

theatre

JPR Ochieng introduces Millicent Ogutu and other cast members of *When it Rains*, which runs at the Phoenix Theatre, Nairobi, until October 21. Inset, below, playwright JPR Ochieng
Pictures: Anthony Njagi



When it rains... it pours trouble

Insecurity is a major issue in East African towns, and the Phoenix production of JPR Ochieng's play tackles it very well, despite over-acting and shouting in some scenes, writes *Anne Manyara*

The new play by JPR Ochieng, *When it Rains* resorts several times to the phrase "senseless violence."

Anyone living in an East African town needs no explanation of that phrase. But one needs to ask, is the violence really senseless?

There is some sense behind everything, and it is of the utmost urgency to work it out.

I have always admired polymaths, and JPR, as he is affectionately known, is one of them. A distinguished entomologist with the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (Icipe), he has also established himself as a skilled playwright, both here and abroad. Over the years, he has clocked up impressive literary awards.

The play's title refers to the fact that when it rains, we are all more vulnerable to the elements than ever — mysterious traffic jams appear, the hammering of water on roofs makes it easier for thieves to go about

their business unheard, and power cuts and network failure are frequent.

"Whenever it rains, it's time for demons to hobnob."

The writer has collected a motley crew of characters who drink away their cares on a Friday night, the most interesting of whom is Mungwana, an outspoken former MP who is chronically dissatisfied with everything and everyone.

He is obviously JPR's alter ego, the one who offers a scathing commentary on some of the causes of social disarray.

"What a joke this working nation is turning out to be. When there are matatus, watchmen walk to work. When there are no matatus, they don't report to work, ostensibly because of lack of transport. Ha!"

But it is the very same former MP who puts the barman on the spot, making impossible demands on him and not giving a thought to how the guy is going to get home safely. As members of the group sit there chatting idly, they make themselves fair game for an attack by gangsters.

Making use of traditional African story telling methods, JPR interrupts the flow of the play to narrate several tales which have a bearing on the theme:

Pepi, the *mitumba* business-



woman, puts her finger on the way many people feel:

"All I want is to be able to get on with my life without always worrying about who is in the car following me..."

She and her fellow traders have taken on the job of protecting themselves since no one else will do it properly.

Mzee, a retired insurance salesman, blames the communal passivity:

"We allow things to happen," he says. "It is worse than the fear of Osama bin Laden, since it is more widespread and unpredictable."

Between them, a fairly representative group of ordinary people grapple with the key issue of the day — insecurity. They look at it from different angles, providing a rich tapestry of Kenyan life.

The social analysis is disturbed by a real life crime, a complicated series of surprise role reversals and about-turns.

JPR manages to keep the humour going alongside the angst.

Stepping out of character in a kind of Brechtian manner, the barman urges the audience to put themselves in the shoes of these people and decide how to react.

A vote count pits "people power" against "the law." What is people power? Or, for that matter, the law? Don't the police frequently take it upon themselves to determine who is a criminal and to punish them accordingly, without any due legal process?

There have been many examples of people who take out their frustrations on the wrong people with disastrous results that do nothing to advance the cause of justice or human rights.

Nevertheless, it is refreshing to see real issues on stage, rather than watered down British bedroom farces.

And although there is much over-acting and shouting in George Mungai's production (the space is, after all, very intimate and acting styles need to fit), Mungwana lives up to the part of the ex-MP, while Hafsa Rashid and Wachuka Njoroge provide good foils for the men who are in danger of going on and on.

ProPerArt Creations have combined with Phoenix to research and mount the play. And Jimmy Makotsi of Acacia has published it, not least because he has had personal experience of tuggery in his life. The play is supported by the German Embassy and Heineken, among others. It is showing at Nairobi's Professional Centre until October 21.

REVIEW

A cool evening with Keita, the griot from Mali

As the year comes to a close, music lovers in Nairobi have been soaking in a series of quality performances. The highlight, lately, has been the Safaricom classical concert, which will culminate in a performance at Impala Grounds, Nairobi, on September 26.

Equally, the Alliance Francaise in Nairobi has been a hub of music. The French cultural institution has remained focused on interesting events, as opposed to the limited cultural content that private promoters and event organisers offer the public.

The emphasis on quality has resulted in a diverse and interesting mix of performances and audiences, last week being no exception. Youngsters mingled with up-and-coming musicians, self-absorbed intellectuals and middle-aged writers to spend the Friday evening in style.

The buzzing mix of characters had turned out in huge numbers for a session by Malian balafon player Aly Keita.

It is no surprise that Aly Keita became a musician. Many musicians from Mali have a long family traditional. Over the centuries, the families have followed in their ancestor's footsteps.

Aly Keita traces his griot roots back to the 1300s. He is schooled traditionally, by ear, and has never had a desire to learn to read or write music. His material is self-composed, but stays true to the traditional rhythmic foundation of the griot.

I was surprised to see a single balafon on stage and had expected backup by other musicians, but no. This was a one-man show.

Silence fell as Keita entered the stage and started on a self-written piece.

He kept the audience mesmerised for more than an hour, the repertoire diverse and highly surprising — one minute a sensitive ballad, the next a catchy tune of upbeat simplicity, and on to a show of might in speed and complexity. His technique is fantastic, a rare thrill to witness, especially his apparently limitless improvisations played over a sophisticated set of left-hand grooves, and with an invitation to the audience to join in the singing.

Suzanne Owiyo briefly joined him on stage and the atmosphere was warm, jokes flying around as they embarked on a couple of songs together. The collaboration was excellent and there was an obvious feeling of mutual respect between the two. The audience was soon at its feet.

Suddenly the show was over. The surprise on everyone's face was evident. One hour and 20 minutes gone! An upbeat crowd then dispersed into the Nairobi streets, its distant laughter and animated talk leaving no doubt that the evening was one to remember.

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All I want is to get on with my life without always worrying who is in the car following me.

Pepi, a *mitumba* businesswoman in the play