Theatre travelling in new directions

AFTER a month-long countrywide tour treating wananchi to some juicy theatrical action, the Nairobi University Free Travelling Theatre is back in Nairobi, this time devoting the week to the city's students. And there are new happenings on offer too.

For apart from the usual plays, there is an extra one in Kiaruhili, Mkgugu & Mwaka wa Serkad (The Government Inspector) by Nikolai Gogoli and a whole lot of Ma- shairi.* The latter is a translation from Margaret Dickson's When Bullets Begin to Flower.

I had a chance to see them in action when they performed The Chef's Bride by Desmond Paini, an entertaining commentary on the clash between the old and new.

While the Travelling Theatre might not so much be a venue where critics should be exercising their wits, yet I feel obligated to mention the outstanding performance of two of the main characters in this play, Lilian Wanjiria as Tamara the young village girl who has been promised as a wife to the chef (Oseak Ouma Ouma) and Acheng Nyongo as Khatiwa the young village wife who would bring women's liberation right to the chief's door-step, upsetting the calm routine and even influencing Tamara to run away from her husband.

Wanjira and Acheng make a fine pair acting opposite each other, and while Wanjira's best asset happens to be her quick reactions coupled with snappy facial expressions, Acheng's is her voice, without which I feel most of her acting might be rather blurred.

Mathangani wa Muya as Langa the headman's chief aid deserves mention for turning a rather small role into something to reckon with, throughout the play.

But as I said, the FTT is not an excuse for critics to have a ball.

What is most striking is the team spirit of the group that, even though they number only 15, they manage to act plays written for bigger casts without betraying themselves like all competent actors, to the fact.

Their best however, and which draws the longest and loudest of applause is the Mashaari from the revolutionary When Bullets Begin to Flower. Set to music, choreographed and recited in sans and chorus by the entire cast as well as accompanied with a guitar and drums, the Mashaari II listened and watched Bantu wa Kibarua and Wimbo wa Uchungu are very stimulating both to the ear and the eye.

Director Wanjiria Wachira has done a good job setting these to music and no doubt it contributes a lot to the warm reception they get from the audience.

A new discovery, says FTT director of Wanjiria Wachira, is that henceforth the programme will have to consider and include primary schools in their tours. This means that they will have to include scripts especially suitable for the primary schools.

This discovery came as a result of a "first" performance at Mugu Primary School where "the response was so good, even with the English plays," says Wanjiria, adding: "What we get from that school we knew to be genuine. Children do not applaud for the sake of it and we knew they were following whatever was going on on stage."

Other productions on their programme are the well-tested Jomo and the Presidet by Sean O'Casey, The Leader by Joseph White, The Grand Race by Kivutha Kibwana and Five and Ashes by Wanjiria Wachira.