

Lysistrata in Nairobi: performing the power of womanhood in the post-colony

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Abstract:

This paper is based on my personal experience of adapting and producing the ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* in Nairobi, Kenya. Originally written by Aristophanes in the fifth century BC, the play gives voice to the power of womanhood. At the time of producing the play in 1997, a woman, Charity Ngilu, decided to run against Daniel Arap Moi for the presidency in Kenya. In this context, the play became what one might call a dangerously relevant script, and was thus promptly banned. The account here serves to document the experience but at the same time makes observations about the interaction between "dissident" artists and the postcolonial state in Africa particularly during the post-multiparty era in Kenya and other erstwhile African dictatorships (Haugerud 1995; Bayart 1993). In the tango between the political and institutional authorities on whether or not *Lysistrata* should see the light of day, some fundamental theoretical questions also emerged. The first concerns question of how effectively the ancient "BC times" could articulate the problems and concerns of a twenty-first century post-colony like Kenya. Secondly, what threats and challenges does the power of womanhood, and women's empowerment in general, pose for the postcolony? And finally, how does "popular" theatre survive and overcome a self and institutionally imposed censorship which represents new strategies for checking the dissident artist?