

Sweetpeter – John Retallack and Usifu Jalloh (UK)

Born in 1787 on a slave-ship and immediately murdered by his father who wants to spare him from a life of slavery, Sweepeter is a mythical boy with seven lives. In this free-wheeling play that thrillingly blends movement, music and verse, Sweepeter travels through time and space. Shepherded by his mother and desperate for reunion with his father, he encounters a mix of Western characters from an evangelising missionary to a contemporary British soldier sent to liberate Sierra Leone from fighting. His tragic journey follows a rollercoaster path as he passes from being patronised to educated before becoming a brutalized bar-boy under first black rule after Independence. In the most chilling section, we see him as a modern boy-soldier under the thumb of his stone-hearted father. But can son and father be lovingly reunited? And can they discover themselves, free from white interference?

John Retallack is the founder and director of Company of Angels which produces new and experimental work for young audiences. He has written and directed a number of plays in recent years, including *Risk*, *Virgins*, *Ballroom*, *Sweetpeter*, *Common Ground*, *The Foundling*, *Club Asylum*, *The Wild Girl* and *Hannah and Hanna*, which has toured widely and been translated into several languages. He has been a director at Performing Arts Labs where he ran the Playwrights' Labs. He was formerly director of Oxford Stage Company (1989-99) where his adaptation of Melvyn Burgess' *Junk* won the TMA Young People's Award in 1998. He was the founding director of ATC, Actors Touring Company (1977-85) and has toured and worked in many countries including Europe, India, Japan and America.

Why do you write for the theatre?

I write because I can express things that I feel that I would never know I felt if I didn't write. It's a necessary activity for me to enjoy living with myself and with the world. I write for the theatre because it's the medium I know and love.

What does 'Europe' mean to you?

I live in a city on an island that is part of the continent of Europe. I love London because it has become more European (better food, better films, better music, better-looking) in my lifetime. I love Old Europe (cathedrals, Bach, museums, parks, café life) and I love New Europe (dynamic, multi-lingual, brash, impatient, totally adaptable, takes nothing for granted, very late-night). If I stay fit and healthy, I want one day to cycle from the north of France to the south of Spain, via the Pilgrim's Route. I haven't yet worked out a New European cycle ride.

Do you think your play could work anywhere in the world?

It might or might not – but where I'd like it to work most of all is England.

Did you begin with myth or history in conceiving the play?

I began with history. I wrote *Sweetpeter* because of a comment I read by Richard Weight in his book, *Patriots*, that '...in the English character liberalism and racism co-exist...' I knew something of Sierra Leone and thought that the story of that country embodied that observation. After all, the English abolished slavery, set up a colony there and called it 'Freedom' – and then, a century later, once again enslaved the very people that they had freed. Was this one of the causes leading to a civil war so

brutal that almost no journalist reported it – and that only the intervention of the British Army brought to a halt? These thoughts led me to imagine a boy, Sweetpeter, who has lived through it all, from 1787 to 2004. I wanted to express how much he feels for our country – and how little we know about his.

To what extent did the play change shape during writing?

The play was greatly helped by the speed of its composition and the collaboration with a great story-teller, Usifu Jalloh, who is himself a Sierra Leonian. He has a dance and a story-telling background. I loved writing it and being able to keep an imaginative hold on such a wide span of history. I've never been to Sierra Leone – so I couldn't have written it alone. If I had, I would have felt that it was a 'colonial' play. Meeting Usifu made me much less afraid of the subject and the form.

Could you say something about its dramatic form and language?

Sweetpeter, The Mother, the Father, Gentlejesus – these are strongly representative characters who turn up in different guises and in different centuries. They inhabit such a vast span in space and time that I wanted a language that has great volition and rhythm, language that marries well to the abundance of music and physical gesture in the play. The father is all brute power, his language is minimal and terrifying. In contrast, Sweetpeter is airborne and abundant with imagery – while Gentlejesus bends language to suit his historic purpose.

Do you think that theatre has the power to change the world?

I think if all the theatre that was going on in the world now just stopped forever and never came back or was ever seen again - then I can say with certainty that, within a few years, the world would become a place that desperately needed theatre back. In this sense, I believe that theatre is changing the world constantly (even if we can't see how it does so because we're so used to it being here).