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Digital Masks to Africa

Pan-African Theatre Ensemble

Review by Mark Horning | [Season Schedule](#)Also see Mark's reviews of [The Nether](#) and [School of Rock](#)

White-clad slaves work their way across the stage picking fluffs of cotton from the floor as they go. When all of the balls of cotton have been picked from the area, they pull handfuls of cotton from their cloth collecting bags and throwing them down, stooping to pick them up once more. This action is repeated over and over.

This is the opening scene of the dramatic multimedia presentation of Mwatabu Okantah's epic poem *Digital Masks to Africa*, based on Cheikh Anta Diop's "Poem for the Living," in performance at Kent State University.

The story is of one African American's journey to Africa in search of his true identity and place in the world African community. Over the course of the slightly longer than 60-minute piece, a cornucopia of sight and sound sweeps through the senses in a seamless pattern of spoken word, music, song, drumming, pantomime, poetry and prose. The collection of spoken languages include a collection of African tongues such as Wolof, Twi, Ewe, Yoruba, Fante and


**Yayra Tamakloe***Photo Courtesy of Pan-African Theatre Ensemble*

Lingala, as well as the European languages English, French and German, with South Asian, Hindi and Arabic represented as well.

What this gives the viewer is a crystal clear picture of the centuries-old journey of slaves and forced labor from the African continent to all parts of the world and the return of their descendents back to their home countries. They come to learn, to relate, to try to understand what happened, why it happened, and most importantly, who they are.

Six actors portray various characters who speak powerful words of anger, acceptance, fear and hope, as music, voice and sound overlay their recitations.

Performing are Dr. Lundean Thomas, Professor Emerita of the African American Theatre Program, University of Louisville, Kentucky; Huda Alhamed (English and Arabic); Madison Ledyard-King, freshman at Kent State University majoring in Managerial Marketing; Yayra Tamakloe (English, Twi and Ewe), senior at Kent State University majoring in fashion design; Sri Varshani Raghuje (English and Hindi), international student and freshman at Kent State University studying fashion design; and Mike Esekwen (English and Lingala), senior at Kent State University majoring in Integrative Studies. The production is directed by D. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson, founder and artistic director of the Pan-African Theatre Ensemble at Kent State University who also developed the theatrical adaptation of the work.

 I have I seen so much emotion exhibited in such a short space of time. The actors move effortlessly from scene to scene going through multiple costume changes. It is a wondrous experience for all in attendance.

Digital Masks to Africa will be performed once more on April 11, 2019 in the Oscar Ritchie Hall (Room 230), Department of Pan-African Studies, Kent State University before heading to the Fringe Theatre Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, this coming summer. For more information on the company, visit <https://www.the-pate.com> or their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/thepateksu/>.

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