Report on research trip to the Fonds Sony Labou Tansi at the Bibliothèque francophone multimédia and the Festival des francophonies in Limoges, France, funded by the ASMCF Peter Morris Memorial Postgraduate Travel Prize

My thesis examines the role of the body in performances of power in a selection of plays by the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi (1947-1995). In this research I aim to analyse the theatrical texts, many of which remain unpublished, alongside the plays in performance, given Sony’s work as both playwright and director of his own company. The first chapter of my thesis, which situates his theatre in its historical and cultural context, is particularly interested in the ambiguous role of French institutions and cultural figures in the development of Sony’s career and the significance of their continued involvement in Francophone African arts more broadly. The final chapter also makes connections between past and present in its examination of the legacies of Sony’s work in theatre and performance in the Republic of the Congo and the Congolese diaspora today.

The prize offered by the ASMCF in memory of Peter Morris covered my travel, accommodation and festival tickets, allowing me to spend ten days in Limoges to consult the Sony Labou Tansi archives held at the Bibliothèque francophone multimédia and attend the Festival des francophonies. In the archives, I was able to access a vast quantity of material for use in responding to the questions I ask in my thesis. The opportunity to consult both unpublished plays and early manuscript drafts of some of the published plays allowed me to expand my corpus and to better understand the genesis of Sony’s writing. I was also able to look at Sony’s correspondence with several important cultural figures in France in the 1970s and 1980s, including the respective directors of the Festival des francophonies in Limoges, the Concours théâtral interafricain (a French competition for African radio plays), and the Centre culturel français in Brazzaville. Perhaps most significantly, the visit allowed me to access audio-visual recordings of performances of Sony’s plays and documentaries detailing his creative process in rehearsals, as well as other documents related to performances such as posters, programmes and invitations. Accessing performances themselves had been a real challenge in my research until this trip, and this opportunity has helped me to develop my performance analyses and establish a timeline, to be included in my thesis, which tracks the performances of his work.

My trip was timed to coincide with the Festival des francophonies in Limoges. This festival contributed significantly to the development of Sony’s career, and from 1985-1990 he would create a new work each year for the festival. Attending a variety of performances helped me better understand the broader landscape of contemporary Francophone African theatre as well as the specific cultural context of the festival for which Sony was writing. This year’s festival included Congolese art of the decolonisation and post-independence years, with a performance by the Congolese musician Ray Lema in homage to the legendary Tout Puissant OK Jazz, highlighting the significance of rumba music during this period. I was delighted to be able to see a performance of *Congo Jazz Band* directed by Hassane Kouyaté and attend a roundtable discussion about the play and the history of music in both Congos. The discussion provided very useful contextualisation of music in theatre for my work, and I am currently working on an article that includes a study of this performance. The festival also provided an excellent opportunity to connect with other researchers and artists working on Sony in France. The contacts I made have since shared with me copies of other unpublished documents relating to Sony’s theatre as well as information about upcoming performances in France which has been immensely helpful in my tracking of contemporary productions of Sony’s work.

A further benefit of my research trip was my meeting with the French director, Gabriel Garran. Following my consultation of his letters in the archives, M. Garran invited me to consult his personal collection of documents on Sony, which includes material about his staging of one of Sony’s plays at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris in 1985 and records of his first meeting with Sony and attendance at a performance of one of his plays in the Congo. I was able to interview M. Garran about his experiences, and his memories of the performance conditions in Brazzaville and of his own approach to staging Sony’s work will be directly relevant to my thesis, developing my work on the relationship between France and the Congo in the arts in the late twentieth century.

This trip has benefited my research in multiple ways and I am extremely grateful to the AMSCF for this opportunity which would not have been possible without their generous support.

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