The weekend

A PLAY FOR TODAY

A collaboration between BBC World Service Drama and the African service brings the story of one Nigerian teenager to the airwaves this month. Nina Adams profiles the writer of Shakara

Oluseye Tess Onwueeme is a playwright whose work is preoccupied with questions of identity, class and poverty - through which runs a rich vein of women's voices. A Nigerian, now based in the USA, Onwueeme and her writing are rooted in her home continent, from plays such as Tell It To Women to her novel Why The Elephant Has No Butt, themes of African folklore and traditional culture underlie her work. She has a string of honours and awards to her name and is currently in residence as Distinguished Professor of Cultural Diversity and English at the University of Wisconsin, USA. Among her acclaimed works is Shakara - Dance Hall Queen, a new production of which can be heard in Play Of The Week this month, it also forms part of the African Performance season of plays (see page 39).

Through the voices of women, in Shakara and her other plays, Onwueeme draws out universal themes of conflict - between rich and poor, modern and traditional - and the conflict of the inner-self is a recurring motif. Faced with the unfairness of a world which subjugates loyalty and honour while rewarding cruelty and selfishness, Onwueeme's characters construct dialogues which lend a complexity to questions of right and wrong.

Shakara is a 12-year-old girl in Lagos tormented by the love of her hard-working mother and the model behaviour of her born-again-Christian sister. Shakara despises the poverty from which she springs and rejects her mother and sister as fools, remaining loyal to a system in which exploits them while the rich opportunities of life pass them by.

Shakara's best friend, Dupe, is the daughter of a wealthy drug-baroneess and while Shakara envies her material wealth, Dupe in turn covets the security of a loving family. In her search to find a place in the world - one of money and dubious respect - questions of what is fair and right compete with a drive to materialism and Shakara finds herself turning her back on the values with which her mother has raised her, in order to get ahead.

These twin relationships - between Shakara and her mother and Shakara and Dupe - are central to the play. Onwueeme plays with the parallels and contradictions between these two girls' ambitions and desires "What Shakara lacks [money, material goods] Dupe has. What Shakara has [a loving mother] Dupe wants." As Shakara battles to overcome the unfairness of life by venturing further into a rebellious lifestyle Dupe tries to protect her. "They become surrogate mothers for each other in a way," Says Onwueeme, "her friend can offer everything her mother can't. What Shakara realises is that in a vacuum of financial security, in a society where injustice surrounds her, she must short-circuit the system. This is what leads her into dysfunctional behaviour. Joining the gangster culture is a route to recognition, and wealth".

Across so many societies, the message which young people like Shakara recognise is that the struggle to improve ones lot in life often depends less on hard work and more on playing the system. And Onwueeme points out that when society is faced with the criminality of disadvantaged youth, it absolves itself from all responsibility, assigning blame elsewhere. There is an emptiness to these lives, young people left without options, in which society ought to recognise its own hand - but does not.

Onwueeme's literary influences span the globe from Wole Soyinka, to Shakespeare and from Albert Camus to George Bernard Shaw. Her lyrical texts employ a story-telling style which belies the complexity of the messages. In representing African stories, and African lives, Onwueeme is championing the disadvantaged of the world as so many literary voices have before her. Described as "the ibsen of her culture, the playwright who dares to raise new issues", Onwueeme uses the dramatic form to express an optimism for the future, for change and a challenge to the regressive powers over people's lives. But it's an optimism tempered by a recognition that in the noble struggle, one sometimes commits an ignoble act.

For times see Shakara, page 18
Shakara by Tess Onwumere
1 x 60 mins [from 4]

Shakara (Tutu Sonaiwe) lives in one of the poorer parts of Lagos, Nigeria but desperately wants more out of life. She thinks her mother is not doing enough, her sister is too religious and her house is embarrassingly small. A typical wilful teenager, she sees her only hope for a better life in the city's nightclubs where she is held in such high regard by her fellow clubbers. Her hunger for a life of riches increases and as a consequence, so too does the conflict with her mother, a righteous, hardworking woman who just wants her daughter to calm down. Will Shakara listen?

This co-production between BBC World Service Drama and the African Service was recorded entirely on location in and around Lagos, providing listeners with a unique opportunity to take a journey through one of Nigeria's biggest and liveliest cities. Shakara can also be heard in Africa as part of the African Performance season, see page 39.

See feature, page 17
ADAPTED FOR RADIO BY ADJOA ANDOH. DIRECTED BY RISHI SANKAR. PRODUCED BY ALICE MARTIN

Speaking Well Of The Dead by Israel Horovitz
1 x 60 mins [from 11]

A specially-commissioned play to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the USA.

Penelope speaks well of her husband, who was killed at the World Trade Center on September 11th, while her daughter Willa wants to speak the truth: In her mother's eyes, it would mean killing her father again. Israel Horovitz, a prize-winning American playwright lives in lower Manhattan. The planes attacking the World Trade Center passed over his house, and the smell of their destruction was inescapable for months. Speaking Well Of The Dead is a story of bereavement and grief in the aftermath of the tragedy and explores the need for the living to hero-worship the dead.

Jill Clayburgh, who shot to fame in the Hollywood of the 1970s with her performances in An Unmarried Woman and Silver Streak, is joined by her real-life daughter, Lily Rabe, as her fictional daughter, and by Israel Horovitz as her dead husband.

DIRECTED BY NED CHAILET

Misery by Stephen King
1 x 90 mins [from 13]

After an automobile accident, novelist Paul Sheldon meets his biggest fan. She is his nurse and his captor. Now, she wants Paul to write his greatest work - just for her. She has a lot of ways to spur him on. One is a needle. Another is an axe. And if they don't work, she can get really nasty. This stunning adaptation of the Stephen King classic is based on the stage version by Simon Moore and is radio that promises to keep you on the very edge of your seat.

Starring Miriam Margolyes and Nicholas Farrell, with music by David Chilton.

ADAPTED FOR RADIO BY DIRK MAGGS. DIRECTED BY MARION NANCARROW

Monsieur Ibrahim Et Les Fleurs Du Coran by E E Schmidt
1 x 60 mins [from 15]

Award-winning actor Henry Goodman stars in this delightful one-man show by Eric Emmanuel Schmidt. Momo is a young Jewish boy who lives in the Rue Bleue in Paris with his lawyer father - his mother having abandoned them both shortly after his birth. Momo steals cans of food from the "local Arab", Monsieur Ibrahim, to supplement his meagre pocket money. But the arrival of Bridget Bardot in Monsieur Ibrahim's shop begins an unlikely friendship between the two men: a friendship in which Momo is to make a long journey - both literally and metaphorically.

This bitter-sweet monologue was the winner of a prestigious Sony Silver in this year's radio awards.

ADAPTED FOR RADIO BY HENRY GOODMAN. DIRECTED BY MARION NANCARROW

A day at the races puts Zoe on a winning streak when it comes to money and love. Is romance on the cards for her and Sean?

Just when David thinks his troubles are over, Ned tells Annie about David's past indiscretions. Annie's sense of betrayal escalates into a dramatic showdown at the health centre. Will her fury put David's life in danger? And will Jane learn some secrets about her husband which will change their lives forever?

Sana's full of remorse and confusion when she finds herself on a date with Tameer. Should she follow her heart or her head?

WRITTEN BY JONATHAN MYERSON, PATRICIA CUMPER AND ANNE CAULFIELD. DIRECTED BY DAVID HITCHINSON AND JONATHAN MYERSON.

EDITOR: DAVID HITCHINSON

Australia and NZ | Episode 1: Wed 0032 rtp Wed 0532, 0932, Episode 2: Fri 0032 rtp Fri 0532, 0932; Omnibus: Fri 2350 rtp Sun 0950; East Asia | Episode 1: Wed 0032 rtp 0832, 1532, 2132, Episode 2: Fri 0032 rtp 0832, 1532, 2132; Omnibus: Sat 0630 rtp 2130, Sun 0930; South Asia | Episode 1: Tue 2332 rtp Wed 0632, 1032, 1632; Episode 2: Thu 2332 rtp Fri 0632, 1032, 1632; Omnibus: Fri 2230 rtp Sat 0530, Sun 1030; East and South Africa | Episode 1: Wed 0832 rtp 1532, 2132, Thu 0132; Episode 2: Fri 0832 rtp 1532, 2132, Sat 0132; Omnibus: Sun 0630 rtp 1530, Mon 0130; West Africa | Episode 1: Wed 1032 rtp 1532, 2132, Thu 0132; Episode 2: Fri 1032 rtp 1532, 2132, Sat 0132; Omnibus: Sat 2230 rtp Sun 0530, Mon 0130; Middle East | Episode 1: Wed 0832 rtp 1532, 1932, Thu 0132; Episode 2: Fri 0832 rtp 1532, 1932, 0132; Omnibus: Sun 1030 rtp Sun 1530, Mon 0030; Europe | Episode 1: Wed 0932 rtp 1432, 1932, Thu 0132; Episode 2: Fri 0932 rtp Fri 1432, 1932, Sat 0132; Omnibus: Sat 1130 rtp Sun 1930, Mon 0030; Americas | Episode 1: Wed 1532 rtp 2132, Thu 0132; Episode 2: Fri 1532 rtp 2132, Sat 0132; Omnibus: Sun 2130 rtp Mon 0050

in praise of god
Programmes which reflect the devotional and experiential aspects of the practice of faith around the world

A reflection by the Rev Ruth Scott on the meaning of the symbol of the Cross - now a symbol of Christianity but once regarded simply as a magical symbol which warded off evil. Christians did not