

THEATRE PRACTICE AND ECONOMIC RECESSION IN NIGERIA: THE JOS REPERTORY THEATRE (JRT) EXAMPLE

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Abstract

Economic recession, which narrows human priorities to the basic needs of life, portends shortfalls to arts and entertainments, including theatre practice. This is an analytical study of the performance practice of the Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT) that sustains her annual Jos Festival of Theatre amidst the 2016 economic recession in Nigeria. It evaluates the JRT minimalist performance approach adopted in the just concluded 10th edition of Jos Festival of Theatre, against the odds of harsh economic conditions. Among other performances, the study focuses on the performance of Akolo James Anthony's "Late Pam", and examines its minimalist characteristics of the performance as paradigms for sustaining theatre practice in harsh economic conditions. The study relies on participant observation and in-depth interview as primary sources of data. Among other things, it reveals that the minimalist approach, which deploys alternatives to realistic exactness, and simplifies production complexities, is a genuine means for achieving cost effectiveness in the theatre practice. The study hereby recommends that the minimalist approach to drama performance is an innovative strategy for surviving economic recession.

Introduction

Nigeria has wallowed in perpetual harsh economic conditions in the past four decades. The situation, which appears as a congenital disorder, has consigned the nation to a high level of underdevelopment through turns of military and civilian headship. The factors that precipitate bad economy of most developing countries, such as Nigeria, range from externally imposed to internally induced conditions. The external influences include foreign debt burden and the attendant high interest rate, which combine with the internal strings of corruption and lack of goodwill for national development that bedevil the Nigerian economic system till present days. Samies Foundation sees global economic downturn, fluctuation of global market prices, and unwholesome demand for export commodities as the as some of the major causes of the 2016 economic recession in Nigeria. Furthermore, inept and corrupt leadership, poor economic planning and adverse government policies are some of the internal conditions associated with the recession. The fallout of this economic downturn on the masses includes retrenchment, wage reduction, lack of infrastructure, low standard of living and high cost of living, which has consequently widened the gap between the rich and the poor. It is in the face of persistence

of such economic downturn that an economic recession is reckoned (Samie's Foundation n.p.).

Economic experts have suggested that a cardinal indicator to a healthy economy is the increase in production (Smith n.p.). This consideration, which seems true of industrial manufacturing production, also applies to small, medium and large scale business ventures in every sector of the economy. Thus, the experience of a perpetual decline in the activities of production/manufacturing industries is a signal that the economy is experiencing a downturn. Much more, it has been observed that when the economy lags, the entertainment and art sector appears to feel the heat more, as financiers and benefactors become unwilling to sustain their support for artistic productions. In the same light, patrons immediately consider the sector as not a necessity of life and existence.

The experience in Nigerian theatre practice has not been different. The economic recession has not only crippled theatre culture across the nation, it has rendered many theatre practitioners redundant. The experience of theatre practitioners who migrated to make a living in the cinema industry as an alternative to the stage in the 1970s was critical in this regard. Barclays Ayakoroma notes that, "the glorious years" of the cinema industry collapsed due to the economic recession in the 1980s, and at the instance of poor government policy:

The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAD) put in place by the Gen. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) regime in fulfilment of conditionalities for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, sounded the death knell for the cinema industry among other sectors of the economy (38).

This perpetual sting on the Nigerian economy has continuously affected theatre practice and the creative industry at large. Due to lack of facilities and funding, the growth of the industry has been stunted. More so, the prevalent low standard of living leaves production companies with no assurance of return-on-investment (ROI). Consequently, most theatre companies have gone moribund, and apart from educational theatres that domiciled in Departments of Theatre Arts in Nigerian Universities, only few companies manage to stay afloat when the economy bites. Nevertheless, some theatre companies in Lagos metropolis have continued to thrive, and new ones are emerging against the odds. This peculiarity, which distinguishes Lagos as the commercial hub of the nation, explains why most companies that stop operations in other parts of the country still carry out their operations smoothly in Lagos. However, amidst the uncertain economic conditions that pervade every other path of the country, Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT) has sustained its annual Jos Festival of Theatre.

The Nigerian economy was plunged into another season of economic recession in 2016. According to Barclays Ayakoroma, the reasons for the recession range from:

leadership deficit, massive corruption, national insecurity challenges, overdependence on oil, plummeting price of oil in the global market,

falling value of the naira in the forex market, reduced foreign earnings, bilateral trade deficit, to the breakdown of the value system... (5).

Expectedly, the arts and entertainment get poor attention whenever economic crunch sets in. Nonetheless, Jos Repertory Theatre went ahead with preparations for the 2016 edition of the Jos Theatre Festival, in spite of the economic condition. This underscores Ayakoroma's position that, "in spite of the economic recession Nigeria is undergoing, live theatre practice can still thrive because it depends, to a large extent, on theatre artists" (7). Thus, he maintains that the survival of the theatre depends on the approach of the practitioners. It is in this light that this study examines the minimalist approach of Jos Repertory Theatre to performances. The focus is the performance of Akolo James Anthony's "Late Pam", produced at the 2016 edition of Jos Festival of Theatre, as a survivalist strategy for the theatre in the face of Nigeria's dire economic conditions.

The Minimalism Approach to Drama Performance

The term, *minimalism*, enjoys diverse usage and meaning, from varying stand points; but they all share a common etymology that derives from the word, "minim" (down-scaled portion) and "minify" (downscaling approach). In plastic and visual arts, minimalism refers to a reaction against "abstract expressionism", which gives liberty to an approach that conforms with "logical systems and universal physical principles rather than mere impulsive artistic sensations (Princenthal n.p.). Whereas, according to Obendorf, minimalism in music entails the "reduction of structure and sound, often by employing repetition and combination of simple pattern" (50). Other fields such as advertisement, fashion, literature and interior design also express different perspectives on minimalism.

Minimalism gained first mention in the arts through the British philosopher, Richard A. Wollheim (1923-2003), in an article he wrote in 1965, entitled, "Minimal Art". Although Wollheim's thoughts were directed towards the development of abstraction and the avant-garde, which, according to Peter Shelley, were different from what minimalism in the arts was developed to be afterwards (12). Donald Judd (1928-1994), Robert Morris (1931-), Dan Flavin (1933-1996), and Carl Andre (1935-) are plastic and visual artists, who are worthy of mention as leading exponents of minimalism in the arts. Though the concept of minimalism might seem new in Theatre and the Performing Arts, its precepts can apply to artistic performances. According to Nancy Princenthal, the minimal art comprises of sculptures and paintings that are composed by the design attributes of "simplicity", "geometric shapes", "basic colours" and "hard straight lines", as against the use of "uninhibited brushwork" (n.p.). Minimalism in visual arts thus demands the physicality of a work of art to be more imposing than its illusionary effects. The theory is characterised by simplicity of composition and the omission of superfluous elements, which Obendorf terms the "displacement of visual abundance" (26).

In the light of the above, there is a place for minimalism in the performing arts and indeed the arts of the theatre. Inferences from the use of theatrical techniques and devices that agree with the established traits of minimalist characteristics, with the precepts of minimalism, can conveniently be regarded as minimalist approach. Such traits include the preponderance of physicality over illusionary presentation, simplicity of composition over

extravagant exhibition, and preference for a cost effective approach. A survey of the development and history of Western theatre practice reveals different instances of minimalist approaches to theatrical performances. The theatre at Athens, Greece, was believed to have evolved from religious rituals in honour of Dionysus, through the content development of dithyrambic renditions, which had become regular contests at the City Dionysian festival by 6th century BC (Brockett 16-17). Also, Robert Cohen describes the dithyrambic display as, “an ancient drunken dance-chant fertility ritual” that consisted of about fifty revellers (62-63). Obviously, the dithyrambic performances seemed like fantasy display of cluttered exhibitions; and theatre history has it that Thespis, Choerilus, Pratinas and Pymachus were leaders of the dithyrambic groups that engaged in the inter-tribal contests of the era.

As drama performances evolved into robust secular entertainments, it evolved into robust secular entertainments, and the foremost dramatist of the era, Thespis’ legacy of one-actor and fifty-man chorus (revellers), was minified by Aeschylus, who introduced the second actor to simplify the complexities of mono-acting. Furthermore, the numerical strength of the chorus was minified by Sophocles, who introduced the third actor; while Euripides depleted the numerical strength of the chorus to just five (Brockett 50-56). These developments are minimalist strategies to performances, which simplified the complexities of role-playing to engender far-reaching possibilities, while expunging superfluous elements from the essence of the chorus. These served to distinguish dramatic personae by imposing character features, and distinguished the display of individual chorus members in the group. Ultimately, this is cost effective and makes mounting productions convenient and with minimal production challenges.

Furthermore, history records that the general decline in economic and cultural activities that characterised then Dark Age did occasion the death of theatre practice in the mediaeval period. Invariably, when theatre practice resurfaced later, performances held in the Church Temples and later outside and away from the Church (Brockett 18). The staging convention and aesthetics that characterised that era are best described as minimalist. Since drama merely played an ancillary role in the Church, its activities were accommodated in spaces designed for liturgy. The alter-vestry orientation of the temple informed *Mansion-Plates* stage configuration. Pickering explains that the mansion was a small booth covered with beautifully decorated canvas that served to conceal actors and other stage items before they appeared on stage; while the *platea* served as playing space in front of the stage and by the sides of the *mansion* (143). The minimalist approach in this era heralded the stage-waggon alternative to mediaeval production.

Significantly, the modern temperament, which developed with Western theatre in 19th century, stemmed a dichotomy of style to theatre performances: the realistic and anti-realistic performances mode. Though both forms tend to share a similar objective that sought to break away from the conventions and ideals of previous theatrical traditions, the anti-realistic form is averse to the realistic order; and it has developed different perspectives of minimalism to curb the illusionary complexities of realistic performances. Physicality, therefore, which is a core attribute of minimalism, occupies a significant place in most anti-realistic performance modes. In tandem with the position of Samuel Coleridge, who posited that, members of the audience “willingly suspend disbelief” in the theatre, the exponents

of anti-realistic performances give free reign to minimalism. Their practice seeks to minify, and sometimes eradicate aesthetic distance, to replace realistic setting with geometrically-shaped set items, and to ultimately cut down on visual abundance.

Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), for instance, broke away from his foundation mode of realistic performance, and led an Anti-realistic theatre movement that emphasises theatricality (Mark 32-33). His approach to minimalism is what Susan Bennet describes as, a “denarrativising” process, which refers to Meyerhold’s use of spectacle to minify verbal effusion and stimulate visual attention (6). This appears to underpin Meyerhold’s assertion that, “words do not only tell the story, a pattern of movement is used on stage, which will force the spectator into the position of being a keen observer” (174). With elaborate movement, large gestures and exaggerated facial expressions, Meyerhold imprinted bold designs and patterns on the performance space. As such, Meyerhold’s theatre performances were devoid of the encumbrances of set and scenic composition, so that the performers can utilise space with the boundless scenic possibilities formed by geometric shapes and body modelling.

In the same token, Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) had demonstrated minimalist approach in his “Poor Theatre” experiments. He maintained that drama performances should be devoid of external effects and design accompaniments for it to impact an actor-spectator relationship of perpetual, direct and live communion (Grotowski 19). Grotowski insisted that the use of costumes, props, scenes and light designs were extraneous and should be minimised. Thus, his poor theatre is a deliberate attack on the realistic illusion of “rich” performance, to project minimalism in it entirely (Grotowski 17). Although, the elimination of elements that are not exclusive to the performances on stage is a crucial preoccupation of avant-gardism, it is important to note that minimalism in theatre is not squarely an avant-gardist device. According to Barbara Haskell, minimalism epitomises the “reductivist” possibilities that seek to express a “non-illusionistic and non-metaphoric correctness” (99-101). As such, minimalism in drama performance alludes to a mode of presentation that rids the performance of a measure of its illusionary texture. Its characteristics range from the use of basic geometrically shaped set pieces, basic colours, displacement of visual abundance, simplicity, distinction, clarity, and indeed cost effectiveness.

A Brief on Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT)

The Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT) was established in 1997 by Jude Oteh, a passionate theatre professional and former lecturer at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Jos. The Repertory Theatre commenced full operation in year 2000, as a not-for-profit theatre outfit. In an interview, Oteh, a holder of a doctorate degree in Theatre Arts, recalled that his stint with J.P. Clark’s PEC Repertory Theatre in Lagos, inspired his venturing into the theatre repertory model. Remarkably, JRT thrived by developing unique strategies for self-sustainability amidst the unfavourable economic conditions in the country. Victor Dugga and Jude Oteh corroborate the above when they note that, JRT is “an on-going experiment that shows new ways of handling age-old problems” (82). At inception, JRT was confronted by the challenges that militated against most Nigerian theatre groups, especially with regards to poor funding and infrastructure deficit. But as time went on, the

organisation devised innovative means of survival. For instance, the organisation engaged in the production of dramas in the secondary school curriculum and plays that assisted government and non-governmental organisations (NGO) to propagate their programmes and activities.

By the character of its mode of operation, the Repertory has a rich collection of performances. It prepares for an array of performances in any particular season. Hence, the adoption of the minimalist performance approach, which has engendered cost effectiveness in the production of a number of performances by the Troupe in any season. Dugga and Oteh note that, though JRT had enjoyed the rare opportunity of prolonged and renewed funding from The Ford Foundation and British Council for purposes of Theatre in Education (T-I-E) and Theatre for Development (TfD), it also engaged in a number of commercial performances. According to them, JRT initiated the Jos Festival of Theatre, beginning with performances of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman*, Yahya Dangana's *The Royal Chamber*, an adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and an in-house devised drama, entitled, "Our House" in 2004 (Dugga and Oteh 84-87). In an interview, Oteh stated that, "if everything had gone well, this (Jos Festival of Theatre) should be the 13th edition. We missed three editions because of the Jos crisis". He stressed that, apart from poor funding, the only factor that can militate against staging festival performances is insurgency. The minimalist approach, which enables JRT to handle many productions with minimal funding, is the organisation's strategy for the sustenance of production performances.

Furthermore, the benefactors who often reconcile value for money with the magnitude of deliverables look forward to an increased number of productions at the annual festival, without necessarily increasing the financial support, in spite of the persisting dwindling economic situation in Nigeria. According to Oteh, the Jos Festival of Theatre got less founding in 2016 than the previous year, understandably because of the economic recession. But rather than cancel the festival in 2016 on account of inadequate funding, Oteh adopted the minimalist approach and delivered no less a fulfilling theatre experience. The festival, which held on Saturday, 28th May, at the Alliance Francais Cultural Centre, featured three plays: "Late Pam" by Akolo James Anthony, *Bullion Stride* by Kingsley Ubong Umoren, and an adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Rinconet y Cortadillo* by Jude Oteh on the first, second and third day, respectively.

Minimalism and the Performance of *Late Pam*

The performance of Akolo James Anthony's "Late Pam" opened the 10th edition of the Jos Festival of Theatre in 2016. As stated above, the venue was the outdoor performance space of the French Cultural Centre in Jos, Plateau State. A sheltered elevated rectangular space, with a cyclorama, served as the stage; while an ample space flanked by two buildings, which define it like a proscenium auditorium to the elevated stage, sat over a hundred audience members. On the left side of the stage and adjacent to audience, a Chorus of three consisting a pianist, a guitarist and a vocalist, were visibly positioned. Somehow, the audience was enthralled with the performance of "Late Pam". The one-act performance had only two characters: Pam and Bala. The playwright, Akolo James Anthony played the

role of Pam; while the director, Jude Oteh played the role of Bala. The play, “Late Pam” is a witty existentialist drama that is set in Bala’s one-room apartment.

Observably, the dramaturgy of “Late Pam” indeed agrees with the minimalist performance approach by creating two characters that are well-developed in their geometric forms. In essence, the characters of Pam and Bala can be described in terms of their depth, height and width. This pertains to the richness and roundedness of both characters, and how they go through dramatic change of fortunes in the course of the dramatic action. The strength of the performance lies in the character development and interpretation; and other characters that were not seen but mentioned in the play were appropriately aligned to the two characters on stage, in a way that is central to the spine of the plot.

In the play, Bala gets drunk after an unfortunate breakup with his girlfriend and returns home with a bottle of local gin, which he had purchased. But he changes his mind after and dumps the drink in a refuse bin. He then decides to catch a little sleep, when a gluttonous drunk (Pam), whom he does not know, knocks on his door unexpectedly. Since Pam is somebody he is unfamiliar with, Bala denies him entrance into the house. The witty interactions between Bala and Pam hold across the separating wall between Bala’s room and the veranda. Pam arrives at his wits’ end and confesses his real mission. He had trailed Bala from the bar to his apartment, so that he can share in the drink; only that he had seen the bottle of gin in the refuse bin and had consumed it. Bala consequently changes his mind and tries to open the door in order for Pam to join him in a meal; but the key breaks in the hole and he is at Pam’s mercy. Bala begs Pam to rescue him by either helping to break the door, or call a carpenter; but Pam declines after he gets an urgent call to join in a free drink session at the bar. He abandons Bala and runs off to the bar.

There is no gainsaying the fact that, Pam is an alarmist. He knocks on Bala’s door and claims that he was wrongly alleged of theft; and that a mob is after his life; but the sceptical Bala shuts him out. He wants him to say the truth as regards his claims. The ensuing conversation and arguments open a broad spectrum of salient social issues that audience members could readily connect to. Pam characterises the misery of youthfulness. He is a victim of parental neglect and poor career guidance; he had been subjected to career imposition. Thus, he led a reckless life in the University until he dropped out of school. Ironically, Pam attended the same school with Bala; but they did not know each other then. He was one of the school drop-outs, who lived on Campus to foment restiveness, when Bala was the Secretary General of the Student Union Government (SUG). Pam is a drunk, while Bala is undergoing his National Youth Service Corps scheme, having been called to bar as a lawyer. Aside the theme of youthful recklessness that characterised Pam’s life, other sub-themes of the performance include the shortcomings of the Nigeria Police and the judicial system, jungle justice, prostitution, homosexuality, sexual immorality, and dearth of virtuousness, among others.

Findings and Discussions

In the first place, the performance of “Late Pam” featured a stage that was scantily-furnished, and mostly with representative scenic units. It was symmetrically divided by a door for the dual setting: room and veranda. The door, which was represented by a 7ft high,

4ft long and 1.5ft wide wardrobe, stood profile right at centre stage; and its length stretched towards up stage and the width faced the audience. As such, the back side of the wardrobe with the plain surface faced the veranda; while the other side that also had a curtain, faced the room. Hence, Bala and Pam were constrained by dramatic setting and the plot to engage within the two halves of the stage: stage left as Bala's room and stage right as the veranda. Other items in Bala's room consisted of a reading table and chair, a bag, a small mattress on a small bed, and clothes hanging on nails driven into the door (wardrobe). On the other hand, the veranda consisted of a waste bin, flower pot, a ladder laid-down, a bench, and a small water jar.

The performance deployed the representation mode alongside its predominantly presentational mode in the use of anti-realistic techniques, which served the style of production, and connected the audience to the dramatic action. Through the 90minutes performance, Pam crossed the stage right confinement twice. First, while singing, he goes down stage and crosses towards the audience, singing alongside the chorus. Second, at a later moment, he exits backstage to feign the attack by his adversaries; but Bala remains in the stage left area.

The performance was a success in every regard, as audience members followed with rapt attention and responded appropriately. This was also evident at the curtain call, when audience members received the cast with an overwhelming standing ovation and prolonged applause for a very fulfilling theatre experience. Thus, the first night performance of the 2016 festival was a great opening that sustained audience interest and attracted increased number of spectators for the next set of performances.

Incidentally, the performance of "Late Pam" was a matinee; it was an early evening performance before nightfall. Thus, there was no need for stage lighting. There was also no change of costumes, as all dramatic actions in the play took place between evening and morning. The actors deployed the essentiality of the body and voice in space to draw out strong designs in the performance space, like hard lines with edges, which are imprinted on the minds of the audience. This seems to have made up for the use of minimal scenic elements, without subtracting from the aesthetic essence and composition of the performance. As a point of fact, the performance showed that audience satisfaction, which is the hallmark of a fulfilling performance, is not necessarily the result of rich and attractive production designs, but of the creative engagement of the performer with the use of body and voice.

Conclusion

This study posited that minimalism is a possibility in theatrical performance. This may come into play in the adoption of a performance approach that subverts the use of magnificent scenery, extraneous characters, and romantic elements for the essentials of performance, which lie solely in the skill of the performer. The study maintains that *minimalism*, which is highly suggestive, places demand on the imagination of the audience, as they become part of the task in the meaning-making process of the performance experience. Hence, audience members derive increased aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction thereupon.

Consequent on the foregoing, the minimalist performance approach does not only leave strong geometric impressions on the audience; it also *minifies* the production cost of performances. The resultant cost effectiveness presents the minimalist performance approach as suitable for the survival of the theatre under harsh economic conditions. Benefactors and financiers can be encouraged to sustain their support for theatrical productions. On the other hand, returns from gate fee can serve to lighten the burden of production cost. Thus, this study recommends that the example of “Late Pam” at the Jos Festival of Theatre in 2016 is an example for minimalist drama performance, which can service theatre practice and patronage during economic recession.

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