# SCENOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS IN STAGING DIPO KALEJAIYE'S *DANGER AWAKE*

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**Abstract**
The theatre is a collaborative art which entails the coming together of different artists for the sole aim of putting a performance before an audience. These artists of the theatre include the playwright, the director, the stage manager, the set, lighting and costume designers as well as the make-up artist, the sound man, the props man and the actors. This implies that the theatre is as auditory as it is visual. Scenography therefore is basically concerned with the visual aspect of a theatrical production which in actual fact involves the creativity of the scenic designer, the lighting designer, the costume and make-up artists as well as the property and the sound designers. However, the art of the scenographer does not stop at the decoration of the set and the provision of costumes and properties but entails all the creative work that comes into a theatrical production. The problem of this study therefore is to interrogate the creative responsibilities of the scenographer in the production of a theatrical work beyond mere decoration of scenery. This is done through an examination of the technical requirements involved in the staging of *DangerAwake,*a play written by Dipo Kalejaiye with the aim of aiding prospective producers of the play by providing scenographic blueprint towards a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing design for an adequate realization of the play on stage for the proper understanding of the audience.

**Introduction**
The theatre is an ensemble art because its processes involve the collaboration of different creative and interpretative artists. For a theatrical performance to occur, these artists must come together and work towards the production of an aesthetically pleasing performance before an audience. The audience is known to be the final consumer of a theatrical product because without the appreciation of the performance by a live audience theatre is deemed not to have occurred and when a play is not put before an audience, itremainsa playtext. The theatre therefore is the laboratory and the studio for the creation and exhibition of a performance. A theatrical production thus must have the creative input of a playwright where a play text is the creative raw material for the proposed production, (and in the case of an improvisation, the creative process begins with the crystallization of ideas by the performers as the drama is conceived); the creative and interpretative ingenuity of the director and the actors as well as those of the design artists.

The director is the head of the theatre production process because he conceives the concept upon which every other artist begins his interpretative or creative process. It is the director who initiates the interpretation or re-creation of the original work of the playwright because he co-ordinates the entire production and sees to its artistic realization on stage before an audience.

The actors then, are the human carriers of the final theatrical product to the audience because it is through their performance that the audience sees the output of the entire creative process. The director heads the production because he coordinates all the other aspects of the production.

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While he (director) creates and interprets through the human body (actors), the designers (set, light, costume and so on) do their interpretation and creation through the media of technological equipment like lanterns, wood and canvas as well as cosmetic products and sound equipment.
The designers thus render their interpretation and creation through visual and aural means. The creative experience of these design artists is often referred to as Scenography. This entails the work of the set designer, the lighting designer, the sound designer, the costumier, the makeup artist as well as the creativity of the property manager. Scenography therefore is the culmination of the visual and aural aspects of a theatrical production which includes the set/décor, the costumes and makeup on the bodies of the actors, the lighting and sound as well as the properties that aid the actors' interpretation of the creative work of the playwright. Illka Louw (4) thus observes that scenography "tracks a link from the designer's initial interaction with the material of her craft as a means of her imagining the event, to the performer's material interaction, through to the spectator's imaginative interaction". This presupposes that scenography goes beyond scenic décor and lighting rather it is aimed at "creating a theatre beyond drama" (Lehmann 37). This implies that scenography advances the cause of a performance making the designers' duties go beyond simply putting "rostra and flats on the stage" (Folarin 14). The explication here is that in a scenographic event, scenography is considered a "component of performance" (Mckinney and Butterworth 3) where the scenographer is expected to "offer an interpretation of the play"rather than to simply "fill the requirements of the mise-en-scene as the text prescribed" (Louw 9). According to Rachael Hann (2);

> Scenography sustains the feeling of the beyond where the crafting of the 'scene' – inclusive of the orientating qualities of light and sound as well as costume and scenery – encompass a range of distinct methods for atmospheric transformations that score how encounters of 'world' are conceptualized and rendered attentive

In other words, scenography entails all that is seen in a theatrical performance. It is the "… art of the stage architect, the scenery, lighting and costume designer brought together" (Folarin 14)
Whereas it is the duty of the play director to conceive the production concept of any theatrical production, it is through the collaborative efforts of every artist of the theatre that a play production takes life in the theatre. Scenography thus further aids the audience's understanding of the production more so, when it is considered that "… the scenographer also has to work harder to understand the needs of the performer, who are, in the end, the primary visual element one has to work with". (Howard 126). It equally lends itself to detailed interpretation and re-creation of the playwright's message thereby making the audience able to appreciate the performance better.

Consequently, every play presents itself to subjective interpretations by the actors, directors and designers of the theatre irrespective of the fact that there is a central concept upon which the theatrical production is anchored upon, such interpretations, albeit subjective are held together through the production concept thus making the final product which is the theatrical production appear objective. This is because, some playwrights give vivid descriptions of what they envision of the movements of the actors and the set/décor as well as costume of the set and actors while some others allow the creative and interpretative artists room to bring in their respective

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interpretations into the work by giving scant descriptions of the visual aspects. This aspect of the playwright's imagination is captured by Nitish Jain thus:

> Text as the starting impetus allows the collaborators to gauge feeling or mood: this cognition is mostly intuitive and impulsive, and aims to capture the visual that is imagined when the written narrative is read. While reading stage plays, this is activated with the stage directions, either simple or detailed. These directions are essentially a playwright's tools for this very purpose- to convey the visual mood envisaged in a given situation. At this step, the idea is not to imagine the tangible space, rather to elaborate the feeling that goes on to critically carve the visual structure of this space. (27).

However, the director and his crew are at liberty to either follow the playwright's demands or not so long as the basic theme/message of the play is communicated to the audience. Yet, it must be remembered that no theatre artist should work in isolation because of the collaborative nature of theatrical art. According to Kristen Irwin (45), "theatre fundamentally is a collaborative art and the interdisciplinary mix of contributing artists and technicians brings depth to the work and through this creative network connects to diverse communities and audiences …".This work will therefore, consider the scenographic demands of Dipo Kalejaiye's *Danger Awake* with a view to aiding prospective producers of the play by providing a scenographic blueprint towards a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing design for an adequate realization of the play on stage

## *Danger Awake*: A Synopsis
Kalejaiye's *Danger Awake* is a metaphorical journey into the psychology of those in the nation's military service. The play exposes the helplessness of the officers who are under the command of the top notch officers. It calls to question the mantra of the military: "obey the last order" thus making the people to realize that 'might is not always right'.

*Danger Awake* is a silent call to revolution against the archaic ways of the military that have kept the country stagnant in more ways than one. Using the character Danger as a metaphor, the playwright shows how the military and the high in the society has kept the masses in perpetual poverty in a bid to mask their (the rich) fear and failure. The play tells the story of Danger, an armed robber who was executed for the crimes he committed but his (Danger's) spirit returns to torment the Army Colonel, Lt. Goma, who lead the squad that carried out the execution. Thus, the play becomes a paradox of living in a land where the elites feel that the masses are expendable. But, here, the hunter is made the hunted.

*Danger Awake* is one of Dipo's conscious efforts at identifying with the political problems in his homeland having experienced a stable and progressive political structure in his country of sojourn. The play, thus, through the eyes of the 'spirit;' Danger, elicits some truth from Lt. Goma about the depth at which the masses have been oppressed and suppressed.

## Dipo Kalejaiye: A brief Biography

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Dipo Kalejaiye is a Nigerian dramatist of Yoruba extraction. He had his B.A. Honours degree at the University of California at Berkeley and Graduate Studies at San Jose State University, San Jose, California. He returned to Nigeria and lectured at the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Calabar between 1980 - 1984. He went back to the USA sometime in 1984 as an academic being a teacher of English at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland, U.S.A. – where he rose to become an Associate Professor. He returned to Nigeria in 2010 to complete his Doctoral Studies at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. He was later appointed as the Deputy Director and Head of the Academic Unit at the National Institute of Cultural Orientation in Lagos. Thereafter, he became the pioneer Head of Department of Performing Arts and Culture, Leads City University, Ibadan, as Professor from 2014 to 2015.
Dipo Kalejaiye has many creative works in different genres of literature- prose, short stories, poetry and drama. *Danger Awake* is one of his dramatic works. He is among the many Africans, nay Nigerians, whose writings are influenced by their continued sojourn in foreign lands and the nostalgic feelings about their homelands. His works are published in the USA and in Nigeria.

## Scenographic Considerations in *Danger Awake*
*Danger Awake* can be classified among the plays that lend themselves to scenographic interpretations. Scenographic in this context aligns with Rachel Hann's argument that "scenography is formative to all theatre-making and is, therefore, implicated within the labours of directors and performers as well as choreographers and dramaturgs" (3). It is, literally speaking that act that makes the practice of the theatre a central art; a convergence of other disciplines, in fact, "… a platform from which to invite intellectual bridges with other academic disciplines beyond theatre" (Hann 2). The play, *Danger Awake*, is a combination of the real and the surreal; there are dream sequences/scenes and psychological realities that can only adequately be rendered through scenography. This infers that in staging *Danger Awake*, considerations should go beyond mere rendition of the playwright's demand "where performance as well as the space of performance is discovered in text" (Pavis cited by Mckinney and Butterworth 5) rather the designs should be rendered scenographically in which case "the scenographer emerges not as the spatial organizer of scripted narratives but as the author of constructed situations, and as an agent of interaction and communication" (Brejzek 112). This simply implies that using the traditional method of staging which is a method of adhering strictly to the given circumstances with little or no creative input by the interpretative artists might not give the desired effect. It then becomes a mere assemblage of static backdrop and expressive lighting with matching costumes and makeup which in the long run may not bring out the intrinsic meanings in the play.

However, in considering the scenographic demands of the play *Danger Awake* it is worthy of note that the scenographer deals not only in set, lighting and costume but is arguably an artist that works with every artist of the theatre. According to Pamela Howard (126), "… to be called a scenographer means more than decorating a background for actors to perform in front of it; …"
It goes without saying therefore that since there are more surreal situations in *Danger Awake* than there are realistic circumstances, the prospective producer of the play should think outside the box in order to make the play aesthetically pleasing to an audience. In striving to achieve this theatre "beyond drama" (Hann 1); a theatre that is not made based on the "principles of narration and figuration" (Lehmann 18), which simply put is a performance that tasks the creative

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imagination of the artists as well as all the sensibilities of the audience. In other words, the production of *Danger Awake* will go beyond the ordinary, making the presentation, not just a viewing delight for the audience but more of an experience because they (audience) will be considered in the design and execution of the work.

The playwright presents an insight into the nature of the scenographic encounters in the play. He describes the setting thus:

> The set is symbolic; a section of the stage represents the home of Lt. Goma, while another section represents the execution grounds. The action which takes place in the different areas should be brought into play by lights. It is crucial for the producer to note that some of the scenes involving the Storyteller must be played in the audience area, in order to break down the so-called fourth wall. The audience is not merely an onlooker, but a willing participant in the unfolding drama of the execution ground. … (Kalejaiye 76).

The fact that the designer is reminded that the aim is to "break the so-called fourth wall" and that "the audience is not merely an onlooker, but a willing participant…" indicates that the design for the performance should be "… a performative multi-sensory experience – one which helps forge new connections between visuality, spatiality, aurality, objecthood and audience" (Rufford 1). This explains why Louw refers to all participants; artists and spectators, of a scenographic event as "actants" which implies that the spectators are active participants in a performance that goes "beyond drama". Therefore, in considering the design for the production of *Danger Awake*, the audience must be put into perspective. The considerations for the scenic background, the lighting, costume and properties should be done with the audience's role as 'active participants". This is because, as Louw observes:

> The efficacy of the viewers as live actants in the exchange of images is linked to their imagining of the event as it unfolds, drawing a link from the designer's initial interaction with the materials of her craft, to the performer's material interaction through to the spectators' imaginative interaction (8).

It follows therefore that the scenographer in *Danger Awake* should strive to break traditional design "boundaries" by creating an environment that will engage the audience as participants in the theatrical event and not as passive observers. Hence, the scenographer is expected to draw inspirations from real live events as well as from imagined situations especially in the dream sequences. An example of such circumstances is given in the execution scene where the Soldiers, led by their Commander, Lt. Goma marches forward to execute the robbers. Thus, a multimedia staging technique will be most appropriate in order to capture the mood and atmosphere of that event.

Multimedia theatre is that practice of the theatre that "includes both performance where media technologies are brought into theatrical frame as a feature of mise en scene, and the area of new media performance, where a live performer may not be present but a high degree of

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performativity and liveness are achieved" (Klich 32). In other words, a multimedia staging is the application of new media technologies such as live video projections of pre-recorded images (scenes) while a live theatre performance is taking place on stage. It simply means that some scenes of a play to be performed on stage with actors in real time will be recorded and subsequently projected on stage for the audience.

The flashback scenes in *Danger Awake* as well as the execution scene lend themselves to multimedia staging for it to be duly realized. The playwright describes one of such scenes thus:

> Pantomime, with specific military tune in the background. This can be recorded music. Goma and a few soldiers are seen in the bare section of the stage, in a series of military formations, marching to the military tune. This pantomime is essential; it is a flashback…  (Kalejaiye 79).

An attempt to recreate a flashback in a live theatre performance will be dull and uninteresting without the aid of digital audio-visual equipment whereby the sound of the Soldiers' feet and the reactions of the 'on stage' audience and the theatre audience will be adequately captured as well as the gunshots and the screams of the robbers being executed without distorting the flow of the Storyteller's narrative technique. It thus becomes imperative to employ the Multimedia technique as a viable means of achieving the required dramatic effects. The consideration of multimedia staging technique as an appropriate mode of presenting *Danger Awake* is buttressed by Avra Sidiropoulou's observation that:

> Technology is becoming almost inseparable from theatrical design, occasioning jarring, ontologically pregnant collisions, whether through a simple projection of still images on the back wall of a black box theatre space, a prerecorded action played back on a TV screen or more sophisticated *mediaturgies* (1).

It can therefore be argued that the scenographer in *Danger Awake* will employ the multimedia staging technique in order to realize the message of the play effectively. The character, Danger in *Danger Awake* is made an enigma by the playwright. In fact, a super hero, thus the costume and makeup of the actor that will play the role needs serious creativity. The playwright describes Danger thus:

> The character of Danger is of paramount importance in the play. He is a catalyst who precipitates the dramatic action. No attempt must be made to reduce him to the level of cheap sensationalism merely because of his dual quality. What should be of relevance is the fact that Danger lives in the past, the present and the future. The character dominates the memory span of the other characters especially that of Lt. Goma, thereby precipitating action both on the subconscious and the conscious…

Danger's face must not be seen under any circumstance. In fact, the producer should have Danger's face totally masked and his body costumed           in                                    s

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uch a way as to symbolize the mystical essence he has come to     represent in the mind of Lt. Goma…(Kalejaiye 74).

While it could be contended that following the playwright's directives goes against the spirit of scenographic traits as it could lead to the production of what Lehmann (22) refers to as "dramatic theatre" where the designer is "responsible for the accurate realization of the scenic elements of a play, the "things" we see along with the actors on stage" (Louw 8)  it should be remembered that every creative activity in a theatrical event stems from the "Given Circumstances" and in this instant case, the playwright's directives happens to be a "Given Circumstance". What should be debated however is the extent to which the intended scenographer is going to be slavish to the dictates of the playwright. Nevertheless, the contention might be laid to rest when it is considered that scenography aims at a performance "in which there is a fluid transition and exchange between human bodies (the performer, designer, spectator), the body of space, the bodies of materials and the body of time in an imaginative, imagistic and kinaesthetic manner" (Louw 8). It follows therefore that the playwright's directive will serve only as a spring board from where the scenographer begins his exploration of the creative horizon offered by the text.
Consequently, in the design for the set/background for the action, the scenographer should consider the employment of the concept of "fluid space" (Ingold qtd in Louw 3). A "fluid Space" literarily implies that space not limited or bordered by the physical configurations of the stage space an example can readily be seen in Peter Brook's explication of "The Empty Space". In otherwords, it is that dynamic performance environment where actions and inactions are in constant motion aided by costume, makeup, set/décor, properties and light. This space thus offers the scenographer a boundless creative environment through which the message of the play is interpreted for an aesthetic effect on the sensibilities of the spectators.

Consequently, for the scenographer to achieve an aesthetically pleasing and functional environment for the production of *Danger Awake*, he should consider the creation of what Sidiropoulou(2) calls "heterotopic space". Citing Michel Foucault (2-4) he states that "a heterotopic space is a space that is both real/physical/material and imaginary/mental/transitory, even though it may be possible to indicate its location in reality". This kind of heterotopic space is apt for *Danger Awake* especially for the realization of the actions in Scene Three where Danger's Ghost appeared in the house of Lt. Goma while he (Lt. Goma) is playing a game of cards with Dr. Mala. In this situation, the Multimedia staging technique should be properly employed as the character Danger is supposedly seen only by Lt. Goma and of course, the audience.

| | |
|---|---|
| Lt. Goma: | Did you see him? |
| Dr. Mala: | I didn't see anyone. |
| Lt. Goma: | I saw him. You don't believe me, I know, but I am telling you I saw him with my own two eyes. He breezed past your chair over there near the curtains … then … then … |
| Dr. Mala: | Then what? |
| Lt. Goma: | Then he disappeared. (91). |

In other to create a believable performance environment in which the audience could willingly suspend their disbelief and interact and identify with the performance space offered, the

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disappearing and re-appearing of Danger should be projected digitally while the characters of Lt. Goma and Dr. Mala will be physically presented on stage as they would be made to react to the simultaneous action being projected. Here, lighting will play a very significant role in blending the on stage action and the mediated action. This will inadvertently make the audience active participants in the dramatic actions as the scenographer would have succeeded in creating "new spatial adventures" which will "oblige spectators to participate more fully into actions for which they are not only witnesses, but also active makers" (Sidiropoulou 4). The employment of the multimedia staging comes to the fore in considering the functionality of sound design in the production. Lt. Goma is made to shoot randomly at Danger's ghost which he alone 'sees' amongst the on stage characters save for the audience.

> Lt. Goma: Stand behind the firing line …
> (*Rudely points out the position with his revolver*)
> Dr. Mala: Okay so I am now standing behind firing line, but you are not going to start shooting …
> Lt. Goma: Take cover
> Dr. Mala: All right, all right. (Ducks behind a chair)
> Lt. Goma: (*Shooting wildly*)
> I want to kill Danger all over again. He is supposed to be dead. He is supposed to be dead for three days and comfortably lying in his grave … (94).

Synchronizing sound effectively is better via the multimedia staging with the use of digital audio equipment thus making the audience relive live experiences beyond the illusion offered by the theatre space. This presupposes that mere production of gunshot sounds through a loudspeaker may not achieve the desired effect but adopting the multimedia technique where the live action on stage is frozen and the recorded action (of the ongoing scene) is projected on a screen will give the audience a closer rendition of the desired effect. Here, the audience will not 'see' danger because the filmic image that will be projected will show Lt. Goma 'actually' shooting an invisible Danger. More so, when actions can be easily manipulated to make Danger walk through solid objects on screen which cannot be achieved in a live stage action. In this case, Dr. Mala's ignorance of Danger's presence will be more believable.

Lighting also will be considered for a proper rendition of the story through the multimedia staging technique. Stage lighting, no doubt, is an indispensable part of theatrical production. It is in fact, the medium through which the audience "sees' the action on stage. Light illuminates the performance space and gives the actors a life-like appearance. It helps in the delineation of the mood and atmosphere of the production. According to Dean Sterke in his treatise on the application of theatrical lighting; "indoor theatrical lighting is designed in a manner to emulate the natural highlights and shadow that are created by the sun… Proper highlights and shadows at proper light levels, maintains longer eye and audio contact keeping the audience's attention focused on the event" (3). This means that adequate application of lighting in a stage performance helps the audience's understanding of the production. Consequently, in a multimedia arrangement, lighting assists the scenographer in making acceptable mood statements which enhance the theme of the production. In *Danger Awake* therefore, the scenographer has to put into consideration the nature of theatrical lighting that will help every

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artist involved in the production in the interpretation of the play for a proper rendition of the author's message.

However, in all of the above, the set/décor should be representational in order to allow for fast and fluid scene changes. It is advisable to affix castors to the basic scenic pieces with which the background will be created so as to enable scene shifts to be easy. Similarly, properties should be restricted to the essential ones which can easily be taken out. Likewise, costume and makeup should be symbolic: Professions and social status should be represented to allow the audience identify the characters even without dialogue. Thus, it is advised that the scenographer will collaborate with the director for proper harmonization.

**Conclusion**

A consideration of staging *Danger Awake* through the media of live theatrical action and the mediated actions of pre-recorded scenes projected at cued/timed interval will afford the audience an all-inclusive experience whereby the visual elements are synchronized with the auditory elements in order to make the spectators active participants in the theatrical experience as well as aid the understanding of the performance. The scenographer therefore should remember that his creative responsibilities go beyond mere design of an environment for the actors but should include the experiences of the spectators who are active participants in the scenographic event.
It goes without saying therefore that surreal scenes and supernatural occurrences like dream sequences and ghost appearances can more readily be achieved in a live theatrical event through the mediated actions of multimedia staging which the scenographer creatively brings to bear on the on stage actions. Thus plays like *Danger Awake* which lend themselves to scenographic contemplations are better realized through the multimedia staging technique.

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