

**A DESIGNER'S READING OF DIRECTORIAL CONFORMITY
AND DIVERGENCE IN SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE
KING'S HORSEMAN***

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Abstract

*This study takes a critical look at the stage production of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which Ahmed Yerima directed on July 13, 2004 at the National Theatre, Onikan in Lagos, Nigeria, with reference to the collaborative process through which elements of design and directing were engaged to produce meaning from the dramatic text to the theatre audience. Its objective is to assess the role of design elements in the technical process of achieving visual transfiguration on stage and explore the extent of the director's interpretational conformity to, or divergence from, the original ideas of the playwright in the dramatic text. This work is situated within Merleau-Ponty's concept of Embodiment and Body-subject, with a view to analysing and understanding theatre and drama as lived experiences, and visually embodied consciousness and perception. It seeks theoretical supports from Umberto Eco's idea of semiotics. This study used a qualitative methodology, primarily including key informant interviews, for the collection of data, which, in turn, received content analysis. The study concludes that stage design and its attendant elements are central to the process of retrieving meaning from dramatic texts to the audience because while Ahmed Yerima clearly diverged from Soyinka's original intention in the text, he relied heavily on stage design and allied elements as the facilities of divergence.*

Keywords: Stage design, Embodiment, Performance, Interpretive conformity and divergence, Visual design.

Introduction

Death and the King's Horseman, written by Wole Soyinka, was directed by Ahmed Yerima in 2004 and performed at the National Theatre, Onikan in Lagos, Nigeria on 13th July of that year to commemorate

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Wole Soyinka's 70th birthday. With the aid of a physical space, as an extension beyond Soyinka's suggested dramatic and spatial perception, achieved from pure plastic and graphic aesthetics, Ahmed Yerima attempted to reinterpret Wole Soyinka's portrayal of ritual.

Based on the text under study, the visual reinterpretation on stage reflected a heavy reliance on colour, draped fabrics, sculpture, texture, line, rhythm and balance, achieved in the arrangement of characters and complex structural stage architecture. It thus becomes essential to interrogate Yerima's emphasis on the materiality of the *Oyo Alaafin* palace episode and environment of 1946 as revealed in surplus availability and visibility of costumes, theatrical properties and actors' characterization with make-up. Therefore, this study looks at the stage production as directed by Ahmed Yerima, in order to verify the give-and-take procedure, through which elements of design and directing were engaged to produce meaning from the dramatic text to the theatre audience. It focuses on the technical process of interpreting the dramatic text with the collaboration of directing and stage design elements, which have been referred to as "the geometry of the eventual play" (Brook 25). Theatre design plays a major role in theatrical productions in the forms of scenic elements, property fabrication, lighting, sound, costume and make-up.

Primarily, the attributes of design manifest in the notion that theatre is connected to man's entire social concern. This is because traditional "theatre and drama started with man embodying his first preoccupation, his first struggles, setbacks, successes and all" and more importantly, the theatrical experience "arose out of man's needs to redefine himself, embodying within his environment and to conquer and tame nature" (Boh 20). In furtherance of this redefinition and embodiment within the physical environment as referred to by Boh, above, theatrical ritual traditions are considered as being largely reliant on plastic paraphernalia and properties, qualifying them as "the device of invoking ancestors and transcendental essences," which "is particularly significant in the Yorùbá mythic imagination and *ijúbà* tradition" (Olorunyomi 94).

Beyond tradition, design in contemporary theatrical productions has also been viewed as "the visual interpretation of the playwright's intention hidden in the script for the consumption of the audience during production" and that visual design "combines and unifies the intricate parts that constitute the arts of theatre" (Ena and Akoh 128). In the same vein, after a play is over, the stage set often endures the longest: enshrined in our memories, and in storage at the theatre (Kretz 18; Adeoye 22). It is clear that the entire art of theatre relies largely on visual design elements in order to specify meaning from the imaginative dramatic text to the audience.

It is evident that the place of design is germane in any theatrical production because,

Design, as it pertains to the theatre, is not limited to the organisation and arrangement of the performance space, defining and characterising the space or arranging it to facilitate the movement of actors and using it to reinforce the concept of production. It has to do with every aspect of the theatre coming together as one to make performance happen, from the level of planning to the final performance. (Adeoye 124)

It suffices to state that “in so far as expressiveness is enhanced or made possible by unity, balance, harmony, etc., design is inevitable” (Gassner 227). The inevitability of design in the collaborative process of theatre, as confirmed by Gassner, makes it crucial to the entire process of production, including directing of stage performances. It thus becomes necessary to interrogate the holistic and complex nature of theatre as an art form, which is dependent on other arts particularly visual design elements and material constituents. Hence, “a stage setting has no independent life of its own. Its emphasis is directed towards performance” (Jones 68). It is clear from the words of Jones that design is essential to theatrical productions.

Therefore, the extent to which stage design has been exerted by Ahmed Yerima in establishing conformity to and (or) divergence from the original *meanings* and ideas in the play text during the production of *Death and the king's Horseman*, will receive attention in subsequent sections of this discourse. The performance analysis will pay cognizance to the connection between stage design and theatrical performances as interdependent artistic media in the multidimensional performance space. It will also engage, further, the strength of visual plastic design and its link to the directorial challenge as well as re-examine it as a catalyst, which brings the phenomenon in the text to three-dimensional reality, within the ambience of time and space.

Theoretical Framework: Embodiment and Body-Subject (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1908-1961)

As framework for analysing the technical collaborative process in which elements of stage design and directing constitute an embodiment of visual experience for the audience, this study is hinged on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's semiotic notions of Embodiment and Body-subject, which refer: potentially to all aspects of performance: the performer's

embodied experience of performing as much as the spectator's embodied perception of the performance; it can also provide insight into the phenomenal presence of objects in performance and methods of training performers' (Auslander 139).

The *text* as a phenomenon is interpreted into one single body from diverse, open-ended and interrelated perspectives because meaning is not necessarily assigned to it by an aspect, for instance, its author, but by a body of interrelated readers. Reading the meaning making process of the theatrical process as a co-engagement between phenomenology and semiotics, it has been stated thus, the original focus of the "author" is thus intercepted by the various "intertextual" players and "readers," whose emergence is necessitated in the semiotic transition. Hence, "the death of the author," since there is a shift in the appropriation of meaning (Adeoye 91).

Further, as Auslander observes, scholars such as "Bert States and Stanton Garner, sought theoretical rapprochements between phenomenology and semiotics or deconstruction" (139), with the argument that the combination of these theoretical methods would constitute suitable means, under which theatre and drama could be analysed and understood. This is because "phenomenology and semiotics or deconstruction" are centred on the *sign*, as a key object of semiotics and are, therefore, fundamentally relational. "Ferdinand de Saussure set the template for this theory ... *semiology*, 'the science that studies the life of signs within society'" (Adeduntan 71).

Umberto Eco's Theory of Semiotics

Umberto Eco, a semiotic theorist, who was influenced by other scholars of semiotics such as James Augustine Aloysius Joyce, an Irish writer (2nd February 1882 to 13th January 1941). Joyce's major contribution is that signs or sign systems should be classified in relation to the way they are transmitted. The process of carrying meanings back and forth (for instance between the text and theatre audience) depends the embodied object or picture that humans use in communicating intentions, the body of the text to show attitudes or emotions in terms of props, costumes or set. Creating a sign or an idea requires that the community agrees on a simple meaning within their common cultural linguistic context. Schemas might be created within particular cultures explaining common ideas that are governed by semiotic principles relative to those cultures. Umberto Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* contributes to this study especially by providing additional theoretical grounds for applying the rules of semiotics in understanding the relationship between the dramatic text, the theatre stage and the theatre audience. Eco's work is one of the few available writings on

semiotics, which make substantial attempts at treating semiotics as a theory, while others regard it as an emerging (though rapidly developing) field of study.

Eco, in this particular approach to semiotics, makes a conscious and intensive view of the visual arts such as pictorial signs and architectural details as well as how they function in the semiotic communication process. It is also interesting that visual communication was one of Eco's primary intentions and point of entry into this theoretical study of semiotics. This confirms that "a preliminary and tentative version of this text (dealing with a semiotics of visual and architectural signs) was written and published in 1967 as *Appunti per una semiologia delle comunicazionivisive*" (Eco vii). He founded this on "a more theoretically oriented version— offering an overall view of semiotics and containing a long epistemological discussion on structuralism", which has been earlier on published in 1968 under the title: *La Strottura Assente* (Eco vii). It is established that "a design for a general semiotics should consider: (a) a *theory of codes* and (b) a *theory of sign production*" (Eco 3). It is also important to note "the theory of sign production" suggested by Eco incorporate a large range of phenomena such as the common use of languages, the evolution of codes, aesthetic communication, different types of *interactional* communicative behaviour, the use of signs in order to mention things or states of the world and so on' (Eco 3).

"Semiotics studies all cultural processes as *processes of communication*" (Eco 9). Therefore, each of this range of phenomena would be easily admissible into an underlying *system of significations*. It, therefore, is very important to make this distinction clear in order to avoid either dangerous misunderstandings or a sort of compulsory choice imposed by some contemporary semioticians: it is absolutely true that there are some important differences between a semiotics of communication and a semiotics of signification; this distinction does not, however, set two mutually exclusive approaches in opposition (Eco 9). It is evident from the foregoing that the semiotic requirement of theatre entails an intertextual device composed of the artistic elements of theatre design.

Performance Analysis: Ahmed Yerima's Divergence versus Conformity in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Wole Soyinka's text, *Death and the King's Horseman* adopts a 1946 saga of the ancient city of Oyo, in which Simon Pilkings, a district officer makes a preventive interference in the ritual suicide of an Oyo chief, *Elesin*. The suicide is necessitated by the death of the Alaafin and the District Officer's move leads to a cultural controversy, which Soyinka attempts to resolve through theatrical exploration of the

mystery of the Yoruba world of the unborn, the dead, and the living. However, in introducing the performance to the audience, Yerima's reinterpretation of this text on stage deviated from Soyinka's opening style. The initial spatial entry into *Death and the King's Horseman* is conceived as a passage through a market in its closing stages. The stalls are being emptied, mats folded. A few women pass through on their way home loaded with baskets. On a cloth stand, bolts of cloth are taken down; display pieces folded and piled on a tray. Elesin Oba enters along a passage before the market, pursued by his drummers and praise singers (Soyinka 9).

From the above, the stage description of the closing market scene directly ushers in the appearance of the Elesin Oba, in Soyinka's original conception as contained in the text. However, in Yerima's interpretation, the closing market scene was immediately interrupted by the appearance of the conclave of seven initiates of the *Oro* cult accompanied by the exclusive chant of the mystery call "Yéè pà rìi pàà." The characters were clad in appropriate costumes such as white headdresses, shoulder pieces and wrappers suspended across their left shoulders. Traditional oil lamps and additional props were held in the hands of the last three of them. The last female character was clad in costumes similar to those of the *Iya Abiye* of the *Ogboni* cult of the Yoruba. Ritual theatrical props such as kola, fowl and a sacred-looking prop probably, resembling the *Edan* staff, were used by the characters. Their feigned sagely steps were guided by the rhythm of the symbolic *Àgbá* ritual drumbeats. Processional songs accompanied the performative ritual exhibition.

Yerima also relied on elaborate ritual costume and property designs to lay emphasis on the theme of *Ikú* (Death) as being central to *Death and the King's Horseman* and as being the link between "the world of the unborn, the world of the dead and the world of the living" (Soyinka 87). This is in line with the view that "Yoruba metaphysics holds the view of there being three areas of existence- the world of the unborn, the world of the dead and the world of the living" (Soyinka 87). While the nonverbal semiotic prologue, in which Yerima enshrined the *Ikú* phenomenon as the opening glee to the entire stage presentation, was an inventive divergence, he also seemed to share one view with Soyinka, that "there is a mutual correspondence between these three areas" (Soyinka 87). This mutual correspondence was revealed using the stage, space and design as the *Ikú* character was invoked into the stage space amidst strange calls and fear-instilling praise chants.

The designer had been guided by the contents of this strange description of *Ikú* earlier in the form of dramatic scripts. On stage, the

Ikú figure whirled rhythmically into a swift and impressive exhibition of woven fabrics. These were draped into a single holistic and awe-inspiring mass resembling a masquerade costume. Accompanied by strong *Bátá* drumbeats, the *Ikú* character had an ecstatic engagement in space. The costume designed for this character carried intricate embroidery and though it seemed to hold heavy ritual values, this performance capitalised on the exhibition value of the *Ikú* costume to arrest the interests of the audience. The impressive layers of drapery exhibited were used as a means of defining the *Ikú* phenomenon. Though *death* is an abstract and mysterious phenomenon, its design in this production depicted it as such but went a step further by interpreting it as an amorphous silhouette on stage perhaps to re-establish its familiarity with the audience. Though death is familiar (in the social script), its assignments are received as strange each time it strikes. The use of light was also a means of controlling the meaning of familiarity and strangeness in the play. The designers used selective stage lighting technique to highlight the fluidity of *Ikú* and to highlight the lofty cultural pedestal on which the society has placed the Elesin Oba as a respected potential victim of death. While the figures around him were immersed in darker lights and colour, Elesin Oba was bathed in bright and somewhat colourful light for emphasis.

Thus, without using much dialogue, Yerima technically employed visual designs to elongate the play to include a clear-cut introduction. In an interview on the 19th of February, 2016, Yerima explained that "the first page of Soyinka's text," in which Elesin Oba and Olohun Iyo engage in a conversational war of wits, only took place in the third scene during his production of the play and that everything before that was his own interpretive addition to Soyinka's dramatic text. This evidently validates the strength of the visual plastic and graphic elements of theatre as nonverbal alternatives capable of accurately presenting the audience with the semiotic contents of a dramatic text. Yerima's interpretation of *Death and the King's Horseman* diverges from the original contents of the dramatic text.

Yerima applies visual plastic and graphic designs in the transformation of the dramatic to the theatrical with the aid of certain performative ingredients such as mime, music, dance and procession which assume the attributes of design because their performative vitalities rest mainly on colour, costume, make-up and theatrical properties. For instance, Yerima's directorial approach to *Death and the King's Horseman* explored the visual attractions of these artistic materials to re-enact the ritual contents of Soyinka's text. This way, Yerima did not only suggest a prologue that never existed in the text of *Death and the King's Horseman* but deliberately created colour, form, rhythm, texture, and space in an elaborate explication of a

processional performance, done with full technical and aesthetic accompaniments commonly attributed to the *Ogboni* society of the Yoruba. In admission and endorsement of the indispensability of visual plastic and graphic aesthetics to the semiotic process of theatre, it is affirmed that "I cannot claim transparency of communication even from the sculpture, music and poetry of my own creative inspiration" (Soyinka 329). Enshrined in Soyinka's conclusion here is the suggestion that poetic, musical and plastic-sculptural interpretations are equally vital to theatre.

The instrumentality of theatrical properties to the process of ritual could be observed from the re-enactment of the mystery of *Awo* in the opening glee of *Death and the King's Horseman* by Ahmed Yerima. Hence, having implied the existence of the realms of the unborn, the dead and the living in the metaphysics of the Yoruba, the existence of another metaphysical realm that is important to the ritual process, is also identified as a fourth stage, which is not habitually articulated but which has been identified as implicit. It thus becomes obviously concrete as a result of rituals and philosophy, articulated by the *Ifa* priests. This is the fourth stage. It is the area of transition. "It is the chthonic realm, the area of really dark spirits, the really dark forces and it is also the area of stress of human will" (Soyinka 87). The physicality and materiality of ritual came to play as an enactment of the relationship between form and matter. This is because the enactment of ritual as directed by Yerima suggested an open application of aesthetic materials to unveil Soyinka's contention of ritual as metaphysical communicational phenomenon. Ritual was brought onto the stage in material form representing a physical response of the metaphysical. In a divergent view, Soyinka questions the validity of traditional sacrifice, but this must not be taken to mean that he rejects the whole concept. What he advocates is sacrifice, which stems from a strong moral purpose and is intended not just to fulfil the need for ceremonies but to provide a motive force (Eyoh 72).

In a similar account of the '*Bere* festival in Oyo' as a national event in the Yoruba-speaking world, the characteristics and functions of the *Olokunesin* have been enumerated. Hence, "Olokunesin is the keeper of the king's horses. He is in charge of the grass for feeding the royal horses, but more than this, he is regarded as the closest to the world of nature among the palace officials" (Babayemi 12). The *Olokunesin* is the priest who takes care of the growth and productivity of the royal field. "Alafin's energy and wellbeing, through his nature's gift... is annually renewed. *Bere* (the fruit of the field) is offered back to *Sango* in return" (Babayemi 12). The invigoration and rejuvenation of power, which *Olokunesin* holds, terminates with the demise of any particular *Alafin*, to which the *Olokunesin*'s office is attached. For this

reason, he too must commit suicide whenever an Alafin dies. The historical event, which took place in Oyo in 1946, had a substantial influence on the creation of several plays including *Oba Waja* by Duro Ladipo, which in turn (in a way) inspired Soyinka to write the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Theatre Design as Ahmed Yerima's Tool of Divergence in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

This article has shown that the visual plastic and graphic designs in theatre constitute primary basis for the dramatic text in the cognitive process of theatre. In his directorial engagement of visual designs, Ahmed Yerima did not conform to Wole Soyinka's original idea in *Death and the King's Horseman*, that he directed on 13 July, 2004 at the National Theatre, Onikan in Lagos, Nigeria. Rather he manipulated physical space to create a prologue using pure plastic and graphic aesthetics. The crew members built a physical image representing *Ikú* (Death), whirling on stage. The design was a massive combination of cleverly draped costumes and accessories, colour pigments and properties worn onto a dancer who spun in an opening performance that lasted four minutes on stage to suggest a nonverbal prologue. Here it was observed that the original idea in the text was altered with the use of design.

This research investigates the meaning-making process of theatre design in the directorial production of Ahmed Yerima, considering theatrical productions as collaborative processes in which directors convene theatrical elements to interact, interplay and mediate between dramatic texts and audiences. Theatre is a semiotic phenomenon with the primary essence of communicating meaning to an audience. The dramatic text, which emanates from the playwright, is aimed at the audience but between the playwright and the audience, an ensemble (of interrelated theatrical elements such as the stage, scenery, costumes, properties, make-up, light and sound), interplays as a change-agent to transform the dramatic text into a visual form that the audience deciphers and relates with physically as theatre.

Conclusion

Theatre design is germane to the transformative hub of theatrical productions because Ahmed Yerima's divergence from Wole Soyinka's intention in *Death and the King's Horseman* was achieved through the use of visual material designs. The director in the case study used visual plastic and graphic designs, attendant to the production process to catalyse the dramatic text into pictorial and material essence, thereby processing meaning from the dramatic text for the

benefit of the theatre audience. Therefore, researchers in Nigeria need to pay more attention to the technical process of transforming imaginative theatrical texts into visible matters. Theatre design constitutes the semiotic connection between the dramatic text and its audience, on which the physicality and materiality of theatre entirely rests. It is logical to conclude that theatre design constitutes a mandatory aspect of theatre, which students, practitioners and scholars of theatre cannot avoid. The attempts by Nigerian artists and artistes, students, scholars, researchers and critics to isolate design from theatre, by either abstaining from it or being insensitive to its contributions and prospects will often result in poor theatrical practices such as poor construction and use of stage and other visual elements in communicating to the audience. This should be guarded against in order to keep improving the conditions of both the education and practice of theatre in Nigeria.

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