

The Aesthetics used in Directing Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka is one of the very notable dramatists that have emerged from the continent of Africa. Yet, the most common criticism against his plays is that they are too difficult to understand. This criticism arises probably from the reader's inability to understand the unique manner in which Soyinka deploys aesthetic codes in his plays. As a result, many critics and theatre directors have remained on the fringe of Soyinka's dramatic constituency, thereby denying readers and audience the opportunity to experience the value and beauty of the plays of one of the most gifted dramatists in world literature. In this article, therefore, we interrogated the aesthetic codes deployed by Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* which were used by the theatre director, Thomas Onyonyor, in directing the play. Using analytic and participant observation methods, we have argued and shown that the aesthetics of storytelling drama, ritual theatre, the masquerade tradition, dance-drama, the *Oriki* (praise chant) and the Yoruba mythology made the aesthetic edifice of the production robust. In doing this, we have attempted a survey of the concept of aesthetics in order to contextualize the discourse. The conclusion reached is that it is by exploring these aesthetic codes that a theatre director can successfully realize the play in performance.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Dance-drama, Storytelling, Ritual, *Oriki*, Theatre director.

Introduction

Several studies have been done by scholars and critics on Wole Soyinka's plays. Apart from the question of the thematic content of these works, scholars have also often commented on the issue of obscurity in his plays. Consequently, critics and researchers have paid little or no attention to the challenges and prospects of directing his plays on stage. The result is that there is a near critical absence of scholarship on the problems of directing Soyinka's plays.

Most studies of Soyinka's plays and the plays of writers on the African continent focus on the thematic sensibilities of plays. Hardly do they deal with the aesthetics involved in realizing them on stage. To take a few examples, the Nigerian critic, Abiola Irele, has in an incisive study discussed Soyinka's deft method of extracting materials for his plays from the matrix of Yoruba traditional mythology and cosmology.

Indeed, Irele is one of the foremost Nigerian critics to shed light on Soyinka's use of Yoruba mythology in his works. However, he does not discuss the challenge of mounting Soyinka's plays on stage. Similarly, Femi Osofisan and Biodun Jeyifo have done extensive studies on Soyinka's drama, paying copious attention to the author's apparent lack of engagement with Marxist polemics although they remark on the audience's experiences of Soyinka's plays. For example, Osofisan submits that 'Soyinka is not for reading, but for staging, for performance. His plays abound in spectacle and movement and colour... Soyinka's plays cannot but be entrancing for an audience, and even more so especially, for actors' (57). Osofisan has here passed a general comment on what Soyinka's plays contain but he does not engage the specific issues of performance in detail.

Unlike Irele, Jeyifo and Osofisan, two scholars have dealt specifically with the issues of producing Soyinka's plays. One of them is Tunde Onikoyi whose write up discusses the difficulties of a neophyte staging Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy*. In the article, Onikoyi submits that *The Beatification of Area Boy* needs to be studied by the director and his cast first as literature and then as theatre in order to elicit a good production from it. Another scholar who has done a study of the challenges of mounting Soyinka's plays on stage is Annemarie Heywood whose work gives us tremendous insight into the mechanics of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests, Kongi's*

Harvest and Madmen and Specialists. In spite of the insight this study provides into Soyinka's plays, its focus is on the echoes of Western aesthetics in the plays studied. Besides, she does not seem to be writing from a first-hand experience with the demands of these plays in the process of production; rather, her works seems to be a scholar's theoretical projections on the ingenuity of their stagecraft.

As a result, it has become necessary for scholars to begin to engage Soyinka's plays in detail, not from the standpoint of thematic, literary implication but from the perspective of performance and theatrical vitality. Using Thomas Onyonyor's stage production of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* at the theatre hall of the Department of Theatre Arts, Ekenwan Campus, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, on 30th March, 2017, as a point of reference, this article interrogates the aesthetics of story-telling drama, ritual theatre, the masquerade tradition, dance-drama, *Oriki* (praise chant) and Yoruba mythology, deployed by Wole Soyinka in writing this play, which were used by the director in realizing its production on stage. Throughout this paper, emphasis will be on how the director utilized these codes and their values in the performance. The goal is not to critique a director's production of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* per se, but to present a director's challenge and unique experience in deploying these aesthetic codes in realizing the stage production of the play.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Based on an actual event which took place in ancient Oyo empire in 1946, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is the story of the dilemma of a society caught in the throes of change and the place of the agents of this change in that society. In the play, the King (Alafin) of Oyo has just died and as the people's tradition demands, the king's horseman, Elesin Oba, is required to die through a ritual process in order to accompany the dead king to heaven. For the people of Oyo, failure of the king's horseman to commit this required ritual suicide will upset the cosmic harmony in the empire and bring disastrous consequences upon the land. By the time the play opens in the first scene, the king's horseman has already begun this mandatory ritual mission.

However, on being informed of the horseman's ritual mission by one of his native policemen, the British colonial officer in charge

of Oyo, Mr. Pilkings, sets out to stop the ritual. This is because he fears that such an event might create a row and disturb the peace of the colony, particularly at that time when the British resident representing her Majesty, the Queen of England's government is on official visit to the area. In his desperate effort to maintain peace in the colony at all cost, he imprisons the king's horseman, Elesin Oba, but this approach backfires. Olunde, the first son of the King's horseman, who is away in England and who is supposed to succeed his father as the empire's horseman to the new king, returns to Oyo knowing that the king is dead and that his father would be committing ritual suicide as part of the ceremonies attendant upon the king's death. Contrary to his expectations, he finds that his father has been imprisoned by the district officer when he should have been dead through ritual suicide. Appalled by the scenario, Olunde offers to die in his father's place possibly to avert the supposed consequences of his father's cowardice. The women folk present his dead body to his father in prison.

On seeing that his son has died in his place and unable to confront the dishonor arising out of his own failure to perform his obligation to his people, Elesin Oba strangles himself with the chains with which he has been handcuffed. In the end, Mr. Pilkings and the people of Oyo are left with two dead people – father and son – instead of one. A huge shadow has just been cast upon Oyo society. What are the consequences that will likely befall it as a result of this miscarriage of sacrifice? What is the future of the institution of the King's horseman from this moment onward in Oyo society? These and, perhaps many more, become the existential questions that the society is left to grapple with in the face of this misguided compounding of situation.

Aesthetics: An Overview

Over the years, several scholars have expressed their views on the elusive concept of aesthetics. The German philosopher, Baumgarten, argues that "aesthetics comes from the Greek *aesthesis* meaning the sense of perception" (p. 234). Hoppers says that "an object is aesthetic only when it holds the audience's or the reader's attention" (p. 21). These definitions, while not exhaustive, show that when we talk of aesthetics, we are dealing with the objects, action or inaction, movements and beauty from the perspective of the observer. For

this reason, it is important to note that aesthetic boundaries and appeals are delimited by parameters set by private, social and cultural experiences, which in the words of Omoera are more or less subjective (p. 64). They are codes which are culture-bound within a social unit. Fiske argues that “codes are the systems into which signs are organized and these systems are governed by rules which are agreed to by all members of the community” (p. 68). In view of these positions taken by these scholars, we have chosen to define aesthetics in this paper as culture bound dynamics which help in the assessment and enjoyment of beauty. In discussing the aesthetics used in directing Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* then, we are interrogating the dynamics extracted from the Yoruba culture by Soyinka in writing this play, and deployed by the director in its performance at the theatre hall, Department of Theatre Arts, Ekenwan Campus, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, on the 30th of March, 2017.

Yoruba Mythology and Soyinka’s Dramaturgy

Unlike Soyinka’s other major plays which do not follow the conventional method of plot development, in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, which we shall refer to subsequently in this paper as *Horseman* for ease of reference, we are presented with one of Soyinka’s major plays in which he narrates the events in a relatively clear and linear style. Divided into five scenes without a heading, *Horseman* has neither the convoluted narrative of Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* nor the abstract and cryptic dialogue of *Madmen and Specialists*, although it is couched in proverbs, traditional idioms of expression, poetry and poetic prose. Thus, it is easier for the reader to understand the events which he or she is being presented.

Yet, the beginning of this play where Elesin Oba tells the story of the Not-I bird does prove difficult to understand to many who encounter this work in print or on stage because for most of the time, it is difficult to tell what really is going on between the market women and Elesin Oba until Scene Two of this production. Again, Scenes Three and Five are replete with debates between Olunde and Jane Pilkings on the one hand and between Elesin Oba and Mr. Pilkings on the other. In these two scenes of this play’s production, we encountered an atmosphere of near absolute stillness because the actors were busy discussing with little or no movement. And

where there was movement at all, it was on one spot which created monotony.

In the universe of Soyinka's *Horseman*, the interplay of the avatars of the Yoruba pantheon is very evident. Ayejina has remarked that "while Ogun looms large in Soyinka's works, with Esu relegated to occasional appearances, it can be argued that there are many avatars and pre-figurations of Esu operating as dynamic undercurrents, especially in *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*" (16). Ayejina concludes that "Esu's divine task of putting humanity to the test is very much evident in *Death and the King's Horseman*" and that Soyinka "embraces Ogun as his major metaphor as an unrepentant agent of revolutionary change, and Esu as the subterranean catalyst for dialectical self-examination" (p. 17). In the performance of this play, then, the use of the avatars of the Yoruba pantheon as symbolized in Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) and the bride (Offideh Mary-Joan) was not a means of romanticizing the African world but a tool for engaging us in a dialectical self-examination.

The interest in Yoruba culture and mythology has formed the very basis of Soyinka's thesis as we find reflected in this play. As a result, some knowledge of Yoruba culture is necessary for anyone who intends to do a serious study of this play and to produce it. In our production of *Horseman*, for example, it was difficult for the cast to see how the colonial officers' intervention in Elesin's (Omage Jonathan) life is "a catalytic incident merely" and not an index of a clash of cultures until after repeated reading and study of the play. In fact, it was in the third week of rehearsal of this play that the director, Onyonyor, was able to make it clear to them that Soyinka is not clashing cultures here to show the superiority of one over the other; he is merely showing the parallelisms of cultures all over the world and the place of the carrier in the progress of any society.

The director also explained to the cast that the ideals of service, sacrifice and honour embodied in the role of the carrier are the timeless issues that Soyinka has repeatedly canonized in most of his plays to the point of being their ultimate poet. He further explained that although there is a seeming clash of cultures in *Horseman*, it is only a tool for advancing Elesin's hedonism and that the seeming clash is, perhaps, a case of authorial ideology clashing with the dynamics of the text in the reader's perception. As a result,

the problem of choosing one line of argument and emphasizing it in production became a fundamental challenge which the director had to overcome in producing this play. While other playwrights' points of view may be easily isolated and projected, with Soyinka's plays the views are many and not so easy to isolate and emphasize.

Onyonyor also used the element of trance in producing this play. Trance is a fundamental element of ritual theatre in Africa in general, and in Yoruba in particular because ritual is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon, it is a means of communicating with the ancestors. At the moment when the ritual performer is possessed by the spirit(s) of the dead, as we see in the case of Elesin Oba, the performer is no longer himself, he becomes one with the spirit(s) he is impersonating or communicating with. In this performance, trance was emblematic of the crossing of the abyss of transition and of the confrontation with what Soyinka calls "those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf" (144). Balme argues that "the notions of horsemanship ... and being 'mounted' by a spirit are integral to Yoruba spirit possession," and that "it also reflects aesthetic principles" (p. 247). Through the use of the element of possession in this performance, the director projected the meaning of death in Yoruba cosmogony for us, a fact which is underscored by the very title of the play.

In this production, death was not projected as an end but as a means by which humans cross to the realm of the gods. In Yoruba tragedy, death is not a tragic event for those who have achieved greatness through it, but a voluntary act of heroism. This understanding of the concept of death in Yoruba tragedy explains why Iyaloja (Ebitimi Anthonia) and the Praise Singer (Aduobi Philip) keep saying that Elesin Oba's (Omage Jonathan) death in the performance of *Horseman* is a matter of honour. When Olunde (Daodu Peter) dies in place of his father, Iyaloja (Ebitimi Anthonia) says it "because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors" (75). In this production then, the king did not die because in Yoruba culture a king never dies. He only transits to a higher realm. Not to be accompanied by his horseman is to be left to wander in the void – an act that will bring dire consequences on the community. It is this understanding of the place of death in Yoruba tragedy which explains Soyinka's use of Yoruba poetry called *Oriki* in this play, and which the director employed in its production.

Coined from two Yoruba words *ori* which means head and *ki*

which means praise, *Oriki* is, according to Diala, “a ceremonial salutation among the Yoruba in which the sterling accomplishments, titles, and personal distinctions of an individual and his/her lineage are chanted to the accompaniment of drumming and dancing” (p. 48). It is the Nigerian playwright, Esiaba Irobi, whose discussion of *Oriki* is more directly relevant to *Horseman*. He suggests that,

By deploying the *Oriki* as an enabling text which opens the door for the conflation of oral poetry, incantation, chat, spoken words, music, dance ... the praise singer dynamically awakens in the community their age-old communal acting technique of using ‘possession’ as an aesthetic for ecstasy, becoming ... and revelation. (qtd in Diala, p. 48)

The importance of the *Oriki* as an aesthetic code in this play makes it imperative for a director to understand its use in Yoruba culture and to have a praise singer chant some of the *Oriki* occasionally in Yoruba in the production of this play. In the production of *Horseman*, the director deployed the *Oriki* as a means of encouraging Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) in his noble exploit on behalf of his community. In this performance, the director interpreted the modern society through the iconography of folklore and mythology of the Yoruba to portray the ideal of honour and the imperative of sacrifice required of everyman in his place of assignment.

Yet, *Horseman* is not all about Yoruba aesthetics. The playwright actually contrasts the Western and African aesthetics in this play. For example, the African aesthetics are represented by the choral music, the *egungun* masquerade costumes, the sound of the talking drums on and off stage and the dances that accompanied them. On the other hand, we have the masque ball typical of the plays of William Shakespeare and other dramatists of the Elizabethan period. In Scenes Two and Four in which the Pilkings profane the *egungun* mask, Soyinka draws our attention to the fact that lack of understanding of the value and the meaning of cultural, social and religious artifacts of a particular people makes outsiders depreciate their values. In our production of this play, then, equal emphasis was given to the *egungun* masquerade costumes, the choral music, the talking drum and the dances as well as the Masque ball. However, while the *egungun* symbolized the presence of the dead among the living for purposes of restoring the metaphysical universe of the

Oyo race, the masque ball did not seem to have any spiritual value beyond its aesthetic appeal. This, unfortunately, was Mr Pilkings' (Nwachukwu Jonathan) psychology concerning the *egungun* costume as reflected in his choice to wear it as a means of entertaining his guests at the ball. Nonetheless, the masque stood as the Western equivalent of the *egungun*. Soyinka invests it with great political significance by situating the tune, 'Rule Britannia,' within its context and the director upheld this during its performance.

It must be stressed that the nature of this play is that of the opera. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines opera as "drama set entirely or partially to music in such a degree that the musical part of the entertainment ranks as an essential and not an incidental element." This suggests that this play can be described as opera, perhaps, as an African opera. The genre of the opera as understood in the Western world may be said to be different from that of the indigenous societies in Africa. The nature of the opera in the Western sense goes much deeper than what the above definition seems to suggest on the surface. For a work of art to be described as an opera in the Western sense of the word, it must have the following elements: overture, aria, a recitative or spoken dialogue, duet, a chorus, dramatic action, costume and scenery, all structured have exposition, development, interlude and recapitulation. Besides, the performers deploy more of the discords and the minus to convey appropriate mood. But in indigenous African societies, an opera does not have to have all of these elements at the same time; it may just have a combination of the aria, the recitative, the chorus, dramatic action, costume and scenery like we had in the production of this play. In the first scene of this performance for example, some of the songs were provided by Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) himself when he told the story of the Not-I bird. Music, then, was an integral element in the universe of this performance. Jeyifo remarks that

At certain levels of performative sublimity, music is far more powerful than language in opening up for us intimations that referential words cannot evoke, cannot reveal... In the incorporation of beautiful or even sublime cultic music and ritual into the dialogue dramas of the Nigerian playwright, *Ayan*, I suggest, is the presiding spirit. (pp. 10-11)

Among other things, one of the characteristics of the opera is that it deploys music as a more powerful tool than language in

opening up intimations that words cannot evoke. This was one of the characteristics of this performance. As a result, music functioned as a means of signification as was depicted in Joseph's (Akapo Adedamola) difficulty in interpreting the two types of music emanating from Elesin's ritual death. For the people of Oyo community, the music for marriage sends a different message from the music for burial just like the classical music of the Western world, where, for example, Mozart has different kinds of music that are played for different occasions. This is what enables members of the community to decipher the different musical significations in the society.

In *Horseman*, as in most of Soyinka's major plays, music is not an instrument for diverting the attention of the audience; it is an organizing syntax, a major peg upon which the performance heavily depends. The director recognized this fact and applied it in producing this play to elicit the threnodic essence that Soyinka talks about. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka argues that among the Yoruba, music, myth, poetry and ritual come together to form one dynamic continuum. In other words, there are no boundaries between them. According to him, the European concept of music does not fully illuminate the relationship of music to ritual and drama among the Yoruba ... First, it is 'unmusical' to separate Yoruba musical form from myth and poetry. The nature of poetry is intensely the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged symbolic, myth embryonic. Language is ... cohesive dimension and clarification of that willfully independent art form which we label music (p. 147). Soyinka further argues that in this symbiotic relationship between music, language and ritual among the Yoruba, "a circle of initiate mourners raises a chant ... and words are taken back to their roots, to their original sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images" (p. 147).

It is clear from the foregoing that a director must work hard to bring this play to that charged moment where ritual and the evocation of the dance of images become one phenomenon. This was what was deployed in Scenes One, Three and Five of the production. It is necessary to point out at this juncture that to achieve a robust performance of the play; the director had to have a large cast to appear in Scenes One, Three and Five. Due to their evocativeness,

contrapuntal lyrical power, and poetry, the songs in this production were deployed as Diala remarks, as “signs to lead the audience into the portals of meaning and pleasure and as a tool for the ritual canonization of Elesin Oba” (p. 49). For this reason, even when it was withdrawn, it remained in the background where its haunting presence continued to provoke a mood. In this production, the dramatic dialogue was accompanied by song texts and by what Nzewi, Anyahuru and Ohiaramunna describe as “the choreographic processing of language, the visual poetry of dance as metaphor” (p. 9). Together with other aesthetic codes, they served as epistemological icons and ontological landmarks. Thus, the operatic tradition was central to the director’s production of this play.

Dance, Story-telling Technique and Ritual Theatre in *Horseman*

Dance featured prominently as an aesthetic code and as a means of transition in this production of *Horseman*. Based on an actual event which took place in Oyo in 1946, the play is a rite of passage which begins in the market. In Yoruba folklore and in many traditional Nigerian societies, the world is believed to be a market where everyone comes to buy and sell. Besides, the market is believed to be inhabited by the spirits of the dead as well as of the unborn. When humans come to the market in the day time to transact business they mingle with the dead and the unborn. By making Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) begin his rite of passage from the marketplace, the director was merely showing that the process of Elesin’s ritual sacrifice had begun. When, therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings (Nwachukwu Jonathan and Otoabasi Emmanuel) put on the *egungun* masquerade’s costumes, they were unwittingly participating in the ritual which they later attempted to stop because the *egungun* masquerade signifies the presence of the dead ancestors among the humans in Yoruba culture. Thus, the director portrayed the co-existence of the world of the unborn, the living and the dead to illustrate the co-existence of the past, present and future in the lives of the people and to illustrate and put on trial the timeless and unchanging attributes of man.

In the production of *Horseman*, the director, Onyonyor, saw the play as a ritual dance-drama woven out of Yoruba mythology. Consequently, he tried to evoke the atmosphere of a dance and

ritual performance throughout the production, even in scenes where ritual itself was not visibly presented on stage. The director, therefore, depicted some of the scenes in the production as oscillating between a carnival and a revolution. The whole of Scene was a dance-drama characterized by an antiphonal exchange between Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) and his praise singers (Aduobi Philip, Arowojowu Wemimo, Obazee Joshua, Mafo Arnold and Osondu Uche). The following stage direction in this scene posed a big challenge to the director:

A passage through the market in its closing stages ... Elesin Oba enters along a passage before the market pursued by his drummers and Praise singer. He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions. (p. 9)

As it is, it would appear as if only two people – Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) and his Praise singer (Aduobi Philip) – are speaking on stage and the other characters are just standing by and watching. It is not clear whether they are performing any activity and exactly what. The impression given is that the stage is static although there is copious dialogue going on. To solve this problem, the director had to roughly divide this whole scene into at least three different parts, each with its own different song, drumming and dance steps executed by all actors on stage. Moreover, Elesin (Omage Jonathan) was surrounded by five line-speaking praise singers (Aduobi Philip, Arowojowu Wemimo, Obazee Joshua, Mafo Arnold and Osondu Uche), with each of them taking turns to speak the lines allocated to the Praise singer by the playwright. One of the praise singers was made to praise-sing in Yoruba from time to time. In this scene, every character, including Elesin Oba, was made to sing and dance while the dialogue went on at the same time.



Plate 1: Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) speaking and dancing among the market women

Source: Onyonyor's production of *Horseman* at Uniben on 30th March, 2017.

Each time an actor spoke; he stopped dancing, delivered his lines and resumed his dance again. Elesin (Omage Jonathan) danced and moved among the crowd so that each time it was his turn to speak, he did so from a position on stage that was different from the previous one. The same rule applied to the other actors. This constant use of space coupled with the surrounding music, drumming and dancing all at the same time helped to give this scene a perpetual sense of motion. In effect, rather than having a bare and static stage picture, the result was one of the most dynamic and electrifying scenes with all the manifestations of a holiday. Nzewi, Anyahuru and Ohiaramunna have posited that "in most African cultures, dance is conceived and deployed as a nonverbal medium through which cultural narratives and metaphors are tacitly depicted beyond mime ... Most African dances have underlined lingual text" (100). In this performance, the *bata* dance of the Yoruba dominated. *Bata* in Yoruba culture is used in traditional weddings, in the coronation of the Oba and chiefs and in ritual performances. Dance and music in this performance, then, served as means of signification that went beyond words.

In discussing the issue of language in Soyinka's drama, Gates

remarks that Soyinka's use of English is informed by the metaphorical and tone language of the Yoruba and that since I.A. Richards, Western metaphors have served as 'vehicles' for the transfer of meaning 'through semantic space.' According to him,

The Yoruba ... defined metaphor as the 'horse' of words. If a word is lost, a metaphor or proverb is used to find it ... It is just this aspect of Yoruba language on which Soyinka relies. The extended use of such densely metaphorical utterance, searching for the lost and hidden meanings of words and events, serves to suggest music, dance and myth, all aspects of *poesis* long ago fragmented in Western tragic art. (72)

Soyinka's mastery is not limited to the use of metaphors as a tool for searching for the hidden meaning of words. As Gates argues, it is accompanied by an equal mastery of the language of music and that of the dance. In this play, Soyinka uses the antiphonal nature of Yoruba ritual theatre. In the production of this play, attempt was made to capture this dance - music continuum. However, to ensure that this continuum did not become boring, the first scene was broken into at least three different parts.



Plate 2: Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) being pacified by the market women and the Praise singer (Aduobi Philip).

Source: Onyonyor's production of *Horseman* at Uniben on 30th March, 2017.

The first part began from the beginning of the performance and ended where Elesin pretended to be angry with the market women because they have refused to dress him up as a man of honour. The second part started from where Elesin asked for the hand of Iyaloja's would-be-daughter-in-law (Offideh Mary-Joan) in marriage. The third part began from where Iyaloja (Ebitimi Anthonia) and the women presented Elesin with the young bride (Offideh Mary-Joan). This first scene was edited in order to reduce it to manageable proportions because it was very likely to drag if left as it is in the script. Some of Elesin Oba's lines, especially those that have to do with his story of the Not-I bird, had to be edited to ensure a tight narrative on stage. The director had to ensure that the actor playing Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan) understood that the playwright is employing the techniques of the story-telling drama and ritual theatre in this scene of the play. As a result, he was made to embody the different characters mentioned in the story through verbal and non-verbal communication. At one point, he was the courtesan, at another point he was a pupil in a Koran school and at another, he was an *Ifa* priest. The challenge for Omage Jonathan in playing this role was to be able to enter into these characters and embody them convincingly. He was expected to be a singer and a dancer as well in order to be able to externalize this role because Soyinka does not only cast Elesin Oba in the role of a story-teller in this play but in that of a ritual priest as well.

Similarly, the orchestra and the market women were required not only to dance throughout this scene but to keep the music and dance at the appropriate level so that it was neither be too high that it drowned Elesin Oba's (Omage Jonathan) lines nor too low that it left the stage barren. It was this combination of song, music, dance, drums and speech that made this part of the performance unique and challenging. Soyinka employed a bit of this technique in the divination scene in Part One of *A Dance of the Forests*. But here he employs this technique so profusely and with such artless spontaneity that it challenges both the director and his cast. The second half of Scene Three of this performance was taken up by this same ritual process which incorporated music and dance. However, here, we were at a deeper level of the ritual process when Elesin came out of the bridal chamber than when we first met him in Scene One. As a result, the singing, drumming and dancing and dialogue were much more solemn than in Scene One.



Plate 3: Market women doing the *bata* dance.
Source: Onyonyor's production of *Horseman* at Uniben on 30th March, 2017.

In both scenes, the swaying arms, the hip movements of the women, the intricate footwork and shoulder contortions of the men to the rhythm of the *bata* and the talking drums were emblematic of the people's identification with, and commitment to Elesin's elemental undertaking. The dance in *Horseman* has both a semiotic and metonymic significance as we have earlier remarked. There was therefore a certain kinesthetic literacy required for producing this performance. Two different moods pervaded this third scene. The first one which began the scene was the rambunctious mood because the scene opened with a tussle between Amusa (Agwuibe Ekene) and his men on one side and the market women on the other.

The challenge for the director in this first half of the scene was to pattern the movements of the actors in the conflict in a way that will avoid clumsiness on stage. To achieve this, the director instructed the women to drag each of the police constables (Irhobo Joseph, Egbo Joseph and Nwulu Chukwunwike) to different locations on stage so that the director had at least three different groups of women crowding round and beating one policeman in each location. The women were further instructed to strip the constables of their uniforms, leaving them with their under-wears by the time they

were done with the beating. This helped to underscore the comic relief and the author's joke on 'weapons' in this part of the scene.



Plate 4: Market women manhandling the police constables.
Source: Onyonyor's production of *Horseman* at Uniben on 30th March, 2017.



Plate 5: The two little girls (Richards Regina and Anonyuo Princess) mimicking the District officer.
Source: Onyonyor's production of *Horseman* at Uniben on 30th March, 2017.

The two little girls (Richards Regina and Anonyuo Princess) who initiated the beating were directed to wear the hats of the defeated constables while play-acting the white men. Right from the beginning of the scene up to the moment of the victory dance by the women, the scene was rambunctious. The second mood in the performance began when the scene changed to a solemn one from the moment Elesin (Omage Jonathan) entered from the bridal chamber and the rite of passage resumed. One aesthetic code that proved a formidable challenge to the director of this performance was how to get actors to play the Resident, his Aide De Camp, Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings, other British nationals and the girls in the scenes that featured them in the performance. Since it was difficult to get people of white skin to cast as actors who can deliver the lines of these characters with the right body language and with the British accent or something quite close to it, the director had to cast Nigerians for the roles.

Due to the fact that this play, like other plays by Soyinka, is located in the language, the director needed to work extra hard to get the actors to understand and speak these lines for meaning. For a director working in an environment like Nigeria where English is not only a second language, but is spoken by most actors who have no regard for, or the mastery of the proper cadence of speech and have shut their ears to the beauty of words, doing this play successfully was indeed an arduous task. Soyinka is not only a master of his medium of expression but one who consciously marshals words and sends them into battle. The director also encountered similar challenge with the non-Yoruba-speaking actors who played Elesin Oba (Omage Jonathan), Iyaloja (Ebitimi Anthonia) and the praise singers (Aduobi Philip, Arowojowu Wemimo, Obazee Joshua, Mafo Arnold and Osondu Uche) who could not get into the rhythm and the flow of the Yoruba words in the same performance. This problem was solved by instructing the actors to watch certain British and Yoruba films, and by giving them extra coaching in speech.

The curtain-call for this production was a closing glee in which all the actors came back to the stage in their costumes from seven different entrances with the same *bata* dance, singing, the *Oriki* chant and drumming with which the performance began in the first scene. All of these were designed to provoke the inherent sense of rhythm of the production's heavy visual spectacle and to create the appropriate tone. In producing *Horseman*, therefore, the director

attempted to marry line delivery and visual spectacle. By the way Soyinka wrote this play, it is obvious that his intention is to take us back to the very beginning when theatre was the domain of poets and dramaturges, when the audience came to experience the dynamic interface among what Diala describes as “a composite of semiotic articulations” (p. 64); when words, according to Soyinka, were “taken back to their roots, to their original sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images” (p. 147). To this extent, the play is a challenging archeology of theatrical knowledge.

Conclusion

To actualise Soyinka's *Horseman* on stage is quite challenging. The aesthetic idioms of story-telling drama, ritual theatre, the masquerade tradition, dance-drama, *Oriki* (praise chant) and Yoruba mythology formed the cardinal building blocks with which the director built the performance and got his audience not only to see the play but to *experience* it. The essence of producing a play is to get the audience to *experience* it in a way that is more graphic and rewarding than is normally possible through the process of mere reading. This is why it has been argued over the years that a play is not yet a play until it is produced. In employing the aesthetic codes discussed in this paper, the director made the production to move aesthetically through spectacle, polemics caricature and back to spectacle. The choral dirges of the women and the drumming underneath the lyricism of sublime poetry in the first, third and final scenes of this production created a melody and tragic grandeur hardly found in productions of modern tragedy. These are significant idioms of performance borrowed from Yoruba culture. Indeed, Soyinka has, in this play, succeeded in transliterating orature into literature by conflating polemics and aesthetic coordinates to fashion a new kind of theatre and invent a new human image for the global village. The director did justice to the essence of this play by exploring these codes thoroughly in its stage production. Any other theatre director who would want to engage the play and realize a successful performance with it will find Onyonyor's engagement rewarding if he/she carefully explores the aesthetic codes highlighted in this study.

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