

FROM THE STAGE TO THE SCREEN

The Exegesis of Adaptation in Acting

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Introduction

The acting profession has experienced some positive developments in recent times. While many trained theatre artists are trying to eke a living off stage productions, the emergent Home video Industry and private Television stations provide avenues and opportunities for the exhibition of professionalism in acting.

In this paper, we shall take a critical look at the nature of acting and its demands on a prospective actor. This we shall do through an analysis of the peculiarities of stage and screen acting. The essence is to create the awareness that the medium affects the approach.

The professional training of the Nigerian actor is stage-oriented, and the development of TV drama and Home video films pose a great challenge. The stage actor has to be conscious of the demands of adapting to screen (TV/Film) acting in order to perform with believability.

What is Acting?

Acting, in a simple sense, is playing a role that is not really your true character. In an office, you can work in an "acting" capacity, in which case you are working on a table (or as an officer) in a position which is not yours or is above you. It is not a substantive post and you leave that seat when the officer comes back. This implies that acting is portraying a character different from your true personality.

In life, man is seen as an actor naturally because we play various roles every day. You see that mobile policeman who plays

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tough with his gun cocked, asking motorists to bring "egunje," "roger", or "family support" (as the bribe is now popularly called) or be shot? He is acting; you will see his "real" self at home probably when he has removed the uniform. You see that boss playing tough at the office? That lecturer trying to be very strict? That Governor or Head of State being autocratic or dictatorial? Go to the privacy of their homes, their wives may in fact be bossing them. The outsiders (the audience) only see the masks (the roles) they are playing.

However, acting on stage is quite different from real life. According to Wilson in *The Theatre Experience* (62-3), "in stage acting, there is that awareness by the audience and the actors that the presentation has been planned ahead of time." And this consciousness sometimes leads to a more truthful re-enactment than we encounter in real life. Blunt on his part, defines acting as:

The process whereby an inner state of being of extraordinary intensity, composed of emotions, thoughts, and sensations is revealed in a dramatic manner to others by the external expressions of an actor. (188)

Acting then means making an audience believe that what is not true is true, or what is not real is real. And of course, this is premised on the actor's belief in the role he is playing. The actor has the responsibility of making the audience believe in his actions. Coleridge posits that there is "a willing suspension of disbelief" by the audience once they are watching a performance. But the level of this experience can only be sustained if the actors do not break the "illusion of reality." This forms the main theoretical framework of McGraw's illuminating work, *Acting is Believing*.

The purpose of acting is to share a dramatic experience. The actor, who we see as a beast of burden, comes on stage to compare notes, show slices of life, or mirror of the society to the audience

who have a common interest - to hear and see what the actor has to perform. It explains why Rotimi in his charge to actors in the Premiere of *Hopes of the Living Dead* (IX) notes that the Nigerian audience are Polaroid, like the instamatic camera - their responses are spontaneous. They let you know, in the instant of your acting, if you are good or bad.

It is worth pointing out here that as one who specializes in bringing to life on stage (or screen) imaginary characters created by a playwright, the actor lends his body and voice for the concrete realization of the dramatic persons. He makes the character breath on stage, just as the dead words of the script come alive. This underscores Blunt's (3) analysis of *Pantomime* and *Voice* as the "composites of acting". He defines "pantomime" as "dramatic expression(s) made clear or evident by the positions and movements of the body." Being proficient in pantomimic dramatisation entails the training and expressive use of the body so that it can portray the physical and emotional demands of the character.

Voice, on the other hand, is "dramatic expressions projected by the human tone." This is in articulation, pronunciation and enunciation; and it is in the delivery of lines in such a way that the psychological or emotional state of the character at every point in time is communicated to other actors to enhance their reactions; and to the audience for them to share the dramatic experience.

Since it behoves the actor to bring to life the dead words of the script, he (the actor) is vital in the production process. A good actor, through his fine acting can make up for poor directorial work; but no amount of play craftsmanship or directorial ingenuity would be appreciated if bad actors mess up their roles through amateurish acting. It explains why McGraw (6-8) stresses that the two requisites for acting are Talent and Training. The former is that innate ability within an individual which enables him to exhibit flair naturally for doing certain things, while the latter is the development of that ability. Training is the stirring up of one's

talent so that it does not become stale or dormant.

McGraw in his analysis identifies six areas of training which are of interest to us. It is pertinent for us to relate them to our professional training in Nigerian Institutions.

- (a) Cultural Development in the realm of human knowledge and experience. This explains the requirements for courses in Theatre History, Sociology of Drama, Theatre Management, Drama/Theatre in Education and Elective Courses.
- (b) External Training in body and voice to make them expressive. This is evident in courses like Movement/Choreography, Dance, Pantomime, Mime, and Speech Arts.
- (c) Internal Training to enhance the sensory and emotional responses. This is found in courses like Acting and Directing in addition to the courses listed in.
- (d) Interpretive Training to know how to prepare a production, how to relate with other artists, how to observe and do things well. This is the period of experimentation for the actor. He tries out things, takes chances, and grows. Apart from practical-based courses mentioned above, this act could be learnt in courses like production workshop, theatre laboratory or practical theatre.
- (e) Performance Skills on how to prepare for the final production experience. The actor learns how to face the audience for the first time, how to read their response, and how to sustain his role so that portrayal of the character has some permanence.

It is worth stressing at this juncture that a prospective actor must have a profound knowledge of the art of acting and the operational dynamics of the medium in which he is acting. If you do not understand a medium, you will not know how to use it effectively, a theoretical framework that guided the renowned mass communicator, McLuhan in *The Medium in the Message*. This is not to say that the requisite training presupposes the making of a fine

actor. Incidentally, there are actors who are good but are more or less “quacks” as they do not know what they are doing. We can relate such a situation to an event one recalls with tremor:

A certain fisherman in our village (in the early sixties) came back with a hook, not in the mouth of a fish, but in his own upper lip. The villagers conferred as to how best to extract the hook. The solution: hold him down, cut his lip to the hook, remove the hook then sew the wound; and this they did without anaesthetics: The poor man screamed his head off, but it was a successful operation. Obviously, they did not have the training, or the technical facilities for such medical adventurism.

Acting on Stage

Acting on stage is peculiar because it is confined to the physical space, and it is before the other (or better) half of the theatre - the audience. For the audience to willingly suspend disbelief, the actors, in the portrayal of the characters, according to Wilson (65) must be credible and convincing.

The nature of a theatre experience is ephemeral - it comes and goes. It is not an art work, like painting, that you can hold up and admire. A performance only exists as long as it lasts and any appreciation or denunciation later, like in reviews, is from a recall of the shared dramatic experience. This explains the view that roles on stage are symbolic and make special demands on the actor's skills and imagination.

One edge the stage has over TV/Film media is the psychological immediacy - the live presence of the audience and the actor in a given place. They can reach out to each other, touch and influence each other. If the actor knows that his acting is appreciated, he rides on the audience's applause to stardom; and where the reverse is the case, he finds a way to ameliorate the situation.

In Ayakoroma's "The Actor and the Audience: The Contemporary Nigerian Experience", he identifies types of audiences

which include the active, passive, captive and restive and the uncultivated type as those who flood the educational theatres. They are the “PM Stereos” during performances, the cantankerous lot calling for moderation in love scenes, making cat-calls, or laughing to draw attention. They come mostly to be noticed thus actors who are tyros develop stage fright, miss their cues or forget their lines when facing such. The experienced actor knows how to control the audience in live productions.

Use of Stage

The stage is the laboratory for a theatrical event, and in the area of composition, the ultimate is artistic beauty. But then, the audience has the freedom to look at any area of the stage even where elements of emphasis have been used. A child seeing his mother on stage will always look at her; a woman will like to know what her husband is doing on stage even if it is a crowd scene. The trained actor knows the guiding principles of the various types of stages; he knows that acting on a proscenium (picture frame) stage is different from a thrust or arena stage.

Movement

Stage movements, body movements or stage businesses could be swift or expansive or sometimes exaggerated for them to be projected fully to the audience. A little scowl, nod or shrug may not be noticed by the person sitting at the last row, so it has to be made clear. This means so much energy (or dynamics) is expended on stage acting at every point in time.

Voice

The delivery of lines has to be articulate. Articulation is the distinct pronunciation (of vowels) and enunciation (of consonants) of the lines of a given character. It is a source of embarrassment if the speech of actors is poor and some haughty members of the audience throw in corrections. Calls of “Volume”, “FM”, or

“Louder” from the audience may rattle actors who do not make good use of their voices. Stage acting is such that even whispers and asides are loud enough for the audience to hear.

Casting

Premised on the theory of “willing suspension of disbelief”, casting for stage productions is sometimes taken for granted. Actors could be cast for any role, and may be their suitability enhanced with costumes and make up. Have you seen a boy of about 24 years playing a toddler? At the University of Ibadan, I remember one Gbenga Windapo did that convincingly in a Laffomania Production some years ago.

Casting, when not approached perfunctorily, is a challenging task because out of the available actors, the director chooses those whom he believes most capable of projecting the qualities of the given characters or script. And since the stage gives room for double casts, the actors who are doubling have to make efforts to keep the quality of their performances reasonably even and the overall pattern of the production unchanged.

Performance

A stage production takes place once and for all. The actor lives his part for that given period and his freedom is heralded by the final black out. Thus an actor has to learn his lines, movements, and stage businesses very well so that he can sustain the character. According to Hopkins in “Capturing the Audience” (Cole and Chinoy 210), “The true test of performance is the ease with which it is accomplished.” This is in painstaking rehearsal preparations.

The Nature of Television

TV, as a medium of mass communication, has a heterogeneous audience. You do not know who will be (or is) watching your programme. TV is reality in the sense that it shows real life settings through the eye of the camera. If a tele-drama is set in an amusement

park, the location is established before mediation takes place. For example it could start with an establishment shot in that location then cut to medium shots or close ups of the action which may not be in that location really. That is Television.

Casting

In tele-drama, casting is as truthful as possible so that there is some fundamental affinity that makes the surface disconnection not only unimportant but paradoxically helpful as Murray notes in *Nine American Critics: A Study of Theory and Practice* (155). The actor is himself so much so that after a long screen image, the difference between his real self and the role wears out. Ekwuazi studies this phenomenon in *Film in Nigeria* (43) and surmises conterminously:

This association of the actor with a specific role provides a ready source of movie information ... This facilitates the identification process as does the fact that the similarity between the star and his screen ego soon wears out the thin line separating the one from the other ...

It explains why Chika Okpala, Claudius Eke, James Iroha and Romanus Amuta are seen as Chief Zebrudaya, Jegede, Gringori and Natty in real life, courtesy NTA Enugu’s *New Masquerade*, to mention just a few Nigerian TV actors.

The TV actor must look it (like the character) on the screen without even saying a word. If there are twins, there must be some resemblance if they are supposed to be identical; children must also have some form of resemblance with either parent(s). This is all to avoid any artificiality. Gary Coleman could play Arnold in *Different Strokes* for many years because of his natural disposition; Yomi Adeyemi-Lawson did same in *The Third Eye* produced by NTA Lagos because she was cast for the role (Uzie Idafe) as a little girl too.

Audience

The television audience takes part in the screen event vicariously. They are not there to see and affect or influence the actor spontaneously. As Ellis puts it in *Visible Fictions* (160) the broadcast TV viewer is “a bystander, but a bystander in very specific circumstances, that of the home”. For the artiste, the camera (and those working behind the scene) constitute the primary audience.

Composition

This is the rational arrangement of the setting on the one hand, and the pictorial interpretation of the camera work on the other. This is determined by the peculiar demands of the scenes and the “takes.” On a long shot, the way the set is arranged, the way actors are positioned, and the spatial relationship may be different as opposed to medium shots or close ups.

Movement

In exteriors, movements may take the form of normal or realistic everyday movements. But there are little restrictions in interiors or close shots, to enable the camera catch every action and if possible intensify it. This underscores the practice of cuts to long shots when an actor is standing up (or sitting), running, struggling or jumping.

Voice

The use of voice is not exaggerated on TV because of the use of condenser microphones. A shout does not have to be a natural howl that threatens to tear the diaphragm of the mic. A whisper or hiss is executed as such for the mic to pick up. Consequently, TV acting does not exert so much stress on the artiste. There is no fear of loss of voice after a day’s shooting as such. TV recordings are normally broken up and an actor could be given time to rest, if he is being overstretched, while other bits could be recorded.

Adapting to the Screen

There is no arguing the fact that the training of actors in our educational institutions stresses the stage medium. Thus TV/Film directors are saddled with the added task of moderating such aggressive, mechanical or exaggerated styles to suit the TV/Film medium.

In adapting to the demands of the screen (especially in our home video experience), the actor has to note that having the flair is not good enough. Cottrell in *Laurence Olivier* (7) writes in this vein:

Talent alone is not enough. It has to be properly harnessed and directed otherwise. It can drift into shallow waters and flounder on the rocks of mediocrity.

The key to the above is practise to achieve perfection.

Secondly, while the stage production is one full uninterrupted run, a tele-drama or home video is a product of “bits and pieces.” Unlike the stage, the recording (which is the performance) may not be linear. The shooting could start with the last scene and the actor is expected to project that emotional state of the character. If shooting is broken till the next day, the continuity man or lady is there to ensure that you are taking off from where you stopped. This implies that to be acting in the TV/Film medium, one has to be a reservoir of the various demands of a given role.

Thirdly, an actor has to conserve and build his role instantly since recordings are always faced with that phrase actors dread: *Cut! Take It Again!* This may be at points when the actor feels the bit was going on very well; or the director of photography may feel it was a good take. Whether the cut is to change camera angle or a repeat of the scene, the actor is expected to improve on his previous take. This means he does not lose his point of concentration during such breaks.

Fourthly, Film/TV acting demands that actors learn their lines quickly. This is because the rehearsal period is not very long, unlike the stage. Any “fluffing” of lines, any cuts due to wrong lines constitute wastage of tape, time, energy and money.

Fifthly, unlike the stage play, a TV production or movie can be seen over and over again. It has more permanence, so one has to be sensitive in the use of voice and facial expressions. Unless it is a reflection of the character, the diction has to be perfect.

In the sixth place, the actor should realise that TV is a close up medium and calls for naturalness. In extension, this is the reality of the home video film experience. Gestures must not be aimless or unrestrained, and acting must not reveal consciousness of the camera. Unless specifically directed, an actor does not look directly at the camera lens, and learns to take cues from the floor manager without looking directly at him.

Finally, the screen actor must be imaginative and be an observer of real life. He must be ready to build his character realistically because some directors leave the details of characterisation for the actors until the camera drills or dry runs, and just proffer suggestions

Conclusion

The success of an actor on the screen could be judged by the audience’s appreciation of that role. As Chester et al in *Television and Radio* (487) point out, the beginning actor should realize that he is facing competition from established character actors with many years of experience. The TV director venturing into the home video industry will prefer to use such artists for the best results. It is only when one effectively sells his talent in an audition that there are possibilities for break-through.

The view of Cottrell (4) is an apt graffiti for prospective screen actors in Nigeria:

Acting is not nine-tenths divine inspiration and one-tenth technique. It is a profession to be worked at

and mastered to the best of one’s capabilities, and if anyone merits the accolade of “greatest actor,” it is surely the actor who masters his craft to the greatest extent and practice on the worthiest scale ...

The attributes the actor requires include the dramatic instinct, intelligence, imagination, capacity for hard work, ability to acquire skills, knowledge of the TV medium, a good voice and being “telegenic” - a good television image.

The actor who has a sound knowledge of Stanislavski’s treatise on acting, *The Method*, in the final analysis, has to use it as a departure point. He can only create a good screen image when he is conversant with the peculiar characteristics of TV/Film. Here lies the exegesis of adaptation, and the real test of good actors.

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