

# Stepping out in style

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**"ARTISTS are very fragile people. A director has to learn to handle these egg-like egos. This is definitely an enormous task in a world of theatre where everybody is only too sensitive".**



Tebbutt... director of stepping out.

Gerry Tebbutt tells this writer as he goes through his cup of coffee at a Nairobi restaurant. This professional director, an expert, "or so people say" — in his own words — in musicals, is in Nairobi to direct Nairobi City Players' production of a comedy, *Stepping Out*, at the Kenya National Theatre.

Tebbutt is in the country courtesy of Swissair, who sponsor his stay during the direction of at least one script for the NCP once a year. He has a more glamorous contract with a Hong Kong theatre company, where he also directs a play in the local language each year.

**How to succeed in Business Without Really Trying** and last year's smash offering, *Godspell* catapulted him into new heights of theatre direction. The productions were technically a success, with sound and visual imagination way beyond what the ordinary group in Nairobi can give.

"Directing any play requires almost patience, I am expected to soothe the performers, however badly they behave, or however mad they make me. It is my duty to make my cast feel needed, and at home. Actors have to be encouraged

and not destroyed — at least by the director. "The responsiveness of the director to the actor's needs and calmness required for the internalisation of a role. Rigidity is a small word that should not feature in the director's vocabulary," says the soft-spoken and quiet but firm Tebbutt.

At the age of four, the young Gerry did his first dance, and put the life of theatre in his then tiny head. "My family took me to watch a musical, and afterwards I knew that I could not do anything else. Theatre would have to be my life. Indeed it has been, and with no visible regrets," Gerry says.

Gerry, taking theatre seriously, joined one of London's five leading dance and drama schools, and at 17, he ventured into professionalism. "See, in Britain you cannot join any of the theatre companies unless you have joined the Equity Union which takes care of all affairs related to performing arts. So, there I was, I joined the union, and crashed full length into the world of professional arts."

He says, "as an artist I am too busy, too busy that I have very little time to attend to my aging parents. And since I have to be in Kenya and Hong Kong at least once a year, in addition to running my theatre company in Ipswich, life ceases to be smooth, though it is last."

In his 26 years of professional acting, Tebbutt has been involved in more than 300 plays, mostly musicals, as

director, and in at least half of them, as choreographer. He has also taken certain lead roles in some of the plays, and is a man who believes in serious rehearsals, over a set period (which a script itself will always dictate), in order to achieve the near perfection element before opening.

On *Stepping Out*, Tebbutt says "things work out pretty fast. The script is actually easy to direct in fact almost directs itself. When we open, my work will be finished, the rest is left to the cast. I plan to fly out on Saturday to take up my next assignment back in London.

"It is a very unusual play. An unusual comedy. It certainly will make the audience choke with laughter, since both the technical and artistic requirements have been taken care of. It should inevitably be thrilling," he sighs.

Tebbutt believes the attitude of theatre-goers in the city ought to change from the near conservatism that emboldens it. "Theatre can never be for a specific race. It is universal, though what is needed is an effort for the various peoples to try and understand the cultures of the rest. A play is enjoyable if the culture in which it is set is clear in our minds," affirms the director.

As for local talent, Tebbutt says, "There are very many talented people here. It is amazing that Kenyans readily understand the cultures of other people, say western. What is needed is the encouragement of such talent, so that it is possible for the artists to live off their art."

"As it is, there does not seem to be enough money around the country for artists to survive as professionals. In the circumstances, the artists have done well as well practised amateurs, who would perhaps do very well in a country like the United States or the United Kingdom, where art is taken seriously."

**London's ace West End actress Jenny Logan leads Nairobi City Players in their Richard Harris authored *Stepping Out* opening at the Kenya National Theatre and expected to run until June 16.**

Jenny took the lead role in the same play in a production in London which received tremendous response only recently. She hopes that "things will go more or less the same way".

According to officials of Nairobi City Players, the bringing of Jenny to Kenya for the lead role was not only in line with the practice of "important" professional talent to take major roles in the line of theatre development in Kenya, but it was also necessitated by the lack of tap dance culture in Kenya.

Jenny is herself an expert in tap dancing, and having taken part in the same production before a live audience in Britain seems to have

together". "And as a director," says Tebbutt, "it is difficult to get everything one needs for a play. Financial facilities, make life a little difficult. But we must make do with what is available I guess. Improvisation is part of the professional idea."

Now Tebbutt's face softens as the cold begins to bite. "Where is the famed Nairobi sun?" he asks softly, then smiles away, "I guess all time cannot be sunny." Gerry Tebbutt is a man committed to theatre. "I am devoted to art and its development," he says in conclusion, as he begins to "take care" of his lunch.

made her coming to the country a natural decision. She has risen from a child actress to a star. She has done several hundred scripts as well as taking roles in a variety of television commercials, though for her, the stage remains the most natural choice.

In the West End of London, Jenny has performed *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, which was sold out during its run at the Kenya National Theatre two years ago. *Come Spy With Me, Grease, Our Man Crichton* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, all musicals.

But she considers her real success the lead roles she played in *Irene* and *Chicago* which she credits with having given her most natural of performances. For Jenny, it is a combination of sheer brilliance, natural talent and determination that are responsible for the making of a star. "You must be prepared to make certain sacrifices," she states.

In *Stepping Out*, Jenny takes the lead role of a teacher, a professional ex-dancer, who never succeeded. The teacher is invited to take charge of a class of nine women and a man in a play set in an old church in England. As Mavis, the teacher, Jenny is bitter, uncompromising complex, but deep within her, has the urge to finally make it.

One man in the play only comes to the dance class as a means of forgetting his sorrows, which include the loss of a wife. He will be excused for his unnecessary sensitivity and peculiar silence.

In the same class there is also a brooding and uncertain nurse, a black girl christened "the token spade" for the inadequacy she sees in herself, but which she covers in the excess love she spares for her husband and children, and then there is the arrogant and aggressive Maxine, the "fixer" of deals!

cess of any other individual. *Stepping Out* has the teacher, Mavis, with the arduous task of bringing out the best of this group in a dance for a charity performance.

Despite this "tap dance business," this play does not answer or aspire to be a musical or dance. It is a fast moving comedy that should turn out to be hilarious to the comfort of the audience.

The individual performers in the cast are given a full character development process, with their feeling being placed so openly on the table. What the performers reject and love, what makes them angry or ignite embers of fire in their hearts, all come to the fore, with a force that is itself moving.

The challenge of learning a physical "torture" such as tap dancing, which requires skill and talent is not easy to come by especially in the light of the body "strengthening" that all this demands.

Richard Harris is also the man who wrote *Business Of Murder*, which was performed by a cast that included the late Nigel Shave, two years ago. Richard's blazing thrills are as evident as they were then, now.

Jenny Logan believes that her years of experience help her project the right image for any role that she is asked to play, and "plus a serious examination of the character traits of the part, the rest can be managed."

Jenny, who talks very little, will be supported by the likes of Stephens (a tap dancer) who took lead roles in both *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* and *Godspell*. She is very popular for her folk singing in Hooperston's effort.

The man in *Stepping Out* is Ian Barton, while the actresses are Ashlene Makokha (the black girl), Jane Bailey, Ruth Sherwin, Lesley-Anne MacGuinness, Maria Cunningham, and Anne Ochen.

The premier for the play, on Wednesday at 8 p.m. is in the aid of the Nairobi Terminal Care Centre, with the sponsorship for the premiere coming from Thomson tree Safaris Ltd. Travel Promoters Ltd. and Indian Women's Association. Tickets for the premier go for Shs 250, with the rest of the tickets selling at Shs 150.