

British Theatre Guide

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Assata Taught Me

Kalungi Ssebandeke

Gate Theatre

4–27 May 2017

Assata Shakur is a former Black Panther, an active member of the Black Liberation Army, who was convicted in 1977 of killing a New Jersey State Trooper in a shoot-out in which she was herself wounded.

Two years later, she escaped from prison and in 1984 got to Cuba where she was given political asylum. In 2005, the FBI offered a \$1m reward for her capture and in 2013 added her to the Most Wanted Terrorist List and at the same time the New Jersey Attorney General matched the FBI making a total of \$2m on her head.

Kalungi Ssebandeke's play is fiction, but this is the woman he presents to us, her background briefly given in a crackly newscast in the blackout before the play's first scene opens.

The theatre, set in traverse, is turned into her home in Havana. The floor is a mixture of colourful tiles, the walls crumbling turquoise patched with corrugated iron. Designer Frankie Bradshaw and Jack Weir's lighting give us the warmth and exoticism of Cuba and suggest a life of energy and incident but both somewhat precariously held together.

This isn't a relaxed house. At every knock at the door, Assata gets her gun, secreting it out of sight only when she is sure of her caller. (What won't people do for \$2m?) But she has taken a risk now: she stopped a fight and has brought the black boy being beaten up back to her place to patch him up.

This is Fanuco, a cocky young fellow who is studying law at the University of Havana; he fancies himself as a boxer, his body dancing to match his feelings. He's fed up with Cuba and is set on going to join an uncle in Miami. This lady is the first American he has met: he decides he wants her to help him improve his English, to better prepare him for the new life he dreams of. Reluctantly she agrees.

Fanuco sees only the fantasy American Dream; she knew the reality. He feels trapped in Cuba; Assata sees the way Cuba cares for its citizens, though she is trapped there too as she tries to teach him much more than better English.

Kenneth Omole, making his a professional debut, captures Fanuco's exuberance and his naivety and Adjoa Andoh is impressive as a woman of integrity, still firm in conviction after more than 30 years living in exile. These are two fine, contrasting performances. Their relationship is what director Lynette Linton brings out forcefully, but the play is full of underlying symbolism, every turn of the key in the lock a reminder of the danger Assata lives in.

The device of Assata expressing her thoughts to her grandmother's photo and a point when she loses her cool completely are somewhat awkward devices and the situation doesn't allow much

revelation about Assata's life in Cuba, but this short play holds the attention for every one of its 70 minutes.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)