

AFRICAN THEATRE:

STUDIES IN THEORY AND CRITICISM



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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Revolutionary Trends of Make-Up Art in Western Theatre: Reflections on African Theatre

Shadiat Olapeju Shuaib

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, historians, social anthropologist and psychologists have ascribed many motives and desires to man in explanation of the origins of the great diversity of styles of body adornments in the human society; because man has always covered or uncovered parts of his body for variety of reasons with dyes, oil, clay, chalk, powder, shear butter and tattoos among others. [Lyndersay 2010, p. 12] From the statement above, there is no gainsaying the fact that over the years in the human society the exact origin of makeup up art as one of the visual appendages of theatre ethos have remain a mystery and a highly speculative and debatable discourse among many social anthropologists, psychologists, historians and theatre scholars such as Murray (1935), Eicher (1970), Negri (1976), Brain (1979), and Groning (1997), Lydersay (2010) among others. Yet doubt it is not in doubt that the popular craft of adorning and modifying the human body both physically and psychologically is central to human epoch and practice in many cultures across the globe.

This annotation is because from antiquity till date, most cultures of the world have in one way or the other decorate, cover, expose and alter the human body to convey some cultural standard of beauty as well as their religious and socio-political obligations. Some of these socio- cultural function of make-up are what Ezeajugh (2006: 26) outlined as "protection against external influence demons and magic as well as helping to repel evil and ensure fertility and good fortune". From this supposition, it can then be adduced that make-up art is both deep in content and extraordinarily rich in context, thus, establishing the irrevocable uniqueness of the human body as a communicative art.

The articulated observation foregrounds the fact that make-up ethos has always been perceived as a means to an end. Where, the human body is primarily conceived and adopted by man through his indigenous artistry as canvas for inscriptions and adornment of cosmetic substances by the artist in diverse religious, secular, and theatrical activities, performed by man in the bid to understand, master and even coerce cosmic nature and his environment to his advantage. In view of this observation, Robert (1974:2) while recounting the mimetic theatrical experience of the primitive man affirms that "the early man in an attempt to meet up with some of his primal necessities of getting food and defending himself disguise himself to look like the animal or enemy he hunted".

The above submission further affirms Brain's (1979, p. 4) picturesque description of the primitive man's physical and psychological transformation "while masking his body with paint, tattoo, and scarification" with the intent of luring his prey to his advantage in his hunting expedition. This affirms that by the power and initiative to camouflage and change his appearance via the art of make-up, man has rationally characterised his humanity and sets himself apart from the world of animals.

Significantly, many years later, the art of self-expression initiated by the primal man is still in vogue in the human society, although, it has evolved into variegated social endeavours with new impetus and flavour. Today, make-up art is now recognised as one of the socio-functional appearances of any occasion in the human society which obtrusively announces its presence without introduction. The colour, shape, line, texture and pattern exotically and distinctively portray or project the wearer, what he represents and the type of function to be conjectured. There is probably no sphere of human endeavour where human values are vividly depicted more than in body ornamentation that they wear on their bodies in the society. This explains why Ani and Ayaoha, (2012, p. 565) describe make-up "as non-verbal means of communicating, constructing, revising, generating and maintaining symbolic and connotative messages that are vital for their self identity".

In different parts of the world such as Europe, America, Asia, Russia and Africa, various design practices have been linked with diverse races and these practices denote a distinguishing hall mark of each ethnic group, or nation. This gives credence to why every culture of the world, applies make-up in one way or the other to decorate, coerce, expose and alter the human body. In most cases, these design ideas are achieved through the processes of drawing, painting, piercing, hairstyles and body cuts to mention a few, with the aim of transmitting the cultural standard of beauty as much as their religious and socio-political obligations in the human society

The Concept of Theatre Makeup

Drawing from the preceding analogies on the notion of make-up in the human society, we can rightly submit that indigenous theatrical make-up just like other societal make-up is an integral platform of human communication. This submission is based on its close affinity with the people's way of life and their cosmology that cannot be over-emphasised. Regardless of their concordance, however, the utility of make-up within the theatrical parlance transcends how they are observed in the society. That is why Bucham (1989, p.14) submits that they are the vital link between the actors and the audience. This is because the conception and application of make-up in modern theatre is not essentially predicated on the foundation of culture alone, but more importantly on the dictates of the play-text which is based on the message being communicated, the physiognomic features of

the actors, directorial interpretation, production style, harmonious collaboration of other visual designers and the audience to whom the message is transmitted. According to Adelugba (1987, p. 21):

Make-up in the theatre should be objectively revealing. The performer must show his audience something of the picture the author had in mind when he conceived the character. He cannot do this unless he-like the author; has a clear picture on his mind. He should have working knowledge of facial bones and muscles and an understanding of tone and colour.

With the already painted scenario, it is, therefore, important to say that, make-up art has been given a pride of place in the theatre. It is strategically positioned and magnified as crucial element of stage craft that cannot be totally jettisoned in most theatrical experiences. Hence, it is perceived in the variety of cosmetics materials and appliances designed for and applied by actors to effectively and convincingly modify their heads, faces and other parts of their exposed bodies in the portrayal of their character's identity, mood, status, health, race and aesthetic effect to the audience. To this end, Gaffar (2008, p.65) concludes that, theatre make-up is an art form that is different in manner, matter, and motive from real life make-up. According to him, real life makeup merely glamorize his wearer by lending the hair, face, and body a new grace and charm, while theatre makeup is specifically designed for actors' characterization.

Historical Survey of Make-Up Art in Western Theatre

The origin of Western theatre has overtime been widely speculated by anthropologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, to have emanated from myth and ritual of the Dionysus festivals in the Greek empire of the Classical age. Where, mime, actions, chants, costumes and masks among others were used to appease and represent the mystical characters or supernatural forces in the rituals accompanying celebrations of the festival (Brocket, 2008, p.113).

Nevertheless, the theatre of that age, could not boast of a robust make-up tradition, due to the fact that facial masks were majorly worn for character delineation by actors, irrespective of the fact that make-up substances such as lead, berry and reddish powder were graciously adorned by the Greek women for beautification in the Greek society. This is because, in Greek theatre, actors have been attributed with playing several parts by changing masks to transform to new roles, although this did not preclude the understanding that there were manifestations of minimal make-up applications in their theatrical engagements. To date, in some books, there are still some accounts of actors who wore lead-based white make-up with red accents on their faces in this theatre idiom. Thus, Robert's (1974, p. 46) submission shows that:

Sometimes more than one mask was provided for a single character, as was the case of Helen in 'Euripides' play of that time, when she "reappears pale" and "with her shorn", or for the Oedipus of Sophocles, who reappears smeared with blood" after he has put out his eyes.

Aside the Greek theatre, accounts of make-up application are also reminiscent of the Middle East and South East, most especially in the biblical times of about 840BC. An annotation to this opinion can be deduced from some Old Testament passages of 2 Kings 9:30, Ezekiel 23:40 and the Book of Esther. In 2 Kings 9:30, for instance, the scripture establishes that in the bid to change her appearance the harlot Jezebel... "painted her eyes and adorned her head...". More so, before Esther was made a queen she spent a year applying a special beauty regimen that incorporates "oil of myrrh and spices" to amplify her outlook so as to appeal to the King's sense of judgment. This style of make-up was however transferred to their theatrical activities witnessed in court entertainers' make-up of that time.

However, from Hellenistic age down to the Romantic age, body painting and powdery substances, characterised the make-up requirements of women and boys in the above mentioned societies, but, in their theatrical engagements, mask was apparently used in comic and tragic plays for actor's characterisation in the theatre because the Romans had little interest in serious dramatic endeavours with minimal spectacle. This culture was adopted from other cultures such as Etrucia, Greece, Southern Italy who made mask for double roles for actors in their theatrical engagements. To this extent, Brocket (1997, p. 62) submits that "the use of masks made the doubling of roles much easier and simplified the problem of casting characters of identical appearance, as in Plautus, Menaechmi, and Amphitru".

Contrary to Greek and Roman theatre, in the religious plays of Medieval Europe, the actors playing God or Christ painted their faces in white and gold colours, while the faces of the angels were coloured bright red. Despite the fact that the christian church made several attempts to suppress the performance of plays in the church, except for Medieval church of Middle ages who according to Safe Beauty Association (2009, para, 11) considered "make-up to be sinful and immoral as it was worn by prostitutes" and subsequently banned its use in the society.

Regardless of that scenario, the Renaissance age came with new political and economic postulations and agenda which resulted in immense expansion in Arts and innovation and also revitalised the decayed state of make-up art in the society. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2010, para 5) "the use of cosmetics flourished in Europe again during Renaissance". This is because a lot of beauty products were used to lighten the skin of the women of that society; which included Lead paint as reflected in the widely circulated documented portraits and

paintings of Queen Elizabeth 1 of England who was famous for her red hair and white skin during the Renaissance age.

Importantly, during that popular age, characters in French farce also wore false beards of lamb's wool, and whitened their faces with flour, while the Elizabethan actors powdered their faces with chalk. In addition to that, black characters were also blackened with soot and cork to project their roles to the audience. To this end, plays were often performed in theatres, lit by candles and gas light, so that, make-up that were larger than life were illuminated clearly for the audience to see.

Interestingly, the Edwardian era is another phase in Western theatre history that dramatically turned everything around for cosmetics. Jans (1986, p.16) informs that the Ibsen's plays and all the plays of naturalist movement were characterised by the desire to show realistic events and characters. Hence, make-up became more chemical based other than the herbal and mineral products of earlier era. Nusim ,(2007, p. 13) points out that Grease paint evolved around that time in the theatre, with the purpose of creating special characters like monsters and fantasy faces etc. Thus, Lon Chaney; a widely acknowledged important early innovator of motion picture make-up effect was credited to have created and transformed himself into many iconic characters that still resonate decades later through make-up materials like grease paint, wax, fish skin and wigs among others. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2010, para. 8)

The introduction of gas light and electric light into the theatre came with the need for new make-up materials and more skillful method of application, a solution was found in the use of stick grease paint introduced in 1860s in Germany by Ludwig Leichiner.

By 1890, the demand for stage make-up had warranted its manufacturing on a commercial scale. Half a century later, grease paint in stick had given way to more easily handled creams. Indeed, through grease paint, superior quality in colour blending is still prized.

In the theatre of the orient, however, colourful body paintings made from herbs and mineral deposits marked the appearance of body adornments in Asian countries (Indian, Japan and China) at that time (Allensworth, 1982, p.23). The Geisha of Japan for example, used lipstick made from sun flower petals to adorn their eye brows and edges of the eyes, for artistic and aesthetic effects. However, this is not to conclude that the same painting motifs were used in the Indian culture as Safe Beauty Association (2009, para.21) observes:

Since around 4th and 5th century henna has been used in India either as a hair age or in the art of mehndi; an art where complex designs are painted on the hands and the legs, especially before a marriage or special occasion.

Nonetheless, in Japan, the Kabuki theatre make-up was conceived in a highly colourful and stylised design motif appropriate for actor's roles. A white oil based foundation was applied as base, and then covered with white matted materials before other colour media were added to the design. In this theatre form, the eyebrow and the mouth are the most stylised. Most make-up are white, red and black just like Peking opera of China, the make-up style therefore reveals a great deal about the character. (Agostino, 2006, p.163). Hence, the uniqueness of the painting designs in the characterisation of the actors of both kabuki and Peking theatres are further summed up by Morita, (1985, p.12) thus:

The metamorphosis of Kabuki actor begins with its make-up. They call it face-making or face-preparation. Painting out their ordinary faces, they colour in to create their new faces. The make-up is the basic condition for actors' metamorphosis and it is the first step to be taken in the process as a new beginning from being a live-in the flesh human, with every dab of paint, the actor inches closer to becoming one with character of a given role. It is a process transcending the dimension of time and space.

Judging from the above quotation, the significance of make-up cannot be de-emphasised in the theatre of the Orient. Nevertheless, in the Western theatre tradition, the early 20th century was without doubt the dawn of the modern theatre make-up. It is an important period when expressionist playwrights and dramatists tried to transmit the dehumanizing technological development of the society to the audience through minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and prototype characters. Encyclopedia Britannica (2010, para. 10) emphasises that "among those who saw the opportunity for mass-market cosmetics, were Max Factor, Sir Elizabeth Arden, and Helena Rubinstein", in 1914, in the American society the legendary Max Factor made a major breakthrough that transformed the entire cosmetic world. He came up with pancake make-up, which was the first make-up design for motion picture, it was a semi-liquid grease paint made into jars of different range of tones.

Basten (2008, p.46) further highlights that, in 1928, introduction of panchromatic light to the stage inspired Max factor to create a new range of make-up called panchromatic make-up, an achievement for which he won a special "Academy of Motion Picture, Art and Sciences award". This range was however very effective in the theatre productions of that time, where the human skin was under scrutiny under more professional lighting. As time went on, it became very effective as other previous make-up has proved to be totally unsatisfactory for motion-picture medium. Their heavy application made it impossible to appear natural in close-ups and the range of colours did not meet the various demands of motion pictures (Everton, 1974, p.22).

However, the late decades of 20th century were considered to be a time of experimentation in Europe, theatre practice was characterized with the mixing and merging of various theatrical traditions such as postmodernism, improvisational techniques, performance arts and other avant-garde theatres. In view of this, the introduction of colours to motion pictures also created new make-up problems. Various colours in films caused the grease paints used on actor faces' to appear yellowish, red, and blue under the screen light. The situation was made worse with the invention of television, due to the fact that Imperfection was witnessed in make-up application. Light complexion looked ghostly and dark complexion dirty, (Richard, 2007, p.34). Some of the make-up earlier developed for motion pictures proved unsatisfactory. The problem became more complicated with the introduction of colour to television media, for example, a face that looked normal under the human eye unceremoniously appeared as green on television. But with time, through the passion, creativity, and innovative minds of Western make-up practitioners, scholars, and scientists, appropriate make-up materials were developed for both black and white television media, for the effective communication of actor's roles.

Conclusion

Interestingly, despite the hitches experienced in the growth of Western makeup over the years, the pancake make-up developed by Max Factor in 1944 now carry popular stage make-up brands which include Procter and Gamble, Ben Nye, and Mehron Inc to mention a few. Make-up of the modern era has changed in varied ramifications, in different societies of the world. Fashion, world events and technological developments have turned around make-up of the 21st century. Advanced cosmetic products have replaced the old ones and are now utilised for multipurpose functions within the human society both for aesthetics and theatrical purposes via experimental attempts and innovative practices.

These trends invariably engendered the Western theatrical makeup practice to remain vibrant as the forerunner and leading entity in World theatre practice to date. It is therefore the recommendation of this paper that other make-up practitioners around the world especially the African Theatre practitioners should imbibe and emulate the creative and innovative drive that transformed the Western theatre make-up practice to the enviable position it has attained in the contemporary times for the sustainable development of theatre makeup practice in the world. The African Theatre practitioners must reflect on the success story of the west and begin to think of developing indigenous make-up art. This will require the cooperation of public and private investors who are ready to do so. The appropriate time is NOW. Investors could ride on the current waves been made by Nollywood and Ghanywood in the entertainment industry. The positive foreign exchange Earnings from the entertainment industry may be re-invested in required

areas including indigenous make-up products in order to boost the earning capacity of the industry.

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