

Autumn 2012

UK **Writer**

The
Writers' Guild
Magazine

A close-up portrait of Ade Solanke, a Black woman with long, dark braids, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark blue top. The background is a soft-focus green outdoor setting.

WINDS OF CHANGE

**Ade Solanke on the
Afro-European new wave**



Editorial and Communications Committee: Zoë Fairbairns, Tom Green, John Morrison, Darren Rapier

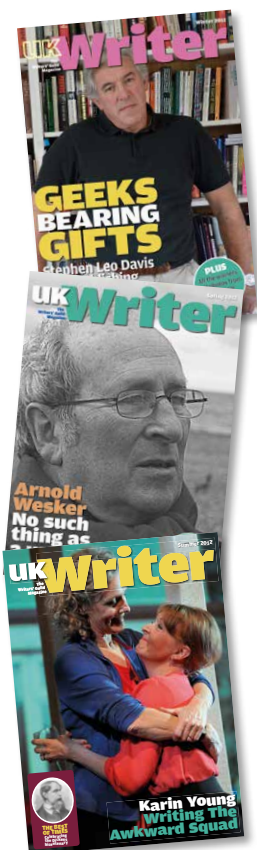
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EDITORIAL

It is almost 18 months since Guild General Secretary Bernie Corbett outlined in one of our first podcasts the major new agreement with the BBC relating to writing for television. At that point the deal was all but signed, and the fact that pens were not finally flourished until June this year tells you something about how challenging the process has been.

Challenging, but worthwhile. As Corbett outlines on page 17, the agreement (negotiated for the Guild by Ming Ho, Gail Renard, Bernie Corbett, J.C. Wilsher, Robert Taylor and Anne Hogben) introduces a number of important changes, affecting both radio and television writers, all reflecting the give and take required in a negotiation. Overall, the Guild feels that it is an extremely good deal for writers.

One aspect, in particular, of the new deal stands out. From this autumn, when TV programmes are accessed online, writers will be paid in proportion to the number of viewers who decide to watch them.

When 'catch-up' services such as BBC iPlayer were introduced few people realised how significant they would be. But they have become a vital component of broadcasting, with as many as 2.5 million people watching a recent episode of Sherlock online.

In a world where many people have come to equate 'online' with 'free', the new Guild/BBC agreement establishes the principle of a fee being paid to a writer each time a programme is viewed. With online audiences set to grow even further, this should help guarantee the livelihoods and status of writers for many years to come.

Tom Green
Editor

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Winds of

CHANGE



It made Afrobeats a global sensation and Nollywood the second largest film business in the world. Now the vitality and verve of Nigerian popular culture is set to burst onto the British cultural scene, says Ade Solanke

ONE DAY in August a friend tweeted: ‘D’Banj is playing on EastEnders’. I had to stand still for a moment to process the news. An African song on a British soap about the East End but with no African characters? What the Dickens?!

But if you have been paying attention, it is no surprise really. More like the first gust onto these shores of a massive wind of change that’s blowing worldwide; a wind generated in Africa but equally propelled by the energies of the Afrospora – the African diaspora – especially its younger generation.

Afrosporans, Afropeans, Afro-Saxons. They live in London, New York, Paris, Munich, but are keen to connect with their roots as much as they are in - and into - western culture. The result? An explosion, a veritable renaissance of African culture, mashing up and remixing African, American and European influences.

Africa Utopia at the South Bank in London in July, Africa Weekend at the Royal Opera House in September ... African and Africa-inspired culture is in vogue. It is reshaping the global cultural landscape (in film, fashion, you name it) and, along the way, impacting the fortunes of British-African writers.

We will come to that. But behind all this are seismic shifts in the global economy, with Africa (50 years after the winds of change of decolonisation) rising to its economic potential. The 21st century seems set to be as much Africa’s as it is China’s, and Nigeria (or Naija) Africa’s most populous nation, is working towards being one of the top 20 economies by 2020.

With his aforementioned top 20 hit, ‘Oliver Twist,’ Brit-Naija star D’Banj (like P-Square, Tuface and Asa) has become one of the most prominent ambassadors of the cultural dimension of the new wave. He has signed with Kanye West’s record label, with a sell-out

US tour, and is now hot in the UK entertainment scene.

His pop is inspired by his African heritage and original Afrobeat, the sound created and popularised by the Nigerian icon, Fela Kuti. Fela’s music (itself a fusion of Yoruba juju and jazz) inspired the multi-award-winning Broadway show, Fela! That raked in \$50 million and seems to have been the wake-up call behind the Nigerian government’s now serious interest in harnessing the commercial potential of their creative industries.

But the impact of D’Banj’s Afrobeats anthem is as much due to his Euro background as it is his African one. Oliver Twist! How apt that in the year of Dickens’ bicentenary, a London-born, British-Nigerian has brought one of our greatest writer’s most enduring characters into the pop charts. As one commentator observed: for a whole generation Oliver Twist will not be recognised as a classic from English literature, but as an African pop tune.

As a British-Nigerian writer, I am thrilled by the rise of Africa’s creative and cultural industries. I also totally get why D’Banj tuned into Twist, and why audiences have, in turn, responded to his song. Little Oliver’s Victorian hunger for ‘more’, as re-invoked by D’Banj (who relocated to Nigeria when his talent and great expectations hit a brick wall in Britain), speaks directly to so many parts of contemporary British society.

I name-checked the same character myself at a conference on the African creative economy in Kenya last year. Talking to fellow artists, artistic directors, theatre producers from across the continent, I’d been amazed at their receptiveness to my play, Pandora’s Box. I had got so used to people saying ‘No’, that being welcomed with open arms was a totally new experience. ‘If Oliver Twist had asked his famous “May I have some more?” question here,’ I’d written of the experience, ‘he’d have been bombarded with the answer “Yes”’

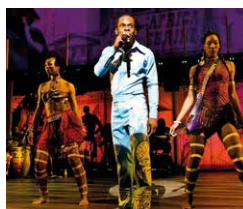
Now ‘more’ – African and African-inspired arts and culture – is on the way.

How and why? First, because audiences on the continent and in the diaspora are supporting it – hungrily. The appetite for Nigeria’s



▲ D’Banji, whose Afrobeats anthem Oliver Twist! was inspired by Dickens

▼ Fela! took \$50 million on Broadway



afro-europe

Nollywood films speaks volumes: consumers are bored with the negative stereotypes about Africa and Africans (war, famine, disease, yawn, yawn) and eagerly investing their black pounds/naira/cedis in realistic depictions of their lives.

Second, many African economies are on the rise, spawning a burgeoning middle-class with more disposable income to spend on recreation and leisure. The continent's population is likely to double to two billion by 2050, and it's a youthful place, brimming with aspirational, entrepreneurial young people.

Nigeria, the continent's third largest economy (after South Africa and Egypt) is forecast by the IMF to experience 7% growth next year, and for the foreseeable future, along with several other nations (like Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana).

It has the largest economy in West Africa and boasts enough arable land to feed itself. The country used to be West Africa's bread basket and could soon be again, exporting a surplus. Lagos, its commercial capital, is set to become the world's third largest city in the next decade or so. And let's not forget Nigeria's energy resources: vast (untapped) natural gas reserves. And oil. Loads of it.

Third, there is that growing recognition that the nation's wealth is not just in the black gold, but also cultural gold. Nollywood has shown there is a huge appetite for Nigerian stories all over the world. The quantity and quality are increasing to match that demand.

And, just as Bollywood tapped into artists as well as audiences in the Indian diaspora, so too are links made between Nollywood and the Nigerian diaspora.

One of the ways the new wave is having an impact on British-African writers is in terms of practical support for their work and collaborations. This year, 24 young UK-born and based Nigerian-heritage artists are being supported by the Nigerian government in a cultural Olympiad initiative with Theatre Royal Stratford East.

Another development is partnerships between experienced 'home-grown' artists and diaspora producers/ artists/ storytellers. I am writing a script for award-winning director Tunde Kelani and I know many other British-Nigerian writers, actors and directors who are teaming up on projects with their counterparts in Nigeria.

There is also a psychological impact. It has been inspiring to see audiences flocking to the African plays and films that have been on in London over the last few years.

This May there were three British-Nigerian plays on in London (my debut, *Pandora's Box*, included). We were worried that this would split the audience. The result was the opposite. They were each lapped up. Many people made a point of seeing all three! I spoke to several members of my audience who said they had never been to the theatre before.

The old notion 'there's no audience your work'

ADE OMOLOLA



● **Pandora's Box:**
Susan Aderin
(Mama) and
Yetunde Oduwole
(Sis Ronke)

'Fast Girls (by Jay Basu, Noel Clarke, Jon Croker and Roy Williams) was a rare and refreshing example of a British film with a black female lead'

has been refuted by this enthusiastic support. The supply made the demand even more evident.

This success is due in no small part to the Arts Council's investment in developing new writing and new theatre audiences. Through its work with companies like Tiata Fahodzi and Talawa, writers like myself have had vital support to develop new work and feed these new markets. I took part in Powerlab, a cultural leadership programme with B3 Media. This linked me up with a mentor, Jon Harris, who helped me produce *Pandora's Box*.

The rapturous audience response (standing ovations and queues of autograph hunters after each show!) has boosted my confidence in not just my writing, but also in writing stories about British-Africans. 'Write white characters,' a writer friend once kindly advised me after yet another rejection slip. I do, and enjoy doing so. I've lived in England all my life so I can write about all of us. I see no reason to pigeon-hole myself. But I believe stories about black people are as valuable as any others.

As are stories with black female protagonists. But in British TV, film and theatre, these are like unicorns: the stuff of myth. The recent film *Fast Girls* was a rare and refreshing example of a British film with a black female lead.

The first line of dialogue in Brian Friel's 1980s play *Dancing At Lughnasa* is: 'When are we going to get a decent mirror to see ourselves in?' Many African writers have been asking themselves that for ages. The answer is: now.

We can express ourselves and explore the richness and variety of our lives and experiences, without the usual stereotypes. Those are still being peddled, but now there's a competing narrative. The fact that we see (and show) ourselves as we are is mind-expanding – for all Britons.

The black characters in the new African films are there as protagonists, not sub-plot characters

(the best friend, the help). They are leading the action and filling the emotional heart of stories. They are making choices, as active agents in the shaping of their own destiny. They are the stars.

It has always surprised me that the commercial potential of the British-African story has been so ignored. I have always been inspired by the uniqueness of my story as a 'British-born'. As a child I was acutely aware of how weird and wonderful that experience was. 'If there was a war between Nigeria and England, who would I fight for?' was the kind of the bizarre thought I used to entertain myself with on my way to school. Those childhood musings are now being recycled and re-shaped into scripts to entertain others.

Through my company Spora Stories I am telling the dynamic stories of the African diaspora. What is dynamic about them? Well, being in a diaspora can be like being a fish out of water. The tensions between 'here' and 'there', the departures, the arrivals and the returns. The ruptured relationships (some ruined forever, some to be repaired) between parents and children, siblings, lovers ... the diaspora condition is inherently dramatic, full of compromises, regrets, yearnings, of losses and gains. It is fertile ground for storytellers.

For example, in recent years we have had a glut of plays and screen stories about troubled youth, black and otherwise, but very little about the story of how diaspora parents struggle to raise their children in spite of the pressures of being in a new land.

Pandora's Box is about an increasingly common response: British-born parents of African-Caribbean heritage taking their British-born children back 'home' to Africa or the Caribbean. They are changing not just schools, but also continents. To my knowledge, there has never been a play about that subject on the British stage.

The play was on at the Arcola Theatre in Hackney in May and the response was quite tremendous. Being nominated in the Offies for Best New Play is a terrific honour and I have also been nominated as Best Playwright in the Nigerian Entertainment and Lifestyle Awards. I was equally stunned by the audience response. Several people came to see it three times, returning with mothers, sisters, sons. But the high spot for me was the row of six-year-olds who sat through its 1 hour and 45 minutes (no interval) without fidgeting, pinching or giggling. That's when I really knew we'd done something right!

We are telling stories that have not been told before and foregrounding British-African experience. But, like D'Banj, I also drew on my Euro-American influences when designing the story. 'Citizen Kane' was one inspiration. Like my main character, a British-Nigerian mother, Mrs Kane sends her son away to better his life chances. I simply made my mother less resolute and designed a story around her indecision.

Having studied screenwriting at USC Film School

What if every community was able to contribute to the cultural success of our nation, just as so many have contributed to its sporting success?



More information about Ade and her work can be found at www.sporastories.com

Pandora's Box is published by Oberon Books and will tour the UK in 2013.

in LA and worked as a story analyst in Hollywood, I am steeped in American film classics of the 1940s and 1950s. Films like Casablanca, The Maltese Falcon, Sunset Boulevard all display the crisp dialogue, complex relationships and deftly orchestrated action characteristic of the best work of that era. No CGI to dazzle and distract the audience with, just great characters in struggle, discovering truths about themselves and each other.

I was recently part of New World Nigeria, a celebration of Nigeria's arrival on the global scene, organised by Nigeria's Bank of Industry and the Nigerian Olympic Committee to showcase the nation's culture. I took part in a series of panels on Nigerian literature, organised by Nigeria's Committee For Relevant Arts (CORA) and the British Council.

Bank of Industry has part-funded (along with the BFI) the forthcoming screen adaptation of Chiminanda Adichie's best-selling novel, Half of a Yellow Sun. The screenwriter and director is Nigerian Biyi Bandele. It will star British actors Thandie Newton and Chiwetel Ejiofor, and is produced by Andrea Calderwood (Last King of Scotland) and Gail Egan (The Constant Gardener).

I hope it ushers in a new wave of thinking in British film and TV and helps remove the age-old bar still blocking black writers from contributing to these vital areas of our national life.

With African-heritage British athletes like Mo Farah winning gold medals for Britain, isn't it strange and ridiculous that we have so few British-African characters on TV? We have no British-African families at all in any of the many communities depicted in our various soaps!

What are the prospects for doing in plays, film and TV what artists are doing in music – using both our English and diaspora heritage to develop existing formats and devise new material? Material that is really commercially viable in being able to appeal to several different audience segments at once?

What if every community was able to contribute to the cultural success of our nation, just as so many have contributed to its sporting success?

The African-American diaspora has been included in America's culture so successfully, its story is one of America's biggest cultural exports – a real earner. Tyler Perry's legions of faithful fans have shown they will pay for diverse material, making him a one-man studio in the process. Why don't we sell our diversity like that?

The world came to London in 2012, yes, and many leading artists from around the globe joined in the Cultural Olympiad festival.

But the world was already here. It has been here for decades. And Danny Boyle's Olympics opening show screened that for all the world to see. Are we ready to screen the same story consistently to UK audiences, and to tap into the commercial potential of that Britain?

Off the Shelf at Black's

A literature collaboration between Black's members club and
the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Books Committee

A series of monthly, one-day residencies for fiction writers
held on Mondays

September 24

Chioma Okereke

November 26

Tibor Fischer

October 29

Matt Thorne

December 17

**Leo Ayles and
Alan Brownjohn**

The day starts at 11:00am with coffee and ends at 4:00pm after lunch and an open-mic session, during which participants can read short extracts from their own work if they wish. All writers will read from previously published work as well as work in progress. An audience of up to 23 will then discuss the work and writing processes, chaired by Jan Woolf of the WGGB Books Committee.

This is an opportunity for established authors to receive mature critical feedback and for the audience to get some guidance too. Cost for each day is £25. This includes coffee, two-course lunch, and all-day and evening membership of Black's. You will also get automatic reference if you want club membership.

In association with Fiction Uncovered

**To book a place or for more information email
janwoolf@hotmail.com**

