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## Tribute to Horst Ulrich Beier, 1922-2011.

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When Ulli Beier was asked how he made such distinctive and creative contributions to cultural life, he thought that he saw objects that others overlooked, and possibilities that others could not imagine. How had he acquired these skills? His conversation always returned to Weimar, the hectic years between the collapse of the German Empire in 1919 and the rise of Nazism. Banks crumbled, militias marched and politicians floundered, but new music, new painting, new theatre erupted. Nobody who lived through that fever, Ulli reckoned, was ever the same again. Born into a doctor's family in Prussia in 1922, his family moved to Berlin to escape rustic anti-semitism, and Ulli was exposed to an amazing range of music and art, ancient and modern. When the family fled to Palestine, they mixed with cultivated German exiles; but adolescent Ulli also wandered among Palestinians, East European Jews, militant Christians and other refugees and visionaries drawn to the much-promised land. As British colonial power waned, Ulli discovered many traditions, and relished their interactions – until 1948 when the emergent state of Israel displaced multi-cultural Palestine. When his parents returned to Germany, Ulli headed for London and a degree in Phonetics. After some years of supply teaching, he joined the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Ibadan.

British rule was winding down in the 1950s, new authorities and conventions had not emerged, and in Osogbo town Ulli was delighted by the same fluid excitement he'd enjoyed in Palestine. Yoruba religion and culture coexisted with Christianity (from the South) and Islam (from the North), allowing space for new forms in painting, architecture and sculpture, and completely new dance and drama. In these golden years, Ulli was free to manage conferences and workshops for emerging performers, publish a new generation of African authors in *Black Orpheus*, and organize overseas tours for Osogbo's dance-dramatists. Ulli embraced Yoruba religious practice, and his first wife Suzanne Wenger became a priest. Ibadan academics, champions of Oxbridge standards, looked askance at an Extra-Mural Tutor 'going native,' but his explorations complemented his continuing appreciation of European music, architecture and artistic practice generally. He could not imagine these traditions to be in conflict: between them, delighting in the influences of one on another, he was most excited, most alive.

By the time civil war savaged Nigeria, tore their friends apart, and suspended normal life, Ulli had a global reputation as facilitator and dramaturge. He had by then married Georgina, they had two sons (Sebastian and Tunji), and it was wise for families to leave Nigeria until the war ended. These circumstances drew him across the globe to the new University of Papua New Guinea. Australian rule was winding down; national sentiment had yet to crystallise, and cultural possibilities were – again, it seemed – limitless. There was a catch. UPNG was innovative, but it was, after all a university, bound by slow-moving traditions, and Ulli was always a practitioner rather than a scholar. Here, Ulli had to teach the Literature half of hybrid Literature-and-Language courses. Before long he won the University's agreement to offer courses in new Writing in English, and Creative Writing to a few selected students.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Ulli was happiest and most creative when political and cultural authority was in flux. Those situations are ephemeral: so was Ulli's obscurity. After fostering Papua New Guinea drama and literature, he returned to post-war Nigeria as an arts administrator, until he was recalled to independent Papua New Guinea – as Director of the new Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. Eventually he retired to Australia. Retirement is not the right term. It was interrupted by an improbable career as promoter of Third World Arts in the innovative Iwalewa Haus in Bayreuth, the heart of Wagner country. And at home in Sydney the Beiers transformed their Annandale house into a gallery of African and Melanesian textiles, sculpture, painting and cross-cultural music. Surrounded by the aromas of Georgina's cooking, Ulli would listen to Beethoven or Tunji's African and Indian drums, translate Brecht from German to Yiddish to English, organise concerts and entertain visiting artists. Ulli had two careers: after his youthful adventures in Nigeria and Papua New Guinea, he enjoyed – or perhaps endured - mainly managerial positions in Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Germany. If the first career was the more glamorous, the second was equally creative, and he is treasured by audiences and performers who enjoyed his support, his protection, his encouragement, and his lucid criticisms. Either career would ensure immortality: it is quite miraculous that he crowded both into a single lifetime.

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<sup>1</sup> A wide-ranging survey of Ulli Beier's life, times, employment, publications and ideas, is available at [blogs.crikey.com.au/culture-mulcher/2011/04/05/death-of-a-giant-ulli-beier/?source=cmailer](http://blogs.crikey.com.au/culture-mulcher/2011/04/05/death-of-a-giant-ulli-beier/?source=cmailer). Ulli's own recent reflections are captured in his *Decolonising the mind : the impact of the university on culture and identity in Papua New Guinea, 1971-74*, Canberra, Pandanus, 2005