here since the 15th century: Beatrice of Congo was burned, as Joan of Arc was, simply because she was a nationalist.)

There is a strong sense that Romeo does want to die that particular death. Death is the only factor over which the citizens have a choice, which is bizarre, as death is usually considered something over which we have no choice. Sony’s novels also

dwell on the repetitive nature of death through the characters of Martilli Lopez, Martial and Ernsta Bentina in *The Shameful State, Life and a Half* and *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopes* respectively. In a totalitarian state, the only element of choice may be the way in which you are able to die. Sony consistently plays with this idea: choosing death, specifically the right *kind* of death is an important theme in nearly all his work. Miller (2007) identifies this concern with form over content (types of death rather than life or death) as one of the features of post-independence theatre. She defines it thus: “[T]heir [Sony Labou Tansi and Koffi Kwahule] theatrical production is resolutely allegorical and distinguished by a volatile lyricism and defiant socio-political denunciation” (134). These concerns can be clearly observed in the play and they show the foregrounded nature of the adaptation. The story’s arrangement is moved from the day/night structure of Shakespeare to a ‘cosmic time’ used by Sony to alienate and confuse his audience, as much as the characters are alienated by and from the violence surrounding them. The theatricality is highlighted through the lexical and syntactic creativity as well as the ‘action’. The farce-like nature of the play counteracts the violent seriousness of their content. The over-played tennis match, the Prince’s righteous anger and Romeo’s desire for death highlight the absurd position of the post-independent state.

The environment in which the characters operate is one of death: Juliet calls it “a country of the dead” containing “cockroaches and toads” and “these fields of skulls”.(Scene 14, lines 1-4) The link between love and death has a political dimension. Romeo is not a martyr to his love for Juliet but to his desperation over the ‘necro-society’ in which he lives. The choice to die is the only choice that the



members of this claustrophobic and hopeless society can make. Sony argues that if we can choose the manner of our death, we are not powerless but resisting beings who can reclaim some sense of agency through a sacrificial action. Though his characters face unending violence and hopelessness, he does present them with a ‘whiff’ or spark of resistance, often through their deaths, sometimes through madness and / or violence. According to Sony, we are caught between ‘parentheses of blood’ and our death is the only part of life over which we have control. Some of the most powerful words in this play are ‘spoken’ by Romeo and Juliet, *post-mortem* through their testaments. Romeo’s testament is written to Juliet, urging her to use his death to live better and more freely “choose laughter over tears as I chose death to live”. (‘Romeo’s Testament’, line 25) Juliet tells Romeo that she is unable to consider life after he is dead. She addresses the senseless quarrel reminding those involved that “you don’t need me to give you hate for you to hate” (‘Juliet’s Testament’, line 30) There is no reconciliation, only a sense of loss: “the tragic tax” that the two families have paid. Even the word “tax” reminds the audience of the inescapability of state-mandated violence.

4. Discussion

The aim of this research study is to highlight the way in which Sony’s adaptation focuses on the political aspects of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Although he keeps the frame of a love story between two children of feuding families, Sony’s adaptation moves into an area of hyperbole which matches the excessive demands of the regime against which he pushes. In the realm of language, characterization and theme, Sony’s work is always up against the boundary: what is taboo, over-stated and

overflowing is what he displays as Megevand (2007) argues:

La figure rhétorique fondamentale de a dramaturgie sonyenne est la parrhesie, la liberté de dire plus qu’il n’est permis ; mais aussi excès de représentation, puisque Sony Labou Tansi est porte par l’ambition de tout montrer, violence extrême et excès de la passion, politique ou sentimentale. (p.79) / (The fundamental rhetorical figure of Sonyian drama is parrhesia, the liberty to say more than is permitted, but also an excess of representation, as Sony Labou Tansi is carried by the ambition to show everything, extreme violence and excessive passion, political or sentimental.)

Sony’s aesthetic is one of hallucination: his characters are often on the margins between rationality and insanity. They function within their absurdist reality but there are several moments where violence and sexuality seem to explode as a mass of ‘words as flesh’. This has been called Sony’s *violence engageante* (committed violence) (Ravet, 2002) which requires work from the reader to inhabit the world of Sony’s characters. By writing about fear and disgust, Sony demands that the reader review their sense of abjection as the first step in the struggle against the barbarity of the situation.

The rules of time and space in Sony’s work are fluid. Repetition and dislocation are key elements which Sony used to evade censorship during this period. In an ironic turn, it was ‘safer’ for Sony to set his Shakespearean adaptation in apartheid-era South Africa than in the contemporaneous Republic of Congo. Despite the availability of funds and the consciousness raised about artistic inclusion or diversity, Congolese plays are seldom performed in the West. The move towards recognizing cultural output from the developing world needs to extend its reach from the English speaking worlds to

other ex-colonies, even when they do not write in English.

5. Conclusion

The Republic of Congo has alternated in the post-independence period between economic bankruptcy, violent civil conflicts and indirect rule by the former French Oil giant ELF Aquitaine. It is through writers such as Sony that attention can be brought to the dilemma of small and endlessly manipulated countries. According to Dominic Thomas (2015) Sony's work focused on "...the question of postcolonial power relations, to the nefarious influence of neocolonial exploitation as an outgrowth of colonialism, juxtaposing the greed, depravity, degenerate nature, and arbitrariness of despotic leaders and the corrupt ruling elite with the inspirational humanity and bravery of the oppressed masses." (p.168).

This is particularly true for his plays. Theatre was for Sony a vital and living language with which to exchange ideas with an often barely literate audience. While he staged plays and published novels in France, he never studied or lived there, remaining close to his own Kongo community. In many ways his political activism was also a sign of his commitment to his country. Working with the opposition Member of Parliament, Bernard Kolelas, Sony was in constant danger and was arrested on several occasions. Furthermore, his later writings contained a rather xenophobic slant, moving towards a position of superiority for the Kongo tribe at the expense of the country's minorities. Writing for the theatre was an important part of his life and Sony's work deserves to have as wide a readership as possible.

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