

*Special Feature*

**NEGOTIATING IDENTITY:  
THEATRE, PERFORMANCE AND CRITICISM IN AFRICA**

**Emmanuel S. Dandaura**  
Nasarawa State University

The question of identity became dominant in African theatre at the onset of colonialism. The colonial masters imported into Africa their kind of theatre, which was in many respects different from the type that existed in pre-colonial African societies. As is to be expected, consequent upon the interaction between the two cultures, there now exist syncretic forms of entertainment, which are a fusion of the two theatre traditions. Since the early 1960s African scholars and theatre critics in particular have sustained the conversation on what features define an authentic African theatre. Today this conversation is still raging because of the twin burdens of globalization and colonialism. In most African cities, foreign entertainment forms still exist side by side the indigenous African performances. At the level of theory, both the African and European theatre traditions have their distinct aesthetic canons. Negotiating these canons is part of what makes the task of the theatre critic in Africa engaging but tricky. This paper examines the challenge of negotiating cultural identity through theatre, performance and criticism in Africa.

The theatre critic in traditional African society exists more as a performer than a literary artist. He is either embodied in the highly participatory African theatre audience or exists as that virtuoso multi-talented performer who understands his people's artistic tastes, values, social mores and culture. Like the modern theatre critic, he is one who can evaluate a creative work and make an informed statement on its artistic merits or otherwise. He is not just a performer but also one who continuously seeks to understand and interpret the social forces that interplay in his society and the extent to which these affect and influence social conduct, creativity and wellbeing of members of the society. However, unlike the modern critic, he doesn't have to reduce his criticism or ideas into writing. He communicates his observations either in the form of song, oral poetry, jeers, applause, and other expressive performances.



A folk Artist and critic in Performance (Photo Credit: E.S. Dandaura)

Perhaps, it is important to note from the onset that the theatre traditions in the fifty-four different countries in Africa are unique albeit similar in many respects. While not taking the uniqueness of each of the constituent traditions for granted, this paper concentrates primarily on those aesthetic values that are common to most African performances rather than those few distinguishing features. That is what has been referred to here as 'African Theatre'. Similarly, the paper has taken liberty to refer to Europe or the 'West' as if it were a theatre bloc whose aesthetic taste is defined by the Aristotelian precepts of literary criticisms. This does not mean that the paper is oblivious that Europe like Africa has its rich collections of theatre traditions whose texture differs from one nation to the other. In both cases the paper dwelt on the common aesthetic values in each region than the national particularities.

Orality was the basic character of indigenous African theatre and also key means of communication by theatre or social critics long before the advent of colonialism in Africa. This oral nature of theatre in African contrasts so much with the perception of theatre in Europe where in the words of Hauptfleisch:

the playtext is the thing thus, not the performance... The theatrical idea that the history of theatre is a history of the performances that took place, is apparently rejected...African theatre, even today, is a performance one, rather than a literary one, though colonial thinking has long sought to canonise the printed text. (2)

During Colonialism, indigenous African performance modes were suppressed and in some cases deliberately supplanted with Western performance modes. Mlama provides a clue to the intention of this colonial policy: “their intention was not only to entertain the European community in the colonies but also to inculcate European values and attitudes among the colonised as part of the cultural domination crucial to the colonization process” (57).

In school, children were taught how to appreciate literature and music from the perspective of the European child. For instance, through nursery rhymes the child was taught about snow and skiing, when in his lifetime, the African child may never see snow let alone ski in his community. They were taught to recite “there are four seasons in a year: winter, spring, summer and autumn”. Meanwhile most African children experience only two seasons in a year- rain and dry seasons. As a child I was also taught to recite popular nursery rhymes like

“London Bridge is falling down,  
Falling down, falling down,  
London Bridge is falling down,  
My fair lady”

It didn't matter to my teachers then if I would ever get to see London, River Thames or any modern bridge for that matter. As we progressed into secondary schools, we were taught basic literary appreciation skills. It was then I learnt that the “London Bridge” poem was constructed “in quatrains”. I was taught about pentameters: iamb, trochee, dactyl, and anapaest. Again I learnt about Greek tragedies, and the concept of the well-made play. We were taught to read and regurgitate the works of great European playwrights from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Menander, through Shakespeare and down to Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. In the university, we were introduced to philosophy, theatre history, literary theory and criticism. From my young mind and orientation, I saw Aristotle as that nosy, larger than life fellow who has done all the thinking for humanity. As a young critic, I was well armed with detailed prescriptions of the Aristotelian poetics, structuralism, Marxist aesthetics and the like which I sought for every

opportunity to apply faithfully. Wole Soyinka's "The fourth Stage" in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* or Léopold Sedar Senghor's *Negritude* both originate from African, yet were additions to my critical canons that probably came too late in the day.

The nature of schooling which colonialism bequeathed the average African critic is such that the default canon for any aesthetic judgment is often the Aristotelian poetics or any other European precept. Sharing the East African experience, Mollel (1982) notes that by sticking to Eurocentric critical canons, modern theatre critics in Africa unwittingly promote the idea that the "only theatrical experience worth speaking about in Africa is the one inherited from Europe". Nothing can be further from the truth. Africa has long established indigenous performance traditions, which subsumes ritual, dance, song, storytelling, wedding ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, harvest festivals, puppetry, shadow theatre, dance-drama, dramatic enactments, mime, etc.

### **Aesthetic Moglelisation: African Theatre under Colonialism**

At political independence, which heralded end of colonialism in most countries, African Theatre ended up as mongrelized aesthetic forms. Even today, most manifestations of African theatre remain an amalgam of both the *traditional* and *modern* (European) theatre traditions. The traditional strand is indigenous, eclectic, boisterous, diverse, and abounds in every community. This strand of theatre manifests in two forms. First, it manifested in the form of purely ritualistic performances, chants, masquerades, and festivals of the various ethnic groups in the fifty-four nations in Africa. Secondly, it also manifests in the form of age-long, entertaining and highly educative story-telling performances, folktales, fables, proverbs, idioms, praise songs, mimes, and dances performed during social events.

Besides the traditional strand, there is also the literary strand, which is a by-product of Africa's experience with colonialism and the intervening European theatre traditions. This strand of African theatre emphasises scripted plays, western literary canons, imported theatre technologies and box office collections. Rather than the eclectic, total theatre performance format of most indigenous theatre forms, the literary theatre encourages compartmentalization of the theatre enterprise into different professional callings as playwrights, directors, choreographers, designers, critics, etc. These professionals strive to earn their living by collaborating to *make* theatre in enclosed buildings, which are specially designed for such purposes.

While the new African political and middle class relish products from the literary theatre strand and other entertainment forms that originated from the West. The vibrant folk performances are conscribed to the ghettos and rural areas. The vestiges of Western entertainment forms, especially literary theatre, found fertile soils on campuses as new crop of playwrights tutored in Western (Aristotelian) aesthetics emerged. Olu Obafemi captures the situation succinctly:

Colonial hegemony in Africa did not only manifest itself in the political and economic life of the people, it also shaped the direction of African literature in a significant way. Early literate African art works, especially dramatic productions were largely informed by European entertainment forms like music hall, morality plays and operatic performances. (np)

Hitherto, there existed in pre-colonial Africa, indigenous theatre traditions, which were truly seen by the majority of the people as integral part of their daily existence. Theatre was part of what brought vibrancy and order to the existence of the Africans. It was free, accessible, performance oriented, oral, engaging, and relevant to the existence of every member of the community where it exists, regardless of social, political or economic stratifications. Suddenly, the visiting colonial masters redefined theatre for the young African school children as not just any performance but essentially a performance:

based on the 'well-written play or ...only possible on an indoor stage, under a picture-frame proscenium, arch and fancy foot-lights, and we still believe that there ought to be for any theatre performance a rigid demarcation between the audience and the performers, the performers on a lighted stage, raised above the audience who sit in a darkened auditorium below, to all appearances non-existent.

The above polarity in the conception of what constitutes good theatre subsists in Africa to date. This duality further complicates the job of the theatre critic in Africa. Often in reviewing a performance, the question that comes to mind is: should the critic pander to the established literary canons of the 'formal theatre' which, of course are Eurocentric, or should he yield more to the traditional African aesthetic values which are understood by the majority of the audience in

Africa. The dilemma is that should the critic opt for the formal theatre, the bulk of the performances, which are often episodic, site and time specific, will not qualify as serious theatre. The bulk of the performances which majority of the African audience enjoy and connect with may not be given the serious attention they deserve as worthy artistic creations.

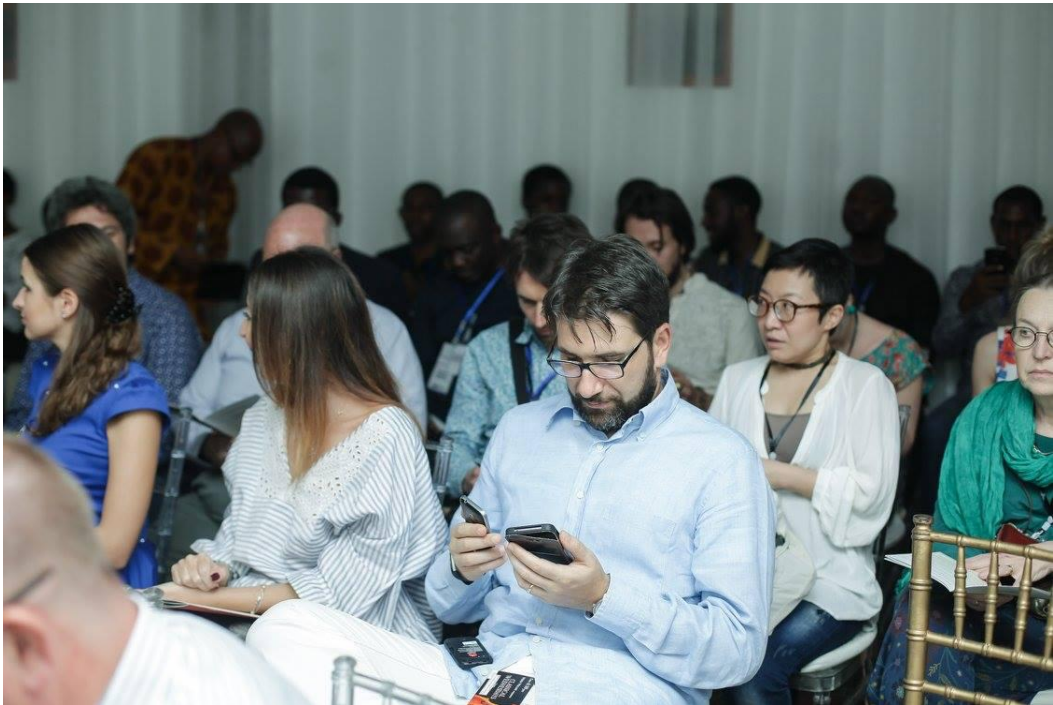


### **A Taste of the Critic's Challenge**

In a syncretic theatre environment, navigating through the maze of which aesthetic canons to apply in reviewing a performance that is strictly speaking neither African nor Western can be arduous. This reality manifested itself recently in Lagos, Nigeria. As part of the 2017 Lagos Theatre Festival (LTF), on Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> day of March, I accompanied three visiting colleagues and international theatre critics from Sweden, Romania and Hong Kong alongside twenty young Nigerian theatre critics to watch two performances: *Lagos Na Wa* at the Recital Hall, Muson Centre, Lagos; and *Vesta Violins' Wednesday Classics*, at the Banana Island School, Ikoyi, Lagos. The International Association of Theatre Critics selected the two performances as part of the field exposure for the twenty

young critics under its 2017 LTF-Young Critics professional mentoring programme.

*Lagos Na Wa* is a fast-moving, comic, improvisational performance created within the total theatre mould. It subsumes songs, drama, buffoonery, dance, mime, and music. The performance utilizes pidgin English, Yoruba and Nigeria blend of the English Language. *Lagos Na Wa* is a satire that expresses the frustration of most African youths who are exposed to untold harassments, exploitations and ultimately made to indulge in dubious acts in order to survive in the urban centres. The episodic performance utilizes popular songs, musical tunes, drama, day to day happenings, and characters recognizable in the daily hustle and bustle of the mega cities like Lagos. Its strongest comment is that the failure of government at all levels has greatly compromised the welfare and security of its citizens.



A cross section of the mixed audience during the 2017 Lagos Theatre Festival performance on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017. (Photograph Credit: Courtesy British Council, Nigeria)

During the tripartite post performance interaction between: the visiting international critics; the young Nigerian critics; and cast of *Lagos Na Wa*, I

noticed an interesting development. While most of the young Nigerian critics found it easy to relate with the performance as a meaningful artistic engagement, my international colleagues found it difficult to classify what they just watched. “Could it be a musical drama”? a rehearsal in progress? or arrant balderdash? It was certainly not ‘theatre’ as far as the western theatre precepts are concerned. One of the European critics submitted emphatically that “there was no spectacle in this at all, and spectacle is a basic element of theatre”. On reading the review of same performance by the young critics the next day I realized that even the Nigeria critics that connected the with the actions of the performance were not in agreement on how to classify or evaluate it. They ended up with some of the following contradictory submissions:

The production style is largely eclectic, employing popular hit songs to deepen the message of the play...Generally, the directing and artistic vision of the production is good and to a large extent delivers the message of the play. (Shedrack Ukuma <https://dailynigerian.com/entertainment/lagos-na-wa-the-casual-rhythm-of-lagos/>)

This is a comedy of errors with a charm that makes it look like a performance thrown together casually (Ifeoluwa Nihinlola <https://guardian.ng/art/lagos-na-wa-just-like-awkward-rhythm-of-the-city/>)

*Lagos Na Wa* is a musical drama, that highlights a lot of vices. The script is impressive, direct and detailed. The musicals ranging from contemporary Nigerian hits, speak where dialogue is mute (Olamide Santos, (IATC-LTF Report).

It is a ‘mosaic of dance, music and drama...It’s a portrait – perhaps a painting achieved in broad strokes would be more appropriate – of rural-urban migration, corruption, sexual health and safety, and a repertoire of other societal issues (Falade Adeoye Dennis, IATC-LTF Report).

What is interesting in the above reviews of *Lagos Na Wa* is that the discordant submissions of the critics were basically as a result of each applying different aesthetic lens. Indeed, the lenses utilized to analyse a performance determines



greatly *how* the performance will be understood by the analyst. Surely if one is evaluating *Lagos Na Wa* performance from the Eurocentric lens, the likely conclusion will be that the performance was anything but a play. However, from the African perception of theatre as a story-telling performance whose relevance is measured by the extent to which it reflects and impacts life, *Lagos Na Wa* stands out as ‘good theatre’.



Guchi Egbuine leading the orchestra during *Vesta Violins’ Wednesday Classics* performance at the Banana Island School Recital Hall, Ikoyi Lagos on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017. (Photograph Credit: Courtesy British Council, Nigeria)

*Vesta Violins’ Wednesday Classics* on the other hand was a concert that featured an international ensemble, which comprised Oana Craciunescu (Romania), Koumait Saleh (Syria) and a host of Nigerians led by Rosalyn Aninyei and the two amazing vocalists; Guchi Egbuine and Ranti Ihimoyan. The concert was just what a performance of “early music” should be: exciting, warm, soul searching, and nostalgic. The tones were no doubt beautifully executed with graceful ornaments, unimpeachable precision and Victorian panache. Ronti’s voice was eloquent, alluring, elastic and had this ringing purity, which kept the audience

mesmerized. Her graceful spontaneity as a singer came to the fore as she added little ornaments to the repeated laughter phrase “hahahaha” in the “laughter song” which was eventually voted the best piece of the night by the audience.

The above review is based on my impressions as a critic who has tuned his mind to the conventional aesthetic criteria of what elements define good classical musical performances. It was gratifying to note that my three visiting international theatre critics who didn't find ‘much theatre’ in *Lagos Na Wa*, that we all watched few hours earlier, found ‘good theatre’ in this concert. However, this was not the case with some of the young Nigeria critics who came to the concert armed with their African aesthetic canons. To such critics, the concert was extremely boring as there was not a single moment of the kind of ‘activity’ in the *boisterous Lagos Na Wa* fashion. Indeed, one of the critics whispered to me “I am wondering what message is in all this? There was no dance, spectacular movement, familiar musical tone or anything that the average Nigerian audience member will recognize or connect to”. Ofcourse, his concern is understandable when we appreciate the fact that utilitarian value of an art form, ‘meaning’ or ‘the message’ is an important element in African performance aesthetics.



*Ranti Ihimoyan in performance of Vesta Violins' Wednesday Classics "the laughter song"*

Photograph Credit: Courtesy British Council, Nigeria

### **African Theatre Aesthetics**

The African theatre aesthetics differs in many respects from those of the conventional European aesthetics. One of these is the African preference for episodic narrative and symbolism as against the European emphasis on dialogue and syllogism of linear plot. As far back as 1934 Antonin Artaud who was impressed by the kind of theatre he found in Asia decried the prostituting of theatre by the West in his *Le theatre et son double* thus:

Why is it that in the theatre, at least in the theatre as we know it in Europe, for that matter in the West, everything that ... doesn't obey expression by speech, by words, or if you wish, everything that is not contained in dialogue... is left in the background?

Indeed, the difference between the African conception of theatre and the European notion of 'formal' theatre goes beyond the idea of orality versus the text. Every theatre seeks to entertain and engender communication between the performer and the audience. However, the approach towards entertainment and communication differ from one society to the other. As a cultural product, theatre is affected and shaped by the predominant aesthetic sense, goals and cultural realities of its creators. This presupposes that no two societies would have same theatrical expressions in so far as the cultural realities and artistic goals of the creators differ.

Theatre in Africa is approached as a communal activity, which involves the whole community. It is not a subjective activity of an artist or group of artists. The messages such a theatre communicates must necessarily be in tune the overriding interest of the community. In this kind of theatre, the audience is active and also engages in criticism of the performance as the show progresses. African theatre has what Ola Rotimi calls a "polaroid" character (referring to the instantaneous nature of their approval or lack of approval for any artistic product presented before them like the 'polaroid camera' which has inbuilt processing image processing capability that produces a finished print rapidly after each exposure). Unlike the 'discipline' audience in Europe that will patiently wait till the end of a scene or act to clap, or wait for the critic to dissect the performance in the next day review, the African theatre audience gives it judgment as the performance

goes on either by jeering at what it considers a bad performance or by clapping or hailing the performer there and then. Obafemi sums it thus:

The critic of African drama had been the audience, which we refer to as participatory audience because they were also at once creators, dramatists and performance. In the oral performance mode, the critical aesthetics revolves around narration, inter-narration and re-narration on the basis of participatory theatrical engagement.

### **Western influences on African theatre**

Western influences on modern Africa theatre remain visible in many areas. First is the choice of language of communication. Most of the modern plays are written in the language of the colonial masters: French, Dutch, English, Portuguese etc. There are very few plays written in the local languages. Since majority of the population in Africa are not literate in these foreign languages, it means the consumers of such theatrical products are either foreigners or the urban-based elites who constitute a minority of the population.

The emphasis on written, verbal drama is also robbing modern African theatre of its orality, vibrancy and immediacy. The influence of the ‘Aristotelian trinity’ (unity of time, place and actions) means that modern African plays cannot afford to retain their traditional loose epic structures, which the people are conversant with. The action of each play now needs to be more concentrated, focused and made to revolve around a more tightly knit plot.

Also, the preference for indoor performance venues, with box office, actors performing on a raised platform, proscenium arc separating the actors from their audience, and all the razzmatazz of modern technology are new influences, which continue to change the character of modern African theatre. Also being challenged is the traditional idea of theatre as any free space available within the community where the performer and his audience commune regularly and freely too. Theatre in Africa was never conceived as a commercial or exclusive activity where the audience needed to buy tickets to participate in a performance. It was an open show on any free and accessible space within the community.

Perhaps, far more significant is the choice of themes and production style by some modern African playwrights. The preference for ‘universal themes’ and more ‘global production approaches’ that will appeal to a ‘wider audiences’ has continued to expand the chasm between the works of some modern African playwrights and majority of their audiences who find it increasingly difficult to

relate to the content of some of these plays. This has further diminished the audiences as most times the urban elites are the few who patronize ‘formal theatre’ performances in most African cities to date. The preference of urban and foreign-based publishers for plays written in foreign languages and styles has also made it difficult for authentic African theatre to be documented in print. This situation is perhaps what Eldred Jones bemoans few decades back when has declared that ‘popular plays never get published and plays which are published are never popular’.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In these days that the human space has been reduced to a global village, no theatre tradition should accept an observer status. Thus, African theatre should take advantage of the increasing opportunities to contribute to the shape and character of global theatre practice. The critic has a role to play in mediating this process. He should be knowledgeable of the various cultures and aesthetic canons that govern both local and intervening foreign canons. He needs to adhere to his professional ethics demonstrate skills in knowing the appropriate lense to apply to performance from different climes. This is necessary if the critic must be proficient and effective in making meaningful contributions towards enhancing the development of theatre practice, as well as position theatre to generate positive impacts on society.

Perhaps it is trite to state that the engagement between Western and African theatre has its positive impacts beside the areas of concern highlighted earlier. For instance, the engagement stimulated the growth of professional theatre in Africa. It also ushered in many generations of playwrights and nurtured theatre critics currently servicing both the media and academic publications. Wole Soyinka’s nobel prize in 1986 and Femi Osofisan’s Thalia Award coming exactly three decades later (in 2016) signify the highpoints of global recognition for the contributions of modern African playwrights and critics to the growth of world theatre.

The introduction of modern theatre technology, indoor theatres and other theatre infrastructure in Africa has expanded platforms for theatre makers to exhibit their works. This has also boosted tourism and the economy of host African nations. The introduction of European styled theatre festivals has boosted creative enterprises and opened the African entertainment scene to multicultural participants. Lagos Theatre Festival, for instance, has motivate the creation of new plays and fresh opportunities for cross- fertilization of ideas between theatre producers and the rich mix of Lagos audience.

However, in these days of global terrorism, theatre has a role to play in helping humanity to regain its fast fading humane values. Playwrights, Theatre directors, critics and other artists need to deploy their creativity towards increasing intercultural and multicultural dialogue within and beyond national borders. It is from this perspective that I commend the design of the World Cultures Festival in Hong Kong which seeks to provide an annual platform for the showcasing the best global theatre performances. The critic should help the theatre makers to think local and act global always in the packaging of their productions. The idea is to celebrate diversity and the beauty of one world, many peoples, colours and expressions.

### **Works Cited**

- Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*. Exp. ed. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993. Print.
- Dukore, Bernard F. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. Florence, KY: Heinle & Heinle, 1974. Print.
- Else, Gerald F. *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*. London: Chapel Hill, 1986. Print.
- Emenyonu, Ernest. *Literature and Society: Selected Essays on African Literature*. Oguta: Zim Pan-African Publishers, 1986. Print.
- Hauptfleisch, Temple, "The Shaping of South African Theatre: An Overview of Major Trends." *Words and Worlds. African Writing, Literature, and Society – A Commemorative Publication in Honor of Eckhard Breitingen*. Eds. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007. Print.
- Mlama, Penina M. *Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa*. Uppsala Sweden: The Scandinavian Inst. of Africa Studies, 1991. Print.
- Mollet, Tololwa, Marti. *African Theatre and the Colonial Legacy: Review of the East African Scene*. 1982.  
<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>
- Obafemi, Olu, "Politics of Theatre and the Theatre of Politics in Nigeria." Unp. Mss. The maiden IATC International Theatre Critics Conference at the National Theatre, Lagos, 3 Mar. 2017.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: CUP, 1976. Print.