Oshi-Deutsch, a play about African refugee children in the GDR premiered at the Osnabrück “Africa is rising” festival in May 2106. The mis-en-scène and particularly the role distribution of the semi-documentary play about a scarcely remembered episode in the recent German-Namibian relations are remarkable. A review.

After the premiere, some of the Namibian actors joke about the place where they have spent the last two months rehearsing, memorising and choreographing. Osnabrück, in their words, turns into Osnabrooklyn, or OshiNabrück.

Osnabrooklyn, well. The city in Lower Saxony probably has an image problem. What it does not have is a quality problem in its municipal theatre. The premiere of Oshi-Deutsch about the destiny of former refugee children raised and schooled in the GDR, adds to the long list of successful and innovative theatre performances on the Osnabrück stage.

The history of the “Oshis”

“Oshi-Deutsch” relates the story of 430 Namibian refugee children who, after consultations between the liberation movement (and later governing party) SWAPO and the SED in 1979, arrived in East Germany and stayed until the collapse of the GDR and the simultaneous independence of Namibia. The children soon nicknamed themselves Oshis or Ossis, blending thus the prefix of the native language, Oshikwanyama, with the dubbing of a GDR citizen. Later on, they kept the peer group name, and some of them still use it up to this day.

The biographical commuting between Southern Africa and Germany, decided upon over the children’s heads, triggered a range of problems. Meeting the expectations in both Germany and, later, Namibia were for many of the Oshis a matter of impossibility. “Who was I, after all,” asks Lucia Engombe after her return to Africa, “was I like that little creature which I feared as a small child in the Zambian bush, and which I ever since have not forgotten? Was I a Fimbilimbi? A chameleon? Sometimes white, sometimes black? What colour should I have? Why had they made me white in the first place, only to want me to be black now?”

Lucia Engombe’s autobiography Kind Nr. 95 (“Child No. 95. My German-African Odyssee”), from which these reflections are taken, is not only a must-have for German tourists in Namibia: the title is available in any bookstore in the country. Together with the 1999 collection of autobiographical pieces edited by Constance Kenna, Engombe’s book also provided rich material for the two directors of the Osnabrück play, Sandy Rudd from Namibia and Gernot Grünewald from Germany.

The bi-national director duo turned these sources, along with material from interviews they conducted themselves, into a two-hour collage staged by three professional (white) German actors (Anne Hoffmann, Rebecca Marie Mehne, Oliver Meskendahl) and eight young Namibian amateurs: Adam Eiseb and (acting impressively seriously) Mbitjita Tjozongoro, Helouis Goraseb, Beatrix...
Munyama, Ndímomholó Ndílula as well as three children of former “GDR children”: Gia Shivute, Sabrina Kaulinge and Shakira Ntakirutimana, whose appearance added authenticity to the performance.

**German-German-Namibian aspects**

These young actors do a more than thorough job, and cannot be blamed for the few questionable moments in the development of the storyline. At times, *Oshi-Deutsch* indulges in cheap GDR-bashing, for instance when the familiar ideological pronouncements of the East German officials, their bulletins and reports fill the room. Such a (re)presentation all too easily disregards the ambivalent attitude of sections of society in the other Germany, the Federal Republic. Admittedly, West German NGOs and churches supported the independence movement SWAPO. However, prominent conservative politicians and parties actively took sides with the South African apartheid regime. The decision of politicians and decision-makers in 1990 to fly the children from Germany back to Namibia is likewise only insufficiently explained by referring to an increasingly xenophobic climate in the Eastern part of Germany. At these points, the play is only partly helpful in conveying the German-German-Namibian relations of the times.

The enjoyable perspective of the newly independent Namibia, on which the play ends, is put on scene by strong recourse to Aristotelian poetics: a somewhat unusual practice in 21st century Germany, schooled as its theatre-goers are in Brechtian aesthetics. The invitation to the viewers to rise just before the end of the performance for the Namibian national anthem, and thus to offer catharsis after all that chilling East German horror, appears strange, over-pathetic and a bit misplaced. However, an astonishing number of the Osnabrück premiere guests follow the appeal.

**Resume**

In the end, and despite these gripes, the risk taken by the Rudd and Grünewald team and the dramaturges Marie Senf and Ndímomholó Ndílula, to bring the history of the GDR children of Namibia on stage pays off. The production is certainly worth viewing and deserved more than just a handful of performances in Germany and, in August 2016, in two Namibian cities. The three professionals and eight Namibian amateur actors masterfully play their way through imaginary East German dormitories, gyms, discotheques and, after repatriation, Namibian venues including the Hosea Kutako International airport or, highly symbolically, the chalk matrix of a round of African hopscotch in which the children are mere pawns in a game masterminded by adult politicians. It is the ultimate achievement of “Oshi-Deutsch” to bring this quintessence on stage: first in OshiNabrück, and later — among other venues — in Oshakati.

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