The role of women on the Ethiopian stage

Aboneh Ashagrie

Department of Theatre Arts, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Published online: 08 May 2012.

To cite this article: Aboneh Ashagrie (2012) The role of women on the Ethiopian stage, Journal of African Cultural Studies, 24:1, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2012.673055

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2012.673055
The role of women on the Ethiopian stage

Aboneh Ashagrie

Department of Theatre Arts, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Drama has been an important cultural form in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa for 90 years. There have been many important playwrights who have been influential in the socio-political as well as cultural development of the nation, and the state has consistently supported a range of theatrical activities – as well as censoring on occasion theatre it found too challenging. However, academic writing on Ethiopian theatre is still limited. This article explores a particular aspect of Ethiopian theatre tradition, namely the representation of women on the Ethiopian stage, and the issues surrounding the empowerment of women in Ethiopian theatre.

Keywords: Ethiopia; theatre; gender; actress; women; empowerment

The beginning of Ethiopian drama

Western influenced drama was introduced to Ethiopia by Teklehawariat Teklemariam, who had been sent as a young man to Russia by Emperor Menelik1 at the end of the nineteenth century. It is thought that Teklemariam had the opportunity to attend theatre productions in Russia, Italy, France, and England during his period abroad (Plastow 1996, 50; Teklemariam 1998/2006, 83–179). When he returned to Ethiopia the mayor of Addis Ababa invited him to attend a ‘play organised at the Terrasse Hotel’. However, the performance in 1920 organized by the Dramatic Society of Young Abyssinians was made up of folk music and dance (Rey 1923, 167), and Teklemariam was struck by the lack of understanding of drama in his country. He therefore decided to write a play to introduce Western ideas of theatre to Ethiopia. The play he wrote Ye Awrewoch Commedia (Comedy of Animals) (1913/1921), which is also considered as the first African play (Plastow 2010, 138–50), was based on a fable he had composed nine years previously as a piece of advice to Lij Iyyasu,2 the Emperor’s heir, whom he considered dissolute. The playwright directed and staged the work over the course of a few days in 1921 at the Terrasse Hotel, in the presence of Crown Prince Tafari Makonnen (Gerard 1971, 412; Kane 1975, 7; Teklemariam 1998/2006, xxxvii) who was later to become Emperor Haile Sellassie.

All the characters in the play, which were animals, were played by boys, as women would have been seen as immoral if they had so displayed themselves to the public gaze. The
performance was a popular success (Gerard 1971, 286). But the following day Empress Zauditu heard that the production had satirized her government as corrupt and inefficient. Further performances were banned and most circulating copies of the play were confiscated. Only when Haile Sellassie took power was this ban reversed.

The male-only casting that began with Ethiopia’s first play continued for decades. Besha Teklemariam (Interview, 3 September 1993) says that the early playwrights Yoftahe Negussie and Malaku Baggosaw both wished to train girls for the stage, but prevailing attitudes about respectable women retaining a purely domestic role prevented them from succeeding. During the Italian occupation of 1936–1941 all theatre activities ceased in Ethiopia. But in 1942 Beshah Teklemariam was commissioned to organize a music and drama group for the new Hagar Fikir Mahiber (Love of the Country Association). Of the 40 members he recruited, 14 were women. The women were enthusiastic singers and dancers but had no interest in acting, and as a result female parts were played by young, handsome boys. New companies faced a similar problem, and the young men themselves were unhappy playing female roles. Tesfaye Sahilu (Interview, 20 April 2010), who played major female roles for the Teatre na Musica Mesfaitya Tsifet Bet (Theatre and Music Development Office), Ethiopia’s second professional theatre company established in 1946 at the Addis Ababa Municipality Theatre, remembers feeling agonized at having to play female roles and humiliated at being identified in public as a female character actor. Awlachew Dejene (Interview, 19 May 1992), who also played female parts for the same company, refused to discuss his experiences saying, ‘I don’t want to remember and talk about the bitter and unpleasant side of my life.’

The unhappy actors urged their theatre administration to look for women to act. Teferra Abu-newold (Interview, 8 July 2006) remembers that women who worked in bars were approached on the assumption that they would not have the inhibitions of their domestic sisters. As a result two volunteers were found who turned up for rehearsals; but on the opening night they disappeared, and further efforts proved largely fruitless. In 1948, Asgedech Alemerew, a very popular bar owner, made a single appearance in a crowded scene of Afajeshin (You Indulge Us in Conflict) written by Yoftahie Nigusie, but this was a unique occasion.

A second strategy was to seek to attract school girls into the profession with an ‘attractive’ salary of 11 Birr (nearly $5 at the time). Zabanay Zellek and Askalie Birhanie were taken on as permanent employees but resigned after only a few days, promising to recruit other girls as substitutes. Zabanay Zelleke persuaded her 14-year-old relative, Selamawit Gebresellasie, who was then in the fourth grade at Beyene Merid Elementary School, to come along. She passed an audition, but on finding she was the only female candidate, ‘...as it would have been a social disgrace for girls to flaunt themselves in the arena of public performance’ (Plastow 1996, 53), turned down the job (Gebresellasie, Interview, 13 November 2010).

The emergence of female playwrights and actresses

Throughout this post-liberation period there had been one place where girls regularly performed. Between 1942 and 1955 a string of plays were put on at the Empress Menen Girls’ Boarding School, all of which were written and directed by Seneddu Gebru (Interview, 25 July 2003).

Seneddu Gebru had taken part in plays when she was a schoolgirl in Switzerland and France. In 1933 she returned to Ethiopia where she taught writing and literature skills and worked with well-known playwright Yoftahe Negussie on staging school plays at Qidus Georgis School. After a year Gebru left teaching to accompany her husband to Harargie region where he was appointed governor. In 1936 she joined the Black Lion Patriotic Front in its guerrilla struggle against the Italian occupation. She was captured and kept as a prisoner of war at Azinara Island in Italy.
After liberation Gebru became director of Sihin School in Dessie from 1942–1943, where she tried to involve the girls in theatre. In 1944 she transferred as Deputy Director to the Empress Menen Girls’ Boarding School. Here she found that the expatriate head teacher had put on a nativity play in 1942 with all the parts played by girls. The piece had been performed at the palace in front of Emperor Haile Sellassie and his family for Christmas that year.

In 1945 Gebru became director of the Empress Menen School, where she signalled her intentions by again mounting a nativity play for the royal family. However, this was only the beginning. Between 1947 and 1955 Seneddu Gebru would write and produce over 20 plays for her girls to perform; many of them with significant nationalist, historical and/or sociological content. Most of Gebru’s plays dealt with the theme of anti-fascist struggle that portrayed Ethiopians’ heroism, martyrdom, and the aggression of fascism. Some of her plays focused on developing Ethiopian nationalism through characters drawn from historical figures such as Emperor Tewodros, Emperor Menilik, and Emperor Haile Sellassie. Other plays treated social issues: love, marriage, human behaviour, living a peaceful life, and social harmony. She preferred to structure drama plots very loosely with ample scenes. In all her plays, female characters are abundantly represented positively (as much as 19 characters in a play), to the extent of emerging as main characters in Ye Nuro Sihitet (Mistake of Life), and Be Graziani Gize Ye Yekaitit Qenoch (Graziani’s February Massacre) (Graziani’s February Massacre) (1947), Ye Tagayoch Simmet Ke Graziani Negegir Behuwala (The Feelings of Fighters after Graziani’s Speech) (1948), Ye Etiopia Tigil (The Struggle of Ethiopia) (1949), Adwa (The Battle of Adwa) (1950), and Atse Tewodros (Emperor Tewodros) (1951). These plays were all in Amharic but in 1949 and 1950 students also performed in English (Gebru 1949/1957, 17–20). The plays were put on in school for students and their relatives, at the palace for the imperial family and aristocracy, and occasionally at Cinema Ethiopia for the general public.

In 1956 Seneddu Gebru took up a seat in parliament. In 1960 she became the Vice President of Senate, and in 1966 General Secretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In 1969, as an appointed Educational attaché, she accompanied her third husband Ambassador Aseffa Lemma to Germany. She continued to write plays in her leisure time, but in the absence of a committed teacher to follow in her footsteps theatrical interest rapidly declined at Empress Menen School. The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 put a stop to Seneddu Gebru’s productions and her political career. She then gave nine playtexts to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library at Addis Ababa University, and almost three decades later, in 2005, the university gave her an honorary doctorate in recognition of her contribution ‘as an early champion of the emancipation of Ethiopian women’ (AAU 2005, 7). Rita Pankhurst (1991, 71–87) considers her a role model for Ethiopian women, and also notes that Gebbru’s former students Tsehai Berhane-Sellasse and Almaz Eshete, who became professors at the Addis Ababa University, had ‘followed her example by choosing to study and work in the field of education’.

**Girls performing boys**

At Empress Menen School girls played all parts, male and female. Significant plays by Seneddu Gebru include a string of anti-fascist and historical plays including Be Graziani Gize Ye Yekaitit Qenoch (Graziani’s February Massacre) (1947), Ye Tagayoch Simmet Ke Graziani Negegir Behuwala (The Feelings of Fighters after Graziani’s Speech) (1948), Ye Etiopia Tigil (The Struggle of Ethiopia) (1949), Adwa (The Battle of Adwa) (1950), and Atse Tewodros (Emperor Tewodros) (1951). These plays were all in Amharic but in 1949 and 1950 students also performed in English (Gebru 1949/1957, 17–20). The plays were put on in school for students and their relatives, at the palace for the imperial family and aristocracy, and occasionally at Cinema Ethiopia for the general public.

In 1956 Seneddu Gebru took up a seat in parliament. In 1960 she became the Vice President of Senate, and in 1966 General Secretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In 1969, as an appointed Educational attaché, she accompanied her third husband Ambassador Aseffa Lemma to Germany. She continued to write plays in her leisure time, but in the absence of a committed teacher to follow in her footsteps theatrical interest rapidly declined at Empress Menen School. The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 put a stop to Seneddu Gebru’s productions and her political career. She then gave nine playtexts to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library at Addis Ababa University, and almost three decades later, in 2005, the university gave her an honorary doctorate in recognition of her contribution ‘as an early champion of the emancipation of Ethiopian women’ (AAU 2005, 7). Rita Pankhurst (1991, 71–87) considers her a role model for Ethiopian women, and also notes that Gebbru’s former students Tsehai Berhane-Sellasse and Almaz Eshete, who became professors at the Addis Ababa University, had ‘followed her example by choosing to study and work in the field of education’.

**Turning point: The emergence of professional actresses**

According to Getachew Debalqe (Interview, 11 February 2010) Selamawit Gebresellasie, who had rejected employment as an actress in 1948, was again approached in 1950 with a request
to appear in a film, *Sallsawe Dawit* (King David III) written by Prime Minister Mekonnen Endalkachew. This offer she accepted and rehearsed for a number of months before the project was halted due to lack of finance. Subsequently she was asked to play the part of Azeb – another name for the Queen of Sheba – for a production by the Addis Ababa Municipality Theatre of *Ye Saba Gazo* (The Journey of Sheba) written by Brihanu Dinqie. Apparently this first performance by a professional actress in 1951 astonished the Emperor and audiences. Finally Ethiopia had a woman on the professional stage.

A few months later Gebresellasie took on the role of Queen Tiruwerk, for the same theatre, in the historical play *Tewodros* (Tewodros), which is about ‘Ethiopia’s first monarch with a concept of modernization’ (Crummey 1969, 3). The play is written by Girmachew Tekle Hawariat, son of the first Ethiopian playwright. All Gebresellasie’s work had been commissioned by the Addis Ababa Municipality Theatre and Music Development Office, which was dissolved in 1955 with the opening of the new Haile Selassie Theatre. Selamawit Gebresellasie transferred to the new flagship theatre where she played leading roles in 15 plays. In 1960 she was given an award by the Emperor for her outstanding acting in *Almotikum Biy’ye Alwashim* (I Cannot Deny I Am Dead) written by Mekonnen Endalkachew; and she also performed in a range of films and television and radio dramas.

Following on from Gebresellasie in 1953 Asnaketch Worqu, a small bar owner and singer who used to entertain her customers with the traditional musical instrument *krar* (Debalqie 2007, 40), joined the Addis Ababa Municipality Theatre and Music Development Office to be followed by a further clutch of actresses recruited in 1954 (Worqu, Interview, 12 November 2009). *Mahber Theatre Dekabet*, a theatre association located in Asmara, had also recruited four female members in the same year to do away with the tradition of casting male actors to play female roles (Matzke 2002, 38–9). In 1961 *Mahber Theatre Asmara* in the same manner had ‘solved the gender imbalance by inviting one *suwa* house [local bar] entertainer and three novices to the stage...’ (Matzke 2008, 64). Concurrently, the Hager Fikir also managed to recruit a group of women to perform (Adanech Tesema, Interview, 24 January 2009). However, even when women were recruited, actors such as Aberra Joro and Firew Hailu continued to play comic female characters at the Hager Fikir in the belief that this cross-gender casting added to the comedy. Conversely, in 1956 Belaynesh Amedie, who was very short and thin, played an errand boy in the theatre in Demissie Desta’s play *Amatina Mirat*.

The employment of expatriate theatre personnel, Narcissi Nalvandian, Francis Zolvaker, and his wife at the Addis Ababa Municipality Theatre, and Richard Hager at the Haile Sellassie Theatre, had changed the traditional style of drama production in the 1950s. These foreigners were keen to promote increased realism on the Ethiopian stage and offered informal training to the actresses, including advice on costume and make-up (Abebe, Interview, 21 April 2010). However, it was in 1975, after the overthrow of the imperial regime, that the first women were offered formal theatre training. A two-year diploma programme was organized at the National Theatre in which nine women took part. Alemyshai Wodajo, Alemsehi Bekele, Beqelech Fiqiru, Hanna Terefe, and Me’aza Birru went on to careers as actresses, playwrights, directors, and stage managers. Both Alemtshai Wodajo and Alemsehi Bekele also served as leaders of the Ethiopian Performing Arts Union.

The most decisive factor that has contributed to the empowerment of women in the development of Ethiopian theatre has undoubtedly been the establishment of the Theatre Arts Department at Addis Ababa University in 1978. Since that time over 100 girls have graduated with either degrees or diplomas in Theatre Arts, and women have been able to take their place in all aspects of professional theatre making. Some particularly notable names include Gifty Abassiya, Marta Sileshy, Azeb Kebede, and Menbere Tadesse who have taken on executive managerial positions in the public theatres and even risen to deputy ministerial rank in the
Ministry of Culture. The production of *Semintu Setoch* (The Nine Women) at The National Theatre by Azeb Worku in 2007 is also unique in Ethiopian theatre history in that, unlike the 1940s male-dominated theatre tradition, all characters in the play were women, and the stage was totally under the control of female performers.

There is much to celebrate in the progress of women in Ethiopian theatre, but there are still areas where more needs doing. Female dramatists often complain that gender bias exists, as public theatre managers show less confidence in assigning women to direct plays (Zinash Tesema, Interview, 12 February 2012). Recent years have seen a decline in women executive directors and since 2009 only one remains in her post. And academically no women have pursued graduate studies in theatre or been employed as theatre academics. It is essential that work continues to ensure the continuing progress of women in Ethiopian theatre.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Jane Plastow for the assistance she rendered to me by sending books very relevant to develop my article, and also for her contribution in shaping the form and content of the article. My warm and heartfelt thanks should also reach Dr Carli Coetzee for her editing, and her support towards finalizing my article.

**Notes**

1. Emperor Menilik II succeeded Emperor Yohannis IV and ruled Ethiopia from 1889–1913. He is recognized as the founder of modern Ethiopia who led the Ethiopian army towards the victory of Adwa by defeating the Italian army during World War I. See Milkias and Metaferia (2005).
2. Lij Iyyasu, the grandson of Emperor Menilik II was designated as heir to the throne by the Emperor in 1909. He remained as head of the Ethiopian state for seven years until he was deposed and imprisoned in 1916 through a coup led by supporters of Teferi Mekonnen – later to become the Emperor Haile Selassie. He is also known as Abba Tena Iyyasu, ‘Abba Tena’ being the name of his horse. Ethiopian leaders are always identified by putting the name of their horse as an adjective in front of their proper name. See Taffete 2004, 47–145.
3. Haile Selassie I (1892–1975) was born Lij Tafari Mekonnen and served as Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930–1975. He was noted for his statesmanship and for introducing many political, economic, and social reforms. He is the religious symbol for God incarnate among the Rastafari Movement (Adejumobi 2007, 184). He was deposed by *Dergue*, the military junta led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam months after the beginning of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. He died in prison and his dead body was retrieved from beneath Mengistu’s office after the downfall of the *Dergue*.
4. Empress Zewditu, daughter of Emperor Menilik II, succeeded Lij Iyyasu after the coup in 1916 and died in 1930, two days after the defeat of her ex-husband by Teferi Mekonnen’s (then heir to the throne) army on the battlefield. After a few months Teferi Mekonnen became Emperor Haile Selassie (Zewudie 2007, 114–37).
5. The school is named after Emperor Haile Selassie’s wife ‘Menen’.
6. Tewodros (1818–1868) was Emperor of Ethiopia from 1855–1868. He is considered as the initiator of Ethiopian modernization. He committed suicide on 18 April 1868, so as not to surrender to the British Military Expedition that came to Ethiopia to free British personnel from the Emperor’s captivity. His wife Empress Truwerk died a few days after her husband; Prince Alemayehu (the son of the Emperor and the Empress) was taken to England by the British military, died and was buried there. Queen Victoria was said to have been very considerate to the Prince (Pankhurst 2002, 97–135).
7. Right after the attempt to assassinate the fascist viceroy, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani on *Yekatit* 12 (19 February 1937) in Addis Ababa, black shirted fascists indiscriminately massacred Ethiopians, and sent intellectuals to prison (Campbell 2010, 185–275), including Seneddu Gebru (Pankhurst 1991, 75).
8. The Ethiopian Revolution erupted in 1974 as the result of the contradictions between the decaying feudalism and the uprooting of capitalism in Ethiopia. Haile Sellassie, who had been praised for four decades as a modernizer, faced strong opposition from Marxist-driven student movements in the early 1970s. The poverty stricken majority of the Ethiopian people gave support to the anti-monarchist student movement which led to the overthrow of the imperial regime. *Dergue*, the military
junta, then took over power (Marcus 1994, 176–220), becoming one of the most dictatorial and brutal governments in the world.

9. Women performers were denied the right to pregnancy in 1950s with the belief that pregnancy would affect their beauty and continuity of performances. But with the struggle waged by Selamawit Gebresilassie and Telela Kebede the restriction was lifted in the 1960s (Gebresilassie, Interview, 13 November 2010).

10. Some of those recruited from traditional bars in Addis Ababa and Asmara for stage productions with low salaries used to run bar entertainment services alongside their artistic involvements (Plastow 1996, 103). In 1974 and 1975 theatre managers in Addis Ababa officially prohibited women dramatists from owning bars, and urged all to refrain from bar entertainment night programmes (Tesfaye Gessese, Interview, 10 February 2012).

11. The Eritrean case is reported as different. Matzke (2002, 39) notes ‘I enquired whether this did not have a comic effect, given that male cross-dressing is not found in long-established Eritrean performance forms, though part of the tradition for women. “There was no such thing as comedy”, Osman vehemently objected, “It was a serious show”’. For further details on Eritrean Theatre, see also Matzke (2003, 2007); Plastow (1997a, 1997b, 2004); Matzke and Plastow (2006).

12. Three distinguished expatriate professors, Robert McLaren, Peter Harrop, and Jane Plastow, are recognized by the department for their commitment to standardizing the theoretical and practical curriculum.

References


Gessese, Tesfaye. 2012. Interviewed by the author, 10 February, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Gessese is a veteran actor, playwright, director, and retired Associate Professor of Theatre Arts at the Addis

Interviews (conducted by the author)

Abebe, Tesfaye. 2010. Interviewed by the author, 21 April, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Abebe is a veteran actor and play producer.

Abunewold, Tefera. 2006. Interviewed by the author, 8 July, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Abunewold is a veteran actor who played a female character at TMMTB in the 1940s.

Debalqe, Getachew. 2010. Interviewed by the author, 11 February, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Debalqe is a veteran actor, and winner of National Arts’ Award.


Gessese, Tesfaye. 2012. Interviewed by the author, 10 February, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Gessese is a veteran actor, playwright, director, and retired Associate Professor of Theatre Arts at the Addis
Ababa University, who also served as the manager of the Hager Fikir Theatre and Ethiopian National Theatre.

Sahilu, Tesfaye. 2010. Interviewed by the author, 20 April, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Sahilu is a veteran actor who played a female character at TMMTB in 1940s, winner of National Arts’ Award.


Tesema, Zinash. 2012. Interviewed by the author, 12 February, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Tesema is a graduate from the Addis Ababa University Theatre Arts Department who resigned from the Hager Fikir Theatre due to being discontented with gender bias.