

THIS MUSICAL IS A MUST

Lindiwe: A musical play in two acts, by Shimane Solly Mekgoe (Ravan Playscripts 3. Ravan Press).

Reviewed by Colin Gardner

Lindiwe is typical of the excellent and enterprising publishing that Ravan Press has been offering South Africa for the last few years. In any capitalist society, but particularly in South Africa, publishing is likely, most of the time, to be in a friendly relationship with moneyed privilege of one kind or another. What Ravan Press has done is to find out what has been going on outside the usual circle of writers and readers, and it has published some of the things that it has discovered.

Lindiwe is a musical play about certain features of black township life. Its central story, which is presented as a series of loosely-connected episodes, is interesting and surprising in a number of ways, but, taken simply as a dramatic fiction, it is not profound. It is not as a play in the traditional sense, however, that **Lindiwe** asks to be judged. It is presented to us as a **script**, and a script for a musical (both the words and the music of the songs are printed fully). Moreover the overall effect of the work is to focus our attention not so much upon itself as upon the communal life and problems and sufferings and aspirations that it is a vigorous expression of. In this respect the author's introductory autobiographical note is an integral and important part of the publication.

I say that it is a vigorous expression of the life, problems, sufferings and aspirations of a community. But as an outsider (total or partial), can I be sure of that? I think I can: as the blurb assures us, Shimane Solly Mekgoe's play has been a smash-hit in Soweto since it was first performed in December 1975, and it "is still going strong".

Here, then, is popular art, art of the people, in a rich and lively vein. Those of us who do not live in Soweto can learn a lot from it. Here are some of the things that I think I may have learned:

(1) One is struck, at many points, by the earnestness and the eagerness of the tone. The community that Mekgoe speaks for seems determined not only to express its thoughts and feelings but to realise its best potentialities too. (At some moments one is reminded, perhaps not surprisingly, of a medieval morality-play).

(2) The "musical play" form has been made wholly appropriate. It seems to convey with a certain accuracy the alternations and variations of communal feeling: key moments in the story are translated and expanded into a kind of folk-music. (The author's master in this field is of course the remarkable Gibson Kente).

(3) The dialogue is in English, but the lyrics of the songs are in African languages – Zulu, Tswana, Tsonga and Xhosa. Prose, in other words – the speech of discourse and discussion – is in the language which urban blacks have chosen and are rapidly making their own, while the songs cling to the various mother tongues. The cultural richness, the flowing-together of languages and communities, tells us something about Soweto, but it also provides an image of what South Africa might eventually become.

(4) In **Lindiwe** one sees also (it is all a part of the same thing) a community struggling to reconcile traditions and value-systems which often seem incompatible. There is a special emphasis on the tension between tribal custom and Christian doctrine. Here too, then, one senses, a possible future South Africa may be coming to birth.

A final comment. **Lindiwe** as presented by Ravan is a very well-made little book: the printing, the photographs, the cover are all handsome. It is a fine format for a significant dramatic performance. □



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