

DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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By **Wole Soyinka**

Directed by **Tawiah M'Carthy**

GRADE RECOMMENDATION 9+

CONTENT ADVISORY

This play deals with the harms of colonialism and oppression. It contains discriminatory language. A major topic within the play is ritual suicide. Although set in what is now Nigeria during the second world war, this play is based on a real incident that took place in the Yoruba town of Oyo in 1946.

SYNOPSIS

In the marketplace of a Yoruba community in colonial-era Nigeria, Elesin Oba engages in good-natured banter with his Olohun-iyó, or Praise-Singer — a musician and poet whose role it is to laud important people — alongside other members of the community, as he celebrates his last day in this world. It is a momentous day for Elesin: his Alafin, or king, died thirty days ago, and tradition demands that Elesin, whose name reflects his rank as Chief Horseman, now give his life in order that he can guide the spirit of the Alafin in the afterlife.

Though Elesin has always enjoyed the pleasures of this world, he professes himself eager to join the world of the spirits and ancestors. Nevertheless, he has come to the marketplace to revel for one last time in the adulation of the women there. He recites the “Not-I Bird” story, a poetic ode that illustrates the magnitude of death, and declares that he is not afraid to die — his “whole life has been spent in blessings” in preparation for this task. Suddenly, his eye is caught by a beautiful girl. Even though she is already betrothed to the son of Iyalója, the Mother of the Market, Elesin insists on taking her as his bride that night before fulfilling his duty that will ensure the welfare of the Yoruba community.

Meanwhile, British District Officer Simon Pilkings and his wife, Jane, are about to attend a fancy-dress ball wearing Egúngún — carefully-prepared Yoruba regalia that a spirit medium wears on specific days, thus enabling an ancestor's spirit's physical presence. Word arrives of Elesin's imminent ritual death and Pilkings orders Elesin's arrest. However,



Maev Beaty (left), Akosua Amo-Adem.
Photography by David Hou.

his officers encounter resistance from the women of the marketplace. Pilkings then intervenes personally, interrupting the ritual to have Elesin dragged away in handcuffs — and thereby provoking a tragic turn of events.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- Global Competencies
 - ◆ Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Learning to Learn/Self-Awareness
- Grades 9-12
 - ◆ The Arts
 - ◆ Canadian and World Studies
 - ◆ English
- Grades 11-12
 - ◆ Social Sciences and Humanities

THEMES

- Ceremony (Sacred and Secular)
- Colonialism, Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Oppression
- The Complexity and Conflicts of Identity
- Cultural Interpretation and Preservation
- Culture as a Way of Life
- Duty and Responsibility (Collective and Individual)
- Death and Ritual: A Metaphysical Understanding of Death
- Family Dynamics and Inherited Roles
- Language and Culture, Language and Life/Death
- Names and Their Significance
- Transition and Cycles of Life/Death
- Willpower and Desire
- Yoruba Religion and Worldview

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- The playwright, Wole Soyinka, has specifically stated that this play is not about a “clash of cultures.” Why do you think he said this so explicitly? What are some more accurate ways to describe the conflict in this play?
- What is the significance of the planned ritual being interrupted? In your opinion, does the ending of the play rectify this interruption?
- Several characters in this play do not fit into clear cultural divisions. How does this impact their identities and how the other characters in the play view them?
- What do you notice about the agency of the women in this play? How are they able to influence events?
- What does this play tell us about how human beings understand and engage with the reality of death and dying?

STUDY GUIDES

Study Guides for all 2022 productions are available free of charge online on our website.

BOOKING INFORMATION: TICKETS, WORKSHOPS, CHATS AND TOURS

STUDENT MATINÉES

You may book any available date, but selected student matinée performances for this show are at 2 p.m. on the following dates:

- Wednesday, September 28th
- Thursday, September 29th
- Thursday, October 6th
- Friday, October 7th
- Friday, October 21st

WORKSHOPS, CHATS AND TOURS

Pre or Post-Show Workshops, Chats and Tours (virtual, onsite or at your school/centre) can be booked by calling the Box Office at 1.800.567.1600.

SOCIAL MEDIA



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