

THE LANGUAGE IDIOM OF MODERN PLAY PRODUCTION IN NIGERIA: A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

One of the most static aspects of theatre practice in Nigeria has been that of acting and directing. For this reason it is also one of the least written about. The Nigerian director has largely remained a slavish interpreter of the playwright's script. Even when the fires of postmodernism and the poor theatre spread through the Western world, resulting in the emergence of the director's theatre, the Nigerian theatre director's approach to play production was essentially traditional and static. The result is that today, playwrights, critics and even directors have come to the conclusion that a play is sacrosanct and cannot be tampered with by a director once it is published. This paper examines the need for a review of this conventional attitude on the part of directors in order to generate a viable relevant theatre for the Nigerian audience.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the need for the Nigerian theatre to adopt a new language of performance and the role of the stage director and other artists in the theatre in the search for this new language. Since the early sixties, the need for African writers to adopt local languages as media of expression in their works has received international attention and has been the subject of many debates and seminars. In other words, it has been a high polemical issue but that debate seems to have ended in an intellectual impasse.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Decolonizing the Mind* (4-25) gives us graphic details of how this debate began. Nevertheless, looking at the canon of plays written in Africa since the very first time that debate began, it appears as if there was never any such debate at all. Indeed, most playwrights have shifted grounds a little by adding a few words from their local languages and from pidgin English to the English language which has remained their primary medium of expression. This has, however, not gone far enough to address the fundamental problem of language in the Nigerian theatre.

In raising the issue of language in this discussion we are aware that there may be many who will find a discussion of language in the Nigerian theatre at this time quite objectionable because to them this issue has been exhaustively discussed and settled. And to some, there is actually no way out of the impasse and so there is no raising the issue at all. We dare to disagree with this position. To be sure, we cannot agree more

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with the position that the issue of language has been exhaustively discussed but only as it relates to writing and not as it concerns plays production. Besides, the question of language, in spite of the volume of protracted debate on it, is far from settled. It may never be settled in the near future because the problem is in fact not one of attitude but of a dilemma arising from our colonial experience (Yemi Ogunbiyi 41).

MEANING OF LANGUAGE

In the context of this discussion, language is not limited to verbal communication; rather, it refers to stage design, style of production – the employment of all the elements of theatrical production to make a statement and impact on audience. Nigerian (indeed African) playwrights are handicapped in terms of choosing an alternative language of expression for their work probably because of their desire to talk to a large audience and to generation after generation. The responsibility of looking for a medium of expression in the Nigerian theatre other than English seems to be not only the burden of the playwright, but also that of the director. Unfortunately however, the director and his collaborators do not seem to realize this.

The present trend in playwriting and play production in Nigeria, for example, seems to gravitate towards a fulfillment of Obi Wali's prescient position in the sixties that "the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture" (Ngugi 24).

If indeed the purpose of theatre is to help man in his struggle to master his environment in order to actualize himself, modern Nigerian theatre has begun to lose or indeed has lost its whole purpose. In a way, this is putting it mildly. It is not as though the Nigerian theatre is not an engaged theatre. Modern Nigerian theatre is indeed engaged. It is in fact replete with works that encapsulate a denunciation of tyranny, poverty, oppression and injustice and an advocacy of a revolt against that tyranny. Yet it is a theatre that is largely ineffective simply because it does not communicate and is far from the people.

We must remember that modern Nigerian theatre, as we know it today, was not, and has still not become part of the normal fabric of our society and of our psyche even though it has been with us since Western education was introduced to us. Indeed, it is a

patch – work of African and Western aesthetics and sensibility; a hybrid theatre that is in search of an audience and a proper means of expression. It is such a combination of African and Western idioms that we do not know which should take precedence over the other. The unfortunate product of this theatrical match-making is a hybrid form of theatre that is neither African nor Western, a theatre that is incapable of addressing the audience for whom it was created in the first place. This inability to communicate is borne partly out of the fact that the audience is deaf to the language in which the theatre is expressed and sometimes out of the fact that the audience is not learned in the culture specific idioms and metaphors in which some of the serious socio –political issues are presented. Sometimes one is tempted to ask if indeed modern Nigerian theatre is relevant or whether it exists. It is against this background that we propose the idea of **reconstruction** for the Nigerian theatre. In proposing this, we realize that this responsibility of reconstruction belongs to everyone in the theatre but the position of this paper is that the greater responsibility lies with the stage director.

For the purpose of this discussion, we choose to define **reconstruction** as the art of reshaping, changing and recreating the entire physical and verbal landscape of a play in order to make that play communicate the relevant message to a particular audience. In doing this, two things are paramount, namely **communication** and **message**. **Reconstruction** may be absolutely transgressive in nature but not necessarily immoral in the sense in which **Performance Art** was in the United States in the 60's (Brocket 250) *Collins Concise Dictionary* (1252) defines reconstruction as “to construct or form again; rebuild”. To reconstruct our theatre therefore means to rebuild the whole theatrical edifice, the entire structure of our modern theatrical experience and not necessarily the physical building. Indeed, the idea of reconstruction is not new in the theatre. From the works of Thespis the first known Greek actor, through the Medieval period to the avant-garde and the environmentalists of today, we find basically works of reconstruction.

This further leads us to the question of whether or not there is a “correct” way to do a particular play. Dealing with the fundamental question of style in play production in the theatre, Robert Cohen and John Harrop (236) argue that

The responsible theatre artist will interpret a play from the standpoint of his or her day, while making every effort to

understand the intrinsic values of a play's work: combining his or her sense of the present with an appreciation of the social and theatrical reality of the time in which the play was written.

That 'sense of the present' may require a director or any other artist in the theatre to alter the sequence of scenes or acts in a play or to take nothing more than just an idea from the play and use that as the cornerstone of his theatrical edifice. It is this lack of understanding of the volatile nature of the aesthetics of play production that has often resulted in some of the tedious productions of some plays on our stages. The greatest casualties of this ignorance are Soyinka's and Shakespeare's plays whose productions are often characterized by a futile struggle to capture their atmosphere in atrocious movements and mangled line delivery.

However, we may not have to go very far to find playwrights, critics and directors of the traditional school who regard **reconstruction** today as a strange, aberrant and unachievable venture. In point of fact, every stage director, actor, costumier and even musician reconstructs a play or music one way or the other for reason of relevance and sometimes for ease of production. The question that may be asked is how far is reasonable in a director's attempt to reconstruct a play to meet production needs? We dare to say as far as is necessary to communicate his message. We consider the argument against the directors freedom to interpret a play the way he deems appropriate restrictive and irrelevant, given the fact that the director is, like the critic, merely responding to the play the way he sees it. Writing about one of the major artistic movements of our time, Oscar Brockett (253) writes for example, that

Post modernism has influenced directing in several ways perhaps most significantly by altering attitudes about the director's relationship to the playwright and the script. Postmodernists...argue that there can be no single "correct" interpretation of a text because words do not convey precisely the same meaning to everyone. Furthermore, once a work is finished its creator's statements about its meaning have no more authority than anyone else's because the text and not the author elicits the response and the interpretation. Such arguments free a director to interpret a script as he or she thinks appropriate even if this

interpretation is at odd with the playwright's. In fact in recent times directors have often been judged by the novelty, (sometimes more than by the aptness) of their interpretations.

It is this freedom of interpretation that makes the director relevant in the search for an appropriate language for theatre in Nigeria. It opens the door for a total overhaul of the aesthetics of production. In the light of this overhaul, most of the works of African playwrights will have to be 'revised' or reconstructed at the point of performance to make them speak to their audience. To mention a few examples, Wole Soyinka has, in play after play, tackled the issue of the search for appropriate leadership in Africa. His *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi's Harvest*, for example, for all their intellectual and philosophical splendour, have largely remained library shelf materials. So is his *Madmen and specialists* where he critically denounces a situation where African leaders symbolically cannibalize on the poor. Here, perhaps more than in any of his other great works, an amazing goldmine of the wisdom of the playwright is buried in a welter of deliberate, obscure yet meaningful verbal nonsense and the audience is the worse for it. Similarly, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* reads like an advocacy of a return to ritual suicide for the sake of it to an average Nigerian audience. The author's significant comment on the continual failure of leadership in Africa due to the continent's inability to produce enlightened statesmen in place of political scavengers is irreparably lost in some of the playwright's finest poetry.

With plays like these, the director faces the enormous challenges of practicing a relevant theatre. A theatre, which draws from the society but is incapable of feeding and influencing that society, is totally irrelevant. The need for a theatre that sensitizes and mobilizes the people to take an active part in reshaping their society is as much as a primary one in Nigeria today as it was in the late 50s and early 60s. The incessant social unrest, the economic turmoil and the adoption in quick succession of one political model after another by African nations are telling indices of the primacy of this need. Surely, the issues have been examined in play after play but to imagine that the Nigerian theatre as it is now will seriously address these ills in a way that will conscientize the people and move them to action is a robust art of self deception.

To enlist the Nigerian theatre in the present effort at national reforms, the stage director and his collaborators must first make their performance speak the language of the locality in which they find themselves. That language may be the vernacular or Pidgin English or it may be symbolic. We are not unaware of the reservations many scholars may have against the adoption of Pidgin English or a local language for production. But then, we must understand that theatre did not emerge to pander to the intellectual taste of university scholars. Discussing the choice of language for television drama many years ago M.A. Okhakhu (192) remarked that

For instance, in any part of Nigeria today, a statement like “I wan buy cigar” or “I dey go oh” is commonly understood... we are not saying that in an absolute situation everybody speaks English, but a majority of the population does and are comfortable with it. Apart from the above the Nigerian Society, in relations to the percentage of those who speak the Queen’s English, is still an illiterate one. Therefore, this kind of advocacy not only makes provision for the not – so privileged ones amongst us, but in fact integrates them in to the main stream of our system.

Indeed it integrates the not – so privileged and uneducated into the mainstream of a theatre that would liberate them from misrule. There have been serious attempts to address this problem by playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi, Wa Thiongo, Tunde Fatunde and others. Even Soyinka, formerly noted for difficulty in his plays, has begun to loosen up but these attempts are not radical enough to communicate with the people. Something more drastic like what Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and his colleagues did with *I will Marry When I Want* in line with Augusto Boal’s experiments in South America must begin to take place, in Nigeria (Ngugi 1988). Our present theatre that cannot be understood by the people’s needs ought to be liberated from the politics of “intimidation” (Augusto Boal xiv).

This leads us to the second point. Our understanding of language in this context is not limited to verbal communication. Rather, it includes the whole style of production. It is time to abandon the erroneous notion that plays must necessarily be done in the styles that have been handed down to us by intellectuals from the West. Some of Soyinka’s plays will make much better theatre to Nigerians, for example, in ‘pidgin’

English or Yoruba than they do at the moment. Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* will be even greater than it has been on stage if performed in Pidgin English. Similarly, Pidgin English will partly cure the monotony and artificiality on Rotimi's *If...* and the frustrating obscurity in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* or for that matter, Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the song*. This is not an absolute criticism of these writers. Rather, it is an attempt to point out the need to search for theatre aesthetics that will enhance our productions regardless of place of origin. Stage directors must begin to consciously midwife the birth of a new kind of theatre by taking the hammer to the counter productive modes of presentation. The suffocating rigidity of the present mode of production with its seemingly inviolate conventions ran its full course before it stepped on the Nigerian soil. The Nigerian stage directors and their collaborators should begin to borrow from the spontaneity and adaptability of the poor theatre and perhaps the involvement of, and the debate on, Epic theatre regardless of the style in which our plays are written. Only by so doing can they make theatre fulfill its pedagogic/didactic and noble role to the people. Such a revolutionary attitude is not new in the history of theatre.

Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Grotowski, Brecht and Peter Brook have shown in their works that the director's craft is not a slavish interpretation of the dramatist's work. We may not subscribe to their sometimes excessive and mystical approach to theatre, but we can at least borrow something from their artistic freedom in order to be part of the present battle to overthrow the evil that has been enthroned in our socio – political life. Examining the relationship between literature and sociology as a course of study, L.O. Bamidele discusses extensively the function of art in the society but launches a serious attack on the idea of using literature as a means of political propaganda (16). Indeed, Marxist literature or Marxist theatre, which is his target of attack may not have all the answers for all time, but to ignore it altogether at this very moment of our socio – political life may not be in our interest.

CONCLUSION

As a recap, the concept of reconstruction recommends that in mounting a play, a director may find it necessary to radically alter any thing and sometimes everything for communication purposes, since what the playwright intends to say may be different from what a play finally says. As Cohen and Harrop (15) argue, the time has come when the

director must choose between the (correct) and the (vital) interpretation of the script. The experimentalists we mentioned earlier carved a niche for themselves in the theatre because each of them sought a new and viable means of expressing their theatre. Finding none within the fabric of the theatrical tradition they inherited, they evolved and distilled successfully a new language for the expression of their work. The Nigerian director must experience that 'epistemological break' with his past and distill a new language for his theatre. This break may lead us as far as to the single – actor theatre of Samuel Beckett. After all, as the French director Louis Jouvet once said “there is only one rule for theatre – success.” (Quoted in Cohen and Harrop vi). The search for this success requires a purposeful manipulation of the elements of production. There are three kinds of language in the theatre: verbal language, gestural language and symbolic language (Tunji Azeez 28). The concept of **reconstruction** advocates that the symbolic and the gestural be given as much emphasis as the verbal and sometimes even more, where the need arises. It even calls for a reconstruction of the verbal also. Only then, we would be able to find a suitable language for communicating theatre to our people.

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