

>> Professor Martin Fusi suggests a costume for actor David Memler. Memler played the Priest's Drummer and announced the presence of the Priest with his drumming.

> Behind the scenes, the actors talk about their costumes which reflected African styles and made the sparse Studio Theater production really pop.



# out of Africa

First play by an African playwright brings important milestone to theatre program

Just as *The Swamp Dwellers* was an examination of a society in change, the production itself represented a major adjustment at the College. The show was the first-ever theatrical production staged at William and Mary that was written by an African playwright. Wole Soyinka's piece, directed by Professor Martin Fusi, touched upon themes of rebellion, tradition and youth.

Soyinka, born at Abeokuta in Nigeria, was accused of conspiring with the Biafra in 1967. Held as a political prisoner for 22 months, Soyinka could not begin writing until he was in Europe. The writer's struggle with imprisonment, as well as the challenges Africa faced in the mid-20th century influenced the style of his works, and *The Swamp Dwellers* was no exception. Despite adversity, Soyinka's perseverance allowed him to become Africa's first Nobel Prize winning Laureate in 1986.

The fusion of physical and societal dangers is what made Soyinka's work a representation of the multiple difficulties facing Africa. "This play represents more than what you can see," senior Brittany Bynum said. Bynum was one of two actresses who played the mother figure, Alu. "It represents the struggle and changes Africa has had, with the conflicting nature of tradition and progression. The play uses the actors to show their view of the world around them and to illustrate common reoccurrences of domination," Bynum said.

The idea of Africa's youth leaving their villages in pursuit of modern life and monetary gain was a major part of the production. This shift from traditional values to city life posed a challenge to the characters.

"Through this play I learned both sides of tradition and progression and Igwezu represents both," Bynum said. "Igwezu realizes that the world has changed but has not forgotten the tradition which he was raised upon. He is stuck between the medium of tradition and progression."

The themes of the play had an impact on the actors, causing a connection to form between their personal lives and those of the characters. "One thing I have learned throughout my life is that change will always come. Some change can be good and some can be bad, however we need to learn from the changes that arrive so that we will not become ignorant or blind," Bynum said.

There were many challenges presented to the actors in *Swamp Dwellers*. Although a play of this kind was new to the College, actors needed knowledge from past dramatic events. "There were parts in the play that required theatrical experience," Bynum said. "For example, Alu's progression to the recognition of the harshness of the world around her, involved emotional expressions rather than words. She never fully understands, but she does not wish to know all of the details for she would rather be blind to the truth than to accept the cruelty of her son Awuchike, and the world he lives in."

The production of Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* represented a valuable milestone for the College's Theatre program. Director Fusi captured the harshness of progression in Africa, showcasing that "only the old and the children stay," and the rebellion associated with growing up.

>Becky Wickel

> Budin prepares to give the visiting priest a shave; however the threatening nature of the shave makes the scene even more tense.

