

An honoring performance

“The Reign of Wazobia” celebrates Tess Onwueme’s accomplishments

Story by Rachel Streich, Chief Copy Editor

In November of 1994, Tess Onwueme was in her first year as a distinguished professor for cultural diversity and professor of English at UW-Eau Claire. An award-winning and internationally recognized playwright, she directed a showing of her play, “The Reign of Wazobia” in the Kjer Theater on campus.

Matt Florence, a freshman at the time, played the role of Iyase, a power-hungry man seeking to dethrone the female regent, Wazobia. He said he was just beginning to learn the art and craft of theater.

Twenty years later, Florence returned to the university as a community member and stepped into the role of the same character, on a different stage with a more diverse cast, honoring Onwueme’s work both on campus and in the world.

On Saturday afternoon in Schofield Auditorium, the university recognized Onwueme’s accomplishments and her life’s work, which she donated to the UW-Eau Claire Foundation. The event included speakers from across the world as well as the chancellor, a performance of “The Reign of Wazobia” and a reception in Centennial Hall.

Molara Wood, special assistant on documentation to the president of Nigeria, spoke on behalf of the president of Nigeria, who addressed the worldwide significance of her work.

“Through the fierce beauty and commitment of her work, Onwueme has stood against all forms of oppression,” Wood said in the president’s speech.

Along with Wood, Onwueme’s family and friends and other distinguished guests filled the second and third rows of the auditorium to honor her. In total, over 400 people attended the event.



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Chancellor Schmidt honors Tess Onwueme Saturday at Schofield Auditorium.

“All the people that are around you at this very moment are here because of the authentic person that you are,” Berith Danse, co-founder and art director of Theatre Embassy in Amsterdam said, addressing Onwueme.

The play that followed served to celebrate Onwueme and her voice for social justice. It tells the story of Wazobia, a regent of a mythical kingdom during a period of transition between one governmental era and another. In speaking out to question the male power structure of the kingdom, Onwueme dramatizes issues of women and the masses as well as crises in leadership, environmental concerns and the tension between change and tradition.

Anna Mae Tempus, an English education major who took Onwueme’s Women in African literature class last semester, said the play was a reflection of who Onwueme is and what she stands for.

“You could hear and see Tess’s spirit through all of the words and all the dancers,” she said.

Throughout the performance, music and dancing was an integral element. Michael Osuji, a Nigerian musician, played folk instruments including a xylophone and a flute.

Poppy Moelter, an Eau Claire community member, sang and played guitar. A choir of mostly freshmen also sang and danced at the close of the production.

Moelter said the music contributes to the play’s storytelling and combines contemporary sounds as well as folk music.

“It’s exciting to be a part of ... the work of Tess Onwueme bringing historical perspective and incorporating current issues,” she said.

While Onwueme wrote the play in 1985, Moelter said the topics it brings up are relevant today.

For the performance, students, faculty members and community members acted in a diverse group spanning different backgrounds, ethnicities, professional experience and ages.

Julie Eklund, senior lecturer in English and communication and journalism, played the lead role of Wazobia and said the diversity of the cast helps show the subjects in the play are wide-reaching.

“It emphasizes that these are human issues and human conditions that are not unique to a particular place,” she said.

Onwueme said she chooses theater as an art form because it is a powerful opportunity to engage in a dialogue about universal concerns.

“The stage becomes an extended social dialogue bringing actors, members of the community and the audience together to engage matters in their world,” Onwueme said.

As the actors danced through the aisles after the performance and Onwueme’s friends and family then joined her on stage, the auditorium filled with applause in support of the cast and Onwueme.

After the performance, Tempus said Onwueme brings a note of globalism and internationality to the university, and she hopes her lasting influence will continue into the future.

Stay tuned for a video later in the week