Multimedia and the Creation of the Scenographic Space in the Stage Realization of Emmanuel Emmasealu's *Nerves*

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Abstract

The major objective of the scenographic team is to create an illusion of reality, a perception of life as seen from a perspective. In doing this, the textual director (Artistic Director) usually relies on the skills and knowledge of the artistic or audio-pictorial director (Technical Director) to coordinate all the virtual and acoustic aspects of the production into a unified point of view for the audience, to reinforce the directorial approach and spine of the production. The skills and knowledge required by the artistic director in designing and coordinating the audio-pictorial composition goes a long way in determining the artistic success of the production. This paper attempts an artistic exploration of the production of Emmanuel Emasealu's *Nerves* as designed and directed by Idiata Frank, a third-year student of the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University in an experimental multimedia production in which multi-media effects were well welded with two and three dimensional scenic pieces to affect a stunning presentation of the select text despite the paucity of technical facilities at the NDU theatre. The aim is to highlight the need for innovative approaches to textual and artistic directing in contemporary theatre productions. It is the opinion of the author that the theatre stands to gain from iconoclastic and new approaches to textual and artistic directing by upcoming students directors and designers.

Introduction

The theatre's chief concern is the creation of illusion. Whether in the mimetic or diegetic mode, theatre appropriates truth through the representational or presentational modes. The theatre is therefore a place for the creation of the illusions of reality. Scenography, being a chief component of theatrical productions articulates intent and spectacle. It underlines the poetic essence of stage enactments. From the very beginning of theatre, it can be perceived from the scenic hillside setting of the Grecian theatre to the experimental mix of 20th and 21st century theatres, that scenography has always played an important role in the creation of theatrical illusion. Beginning from the dawn of the 20th century, the theatre has witnessed an unprecedented growth in the way and manner that

technology is incorporated into the realization process of the theatre product and in portraying the illusion of reality. The rapid and pervading spread of technology today and the speed of development in electronic and communication technology have made it possible for the development of interactive technologies which in turn has impacted on the way and manner that theatre is conceived and presented to an audience. Current trends in cultural visualization coupled with the pervading presence of multimedia applications and appliances around us today with high quality data storage, easy access to content and reliable delivery mechanisms, the theatre, being a mirror of society, cannot but in the present instance, age and time, embrace these technologies to its advantage.

The theatre has thus not lagged behind in incorporating technology in its production modes. In this regard, there are two basic schools of taught in the application of technology to the theatre. One school of thought believe that theatre cannot do without technology since technology has become man's new way of doing things, while the other school see theatre's romance with technology as a futile effort and that the over infusion of technology into the theatre's production process can only derail from its original nature. There are however those who stress the middle ground between the two schools, those that toe the line of necessity. Whatever school of thought one adopts, developmental events in contemporary society makes it clear that the theatre cannot exist in today's world without an amount of technological involvement. The questions that has however bugged the mind of practitioners has been the extent to which technology should be allowed in the creation and presentation of the theatre product, the financial implication of technology, and the aesthetic distancing which technology creates in perception and appreciation of the theatre product.

Clarification of Concepts

Artistic Director: The artistic director traditionally refers to the person in charge of coordinating all aspects of the play production. However, in contemporary terms, there has been a constant re-evaluation of the application of the term based on advancing technologies and the role of the personnel involved in the realisation of the theatre product. Today, the term artistic director now more applies to the technical director who is saddled with the creation and coordination of the visual aspects of theatre productions. If as Eni contends that scenography "locates the ephemeral and live act of the theatre as the primary ontology and make it the principal area of enquiry" (2011, p. 19), therefore, the personnel responsible for the visual picture of the stage is he who is called by the name of the technical director who at best should be the artistic director.

To the designer who seeks to use technology in a revolutionary manner, the text becomes the "raw material" to be used and reconstructed making use of a visual language that suits the purpose of the performance. Thus, scenography is moved to the same pedestal as the actor- in fact, as a second actor- the costumes, lights, sound, set, make-up and all other effects are all expected to act out their parts in a unifying performance.

Textual Director: The traditional role of the artistic director has been renamed textual director. New technologies and emerging new theatre personnel makes this change of nomenclature relevant. In today's theatre, the traditional artistic director is no more in charge of the pictorial format of theatrical production. The role of the traditional artistic director has been limited to textual interpretation of the dialogue and character portrayal. The pictorial structure of the stage composition is now the duty and responsibility of the traditional technical director.

Multimedia and the Scenographic Space

More than any other art, the theatre is driven by imagination, both in the creative process and in the process of the realisation of the theatre product. Imagination is required in the transformation of stories to script and audience requires imagination to willingly suspend belief and be transported into the fictional world of the actors. The contemporary textual and artistic director, more than any other

period in the history of performances, requires imagination to marry text with action in a technologically simulated environment for the play to thrive. The imaginative use of technology in its application to the theatre product is a key to the success and survival of the theatre in today's world.

Today, man is a mediatised creature; his experiences alternate between live and mediated forms. Developments in the media world has changed and reframed cultural practices. The way man perceives his environment today is occasioned by the "multimediality" of the spaces around him. Klich and Scheer (2012) defined multimediality in performance as "the way in which a work develops integration, interactivity, hypermediated or remediated content and immersion in its formal content" (p. 9). Klich and Scheer (2012) further noted that

> when addressing the current cultural moment in performance we observe a haemoraging of nomenclatures "cybertheatre" "postorganic theatre" "mixed media theatre" "intermedia theatre" "video performance" "networked performance" "multimedia installations" "new media performance" and "computer theatre" "virtual theatre", "multimedia theatre"(p. 11).

Klich and Scheer (2012) further observed that the concept is still evolving, and it is "continuously pushing the parameters of existing practice and inventing new modes of performance and prompting new ways of talking about it" (p.11).

From Klich and Scheer, it becomes clear that in the present age and instance, theatre productions have taken on the ontology of the technological. Advances in technologies and the use these technologies are put to by human society alter our perception of things and invariably alter the way art is conceived and made. Burk and Stein have focused in their works on the integration of new technologies in the creation of dramatic literature. They observe that "more adventurous directors and performers have experimented with emerging technologies enabling telepresence, 'virtual' theatrical worlds, and many forms of multimedia performance" (Burk & Stein, 2004, p. 1). Emerging new media and performances are interacting in various ways and are continuously reframing the way humans carry out their daily activities.

Scenography is reputed for its ability to draw on the emotions in other to be expressive. In a multimedia production, character, story, and multimedia rely on each other for a complete experience. The totality of felt theatre is thus dependent on the tripod of character-story-multimedia which can also be substituted as technology-story-audience.
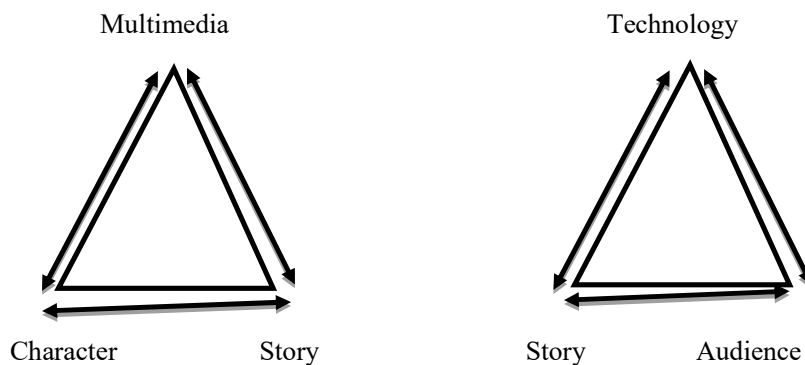
Where multimedia is equal to details of scenographic environment plus character and story, character is equal to dramatis personae plus actor and story is equal to dramatic conflict. The audience is thus subjected to a continuous aesthetic experience that is constantly enriched by the interaction of the triangular tripod of character-story-multimedia and multimedia-character-story; the defining element

of the aesthetic experience being multimedia technologies. In the same vein, technology continues to mediate the audience aesthetic experience of the story enacted by the actors.

According to Gruber (2010), multimedia or "mediatized performance probably grew out of the broad abstractionist tradition in the arts originating at the end of the nineteenth century" (p. 98). It is a rejection of purely mimetic mode of dramatic presentation for the broad abstractionist mode and alienates the pictorial theatre from reality. Multimedia technologies continue to evolve and change. "The convergence of video in digital format and digital computer processing brings about the possibility of universal networked interactive multimedia" (Friedmann 2010, p. 248).

Although most dramas thrive on a linear plot structure, interactive and multimedia technologies drive on a cluster of interlinked non-linear structures. In the theatre, interactive multimedia technologies are used to aid the externalization of the character's internal motivation, psychological state, flashback, bridge time and space in narrative, establish aesthetic effects amongst others. Action in multimedia production explores multi-dimensional and non-chronological structure.

Modern design appropriates technology in placing the performance environment in a visual scheme within the specific world of the play. As noted by Aronson (2012, p. 14), "a kind of panhistorical, oministylistic view now dominate stage design". The use of technology, especially, multimedia technologies, has thus moved stage design into a poetic realm of generalised scenography where different points of view are now integrated into a single frame that confronts the audience with shifting perspectives. Multimedia scenography combines the live presence with the mediated presence in the presentation of the theatre performance. The theatre as observed by Tuan (1990, p. 161),"is necessarily a mixed genre". The application of multimedia technologies to theatre productions appropriates the very nature of theatre in defining the theatre experience.

It is the duty of stagecraft to create a world that is familiar to the audience. In today's world, the more a performance is distanced from technology the more unfamiliar the environment of the performance becomes, and the more technology propels the performance the more familiar the performance environment becomes. This is because even in daily living, technology has come to redefine human relationship to space and environment. The challenge before artistic director therefore, is finding the right balance in the adoption of digital electronic technology on the live stage.

The Production of *Nerves*

Nerves, a play written by Emmanuel Emasealu and published by Kraft Books Ibadan in 2009 was designed and directed by Idiata Frank, athird-year student of the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University as his Advanced Directing class project on the 21st of September, 2015. In the realisation of the play, the director combined video projections with computer generated images to create a simulated three-dimensional environment. It was however a bit disappointing that the technical equipment available on the Niger Delta University Theatre could not fully support the creation of a total multimedia environment for the performance but the benefit of the experiment by the student director was that it expanded the vision of both staff and students to what is possible keeping within the realm of creative imagination with available technical equipment. It also afforded the Department the opportunity of considering breaking free from the conventional modes of teaching directing and design courses to students in the department and to explore new methods that are in accordance with present day realities in pushing further the concept of directing and designing theatre for contemporary audience.

Set in a modern university campus, the play tells the story of a revolutionary minded young man, Philip Ayeni who is the president of the student's union, his love relationship with Tokunbo Thomson, a final year student of zoology. Philip's desire and determination to bring about a better condition of living for the students sets him at conflict with the university authorities and he is forced

by circumstances to disguises as Hannah and hide in the home of Mrs Sanda, Tokunbo's aunt. His love relationship with Tokunbo Thomson and the refusal of Chief Thomson, Tokunbo's father, to allow them marry leads Tokunbo and Philip to procure an illegal abortion that leads to the death of Tokunbo and the mental derailment of Philip. The play dwells on the need for understanding and effective communication between the young and the old.

PLATE 1: Playbill for the Production of *Nerves*

The performance text encompasses a system of multimedia enabled connections through which the director drew dramatic relevance in which the stage space became an architecture of human, video and digitally processed images where the sound intertwined with human action in a present-past dynamic of storytelling. The opening scene in which students of the University of Kombo staged a demonstration against the establishment was conceived by the director as a media report on a major television news channel. Opening and end credits were also projected in the manner of the feature film.

The performance combined the visual text (scenography) and actor's movements into a unity of form in which both actor and scenography combined in dramatizing the text. Thus, in the performance story, character, actor, computer and video images fused together in creating a complete experience for the audience delight. The performance was an exchange between "real space", "screen space", "sound space", and audience mediated by technology. As noted by Shyba (2016, p. 67), "The goal for the general sound ambiance, both computer-delivered and live, was to create an aural text of mystery and electricity, of non-specific space and time — a continual organic throb and pulsation" that enriched the audience theatre experience.

At some point in the production, the performance moved to the level of integrated performance. Video projection of actions (the diegetic) progressed side by side the legitimate unmediated actor (the mimetic) in its liveness. The projections were done on painted wooden plyboard flats, a large plasma LCD television screen and cloth since the theatre could not afford microtiles. The part projected on painted wooden plyboard and cloth had poor image resolution, while the LCD images had better picture resolution, but the area covered by the screens were too small comparatively to the total stage space. If the projections were done on 16 by 12 microtiles the resolution would have been impressive more space would have been covered.This style of imaging theatre adopted by the student director

aided in creating audience distance to the action and contributed to the theatrical style of the production. Thus, the live art and the film art in the production worked side by side. A combination of scenes and projections in the presentation of the play learnt the performance towards what Brecht regards as the literary theatre in that simulation and formulation of scenography and the action of the play work together towards alienation effect. Brecht (1986, p. 43) stated of the literarized theatre:

> The screens on which the titles of each scene are projected are a primitive attempt at literarizing the theatre. The literarization of the theatre needs to be developed to the utmost degree, as in general literarization of all public occasions. Literarizing entails punctuating "representation" with "formulation".

The director adopted the style of cinematic voice-over as narrative expositional technique in bridging time and punctuating the production much in the style of the Brechtian theatre. There was thus a marriage of mimetic and diegetic experience.

Brecht's objective in seeking a mediated style of theatrical presentation as observed by Gruber (2010, p. 104), was to "turn the experience of mimesis into an experience of narrative" to be able to distance the audience from the action and force the audience to think instead of being perceive observers. Theartistic director played a pivotal role in the realization of the *mise-en-scène* of the integrated multimedia display video in tying the live art together with the filmic arts. In the production, the student combined the duties of the artistic and textual director. The result of this combination of roles was a unity of viewpoint. The artistic and textual aspects of the production were thus uniformly tied together.

PLATE 2: A Scene from the production of Nerves Video Images side by side human actors

In the concept of the director, the stage space held an interesting challenge; the stage space served as a space within a space, in that a space that was initially a wall becomes immediately transformed into a screen upon which actions and silhouette of actions were projected. This combination of media in multimedia production tasks the audience in its ability to quickly process information that is place before it and aids audience attentiveness.
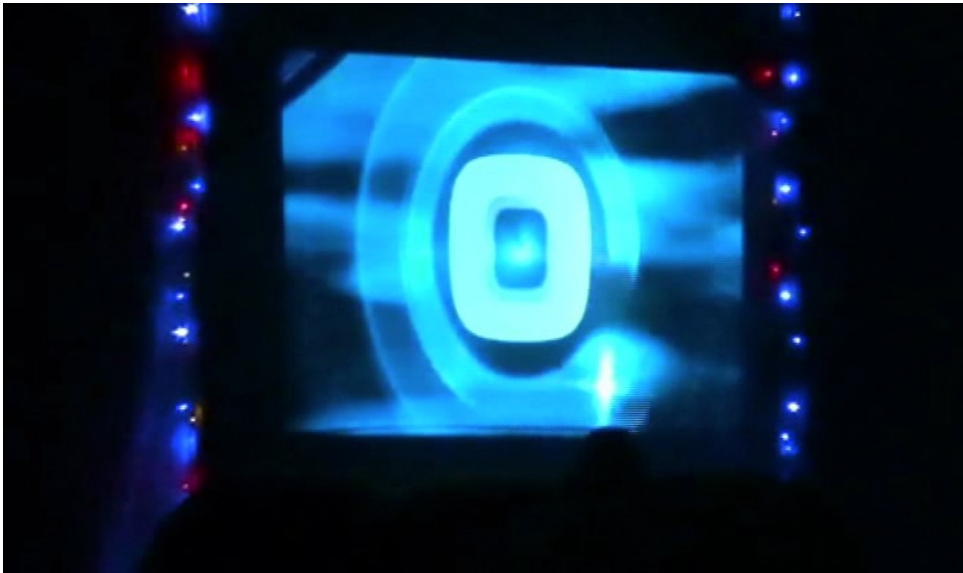
PLATE 3: Animated Computer-Generated Screen that formed background for the human action

The theatre's continual survival over the years has been greatly dependent on its ability to reinvent itself in the adoption of new tools, languages, styles and forms in line with realities of each era. As observed by Klich and Scheer, multimedia productions "can activate new aesthetic potentials and new spectatorial experience" (2012, p. 1). Idiata's production of *Nerves* reinforces the fact that today's stage has become a site to produce subjectivity. Modernity has introduced to human society and consciousness grand meta-narratives. The trajectory of the performance is relevant in retaining the dominance of realism and subjectivity on contemporary stages. In this new age of electronic production, Idiata's directorial style re-enforce and address the power of technology in an age of electronic and information glut. It is a pragmatic approach to directing theatre which rejects the "one style" approach and favours a style that is multidimensional in expressing actor's feeling but "avoids the drab exactness of realism" (Kenneth, 2017, N.P). Combining the role of the Textual and Artistic director, this student director was able to create a cinematic vision to the audience in the production of *Nerves* by making use of the feature film technique in achieving flashback scenes, beautiful sound effects that is actor generated as well as digitally produced spectacular lighting and digital video projections complimented each other in the production process.

The structure of the performance permits multiple points of view and provides many parts to the discovering and understanding of the performance text, this approach to multimedia directing re-enforces the need for a rejection of the emphasis on the single plot. It "signifies the recognition that the world is a web of possibilities and that the world of art reproduce this physiognomy (Eco, 1989, p. 114).

Throughout the ages, theatre has always been a medium for reflecting the state of technological and cultural development of the day. Undoubtedly, the present generation has grown accustomed to certain kind of visual spectacle in entertainment. They are very prolific in the operation and use of gadgets and devices. They are therefore in a good position to experiment with new technologies in stagecraft. Klich and Scheer also observed that

> Through experimentation and innovation, contemporary performance is not only utilising new media technologies to create innovative aesthetic forms, but it is also functioning as a training regime for the exploration of contemporary

perspectives developing as a result of, or at least in conjunction with audio-visual and information technologies (2012, pp.1-2).

The evolving new media technologies when applied to the stage has the potential for opening up new vistas from where contemporary perspectives can be assessed. The example of Idiata firmly attests to the fact that the student stands to gain a lot if these new technologies are creatively applied to the mode of teaching and presenting the theatre product. It is true that finance is a source of worry when the question of acquisition of new and emergent technologies is mention on the Nigerian stage; however, the computer, internet and communication technologies have made it relatively affordable for some of these technologies that it only takes a visionary director to creatively apply available technologies to enrich the theatre experience. 'The technological revolution that is sweeping through all aspects of our society, our lives and our work is also impacting theatre and the performing arts. It is changing the way we consume and interact as well as influencing our expectations as to how we are entertained´ (Beyond the Curtains, 2011, p. 2). The theatre artist of today shuns technology at his own peril and at the risk of becoming obsolete.

Conclusion

The world has continued to move towards multimedia mode of perception and interactivity. The computer and the internet have made it possible that humanity now has a viewing experience that is audience interactive. It is therefore safe to conclude that multimedia interactive communication will continue to change the face of entertainment and become the dominant norm in the industry that will alter stage productions as we now know it. Already, the educational sector has integrated multimedia into teaching modes in the form of CD-ROMS, DVD, Interactive Websites and Interactive Boards and Screens. "The interactive combination of the computer and the World Wide Web with its open architecture reveals opportunities for learning, training, entertainment and commerce (Firedmann, 2010, p. 249). Emerging new media requires that stage productions assume a new kind of visual scheme and structural techniques that is integrative in a manner that is non-linear but polylinear.

The encouraging aspect of this student's experiment is that it was able to push the boundary of experimentation in scenic design and visual effects on the Niger Delta University stage beyond the traditional into the realm of the technological. In other to bring the theatre closer to the younger generation who are technically savvy, these new technologies are tools that can be used to engage their interest. As Burke and Stein (2004, p. 13) observe, "today we exist against a backdrop of technological advancement that seems to grow in autonomy and ability to re-present our own images back to us", it will be disadvantageous not to explore the possibilities that technology offers in re-shaping contemporary stage performances.

Summary of Findings

Multimedia is a very captivating style of production. It engages the audience attention on several fronts. Its major strength is in its reinforcement of visual storytelling. Its strength lies in its ability to engage the audience desire for fantasy. Multimedia productions are a veritable ground for testing new technologies and for advancing the frontiers of the relationship between the conventional theatre and emerging technologies. The theatre of the future lies within the bounds of a well-orchestrated technology in achieving aesthetically pleasing productions.

Furthermore, multimediality in performance increases the meaning making process of the stage which illuminates stage signals and addresses cultural forms. These new technologies are bridging the gap between the live stage and video and film technologies, editing software, packaging, installations and operations. The workflow in the typical theatre production structure is being broken down by these technologies and it is influencing the introduction of new theatre personnel, seniority rules and job reclassification.

Recommendations

1. Nigerian University theatres need to re-focus the methods and materials of teaching stage craft to embrace current technologies.

2. Theatre productions in Nigeria should adopt new media in presenting the theatre product to a wider audience.

3. The Nigerian theatre must make it a priority to train on these emerging technologies in order to be relevant.

4. Although the technology for bringing 3D scenic design live on the Nigerian stage is scarce, the creative and imaginative use of what is available should be encouraged as a way of bridging the gap and taking scenic design to the next level.

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