

THE DRAMATURGY OF A THEATRE SOCIOLOGIST:

**FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF
AYÒ AKÍNWÁLÉ**

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Scene Design and Play Interpretation in the Nigerian Theatre

Abdulmalik A. Amali and Gloria D. Ekere

Introduction

Scene design is generally defined by Asomba (2000, p. 6) as the

art of conceptualising, planning or conceiving a suitable environment to house a dramatic action, a dramatic environment in his context is the totality of all pieces of scenery including stage properties which culminates in the defining the locality of the action.

This makes scene design an essential aspect of a theatrical production which helps the audience understands a play by providing the background information and a visual reinforcement of the production concept. Usually taken to be just the backdrop or painting at the back of the stage or performance space, scene design has of recent assumed a wider approach as it also incorporates the objects and items on stage that are not props. In fact, scene design also refers to stage design, set design or production design and thus, it is the designing and creating of a desired and appropriate scenery or setting for theatrical performances.

The focus of this chapter is essentially on scene designs and its aesthetic considerations within its capacity to effectively aid play interpretation. The skillful organisation of any artistic work gives rise to aesthetic appreciation. This is because scene or setting for a production must be conveyed clear and unambiguous message(s). Scene design is, therefore, appreciated far beyond mere visuals. The philosophy and aesthetics of scene design is thus a process of interpretation, evaluation, understanding and appreciation. The aesthetics of scene design in a production is also the beauty and the essence of the setting as it impacts and contributes to the general viewing pleasure; giving necessary and useful information, adding meaning and aiding in the understanding and appreciation of the theatrical performance. The paper now looks at design which is "the general arrangement of different parts of something that is made". Thus, in the art of scene design, expression is important (Ododo, 2000, p. 93).

Scene Design and Play Interpretation in Nigerian Theatre

The Nigerian theatre, just like the theatres of other African countries, developed from the rites and rituals of the society that practices it. The activities surrounding the organisation, structure and performances are, therefore, influenced and dictated by the culture, tradition, and the designs thereof. The Nigerian theatre has thus been fraught with several contentious positions and various scholarly contributions such as Uka (1977), Rotimi

(1981), Ogunbiyi (1981), Hahger (1987), and others on the issue of aesthetics and designs. Despite this debate, "what enjoys the general consensus nevertheless, is the existence of a robust theatrical activities with distinct and shared features" of which "design practices are part of the tradition just like other arts" (Ododo, 2006, p. 17). The design aspect is important as it contribute too the total ensemble. Thus, Sparke (1992, p. xxi) states that "design is often manifested in tangible and visible form, it is an important point of entry thus, it is more than simply.... fulfilling individual creative potentials". Arguing along the same line, Oni (2004, p. 34) posits that "design depends on some element which includes, lines, shapes, measure, position, color and texture"

Various areas of the theatrical productions are designed as matters of necessity. These are costume and make-up, lighting and stage, and scenic arrangement. Stage setting in the Nigerian theatre places value on being able to interpret the play and communicate with the audience and aesthetic realisation. Beyond providing a dramatic environment also, it provides information on various aspects of the play. Domba Asomba, therefore, clarifies that:

African theatre have always been intimately and functionally linked to the socio-political and religious realities of the African society in concept and it goes beyond aesthetics reflection of reality... such objects as paintings statues, and masks, most often employed in performances of African dramas are not mere contemplative objects but are intended to produce aesthetics as well as perform other social functions. Besides, they are employed in such drama as living elements of collective action of a people (Asomba, 2000, p. xxi).

In the Nigerian theatre, stage setting is very important as it is more than merely decorating the environment for theatrical activities. It underscores the role of scene design and aesthetics in play interpretation in the Nigerian theatre. The paper will be considering some Nigerian play for analysis.

Firstly, *The Swamp Dwellers*. This is a play written by Wole Soyinka. In the opening scene from the playwright, the setting is in a hut on stilts, built in a scattered Island. This gives adequate information on the setting of the play as this type of building can only be found in swampy areas where houses built on stilts are common feature. The audience immediately understands that it is in such an environment that the situation is based and is able to relate the building and appreciate the aesthetics thereof.

Another play to be considered is E. O. Kofoworola's *Futonje: Our Love*. This is a story of love that unites two nations. The opening scene is set into a scenic background that depicts beautiful scene of groups of huts built on corn stalks, some bulls, oxen and calves...on the foreground of undulating hills merges naturally with the horizon of the blue sky tapering gently into the silhouette. It is further noted that the background portrays peaceful

atmospheric feelings to the beholder. In movement 2, Scene 2, the incident in the play takes place in a railway station; this information is gotten from the setting of a rail tracks and signs which gives support and enabling environment to the character as they are costumed in "special railway official uniforms with caps to fit". The last scene in *Futonje: Our Love* is set in a "big African Hall". This is a conference hall for meeting.

Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* (2003) is another play created within the scenic essence of traditional theatre. A scene designer of this play should attempt to interpret the play within the core material culture of the Yoruba people. We will cite two examples here to defend this position:

* Some weeks later. The sub-aquatic palace of princess Oya. It splendour matches the reputation of Oya as fabulously wealthy. At the moment, Oya herself is having her long hair braided. Her attendants, in different colours look like deep aquatic fishes. They sing to keep the princess company.

Forest grove. Night, Moon up. Oya and Osun by a huge Iroko tree. They are dressed in white, with white chalk stripes on their faces and around their eyes. Their attendants wait close by. Otun kneels and rings a bell (Osofisan, 2003, pp. 22-50).

What is expected here is a scenic design of blend of colour choice for the performers, the props and the stage painting. This choice of blend must also be in harmony with the director's concept of the production. Olu Obafemi has also used this style before. In fact, in his *Naira Has No Gender* (1993) "Streamline courtship in a rather traditional African mode" has clearly articulated scenic form

A play, *The Smart Game* (2009) which is stylistically rooted in the dramaturgy of 'neo-alienation' also lends itself to various scene designs and scenic interpretations. Even through the playwright, A. A. Adeoye attempts to place the play within the icon of what he calls "the aesthetics of de-technicalisation" to hone this realistic ingenious theatre yet he insists in one of the scene titled "Pay Day" that; "Chairs and tables should not be used, rather photoramic/captions' aesthetics should be explored in creating the makeshift office" (Adeoye, 2009, p. 52). This is Chief Olowolayemo's office in the play and Adeoye's photoramic/captions' aesthetics is a style in which stage painting and designs are worn or carried by the performers against their imposition on the flat.

In a feminist script, *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* by Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye, the place of Benin works of arts – the woru mask of Queen Idia which was the emblem for FESTAC 77 and other Benin artifacts are also celebrated.

Looking at the Tiv Kwag-hir theatre, humans form the scene, they serve both as a backdrop for the setting and participant audience and also form the chorus in the performance. Hagher (1990) and Gowon (2006) have also commented on this.

Scene design is, therefore, necessary in play interpretation "because a dramatic character in his utopian world does not exist in vacuum, he ought to be represented on stage appropriately adorned to reflect his imaginary locale" (Asomba, 2000, p. xiii). The various scenes give adequate support and an enabling environment for the actors and actions to take place.

Challenges of Scene Designs in the Nigerian Theatre

Despite the numerous functions and obvious contributions to the interpretation, understanding and aesthetics of theatrical productions in Nigeria, various challenges besiege scene design:

- i) Finance: Most productions do not enjoy adequate funding hence most of the items required to create suitable stage design cannot be procured.
- ii) Lack of Technical Skills: Skills are often needed in scene design especially in the use of some technical and precision equipment in designing and realising set designs. However, most of the scene designers working in the Nigerian theatre lack technical skills.
- iii) Outdated Curriculum: Most theatre academic programmes in the Nigerian theatre are outdated and are heavily loaded with theory based courses.

To solve the problems above, we want to insist that scene design needs adequate funding. The production budget for scenography requirement should be stepped up by the producers. This way, the scene designers will have more resources to expand their vision and incorporate more services and equipment. Although the "general prevailing economic downturn in the nation is excruciating, almost all facet of the socio-economic activities in the nation is affected. Like in every artistic endeavour, budgetary limitations have corresponding limitations on the level of artistry that can be brought to bear in a given production" (Ekere, 2009, p. 111) yet scene design should be adequately funded.

Shuaib (2006, p. 67) also notes that:

The educational curriculum plays a vital role in building and sustaining a career in any field of human endeavour, but when the curriculum that is institutionalised for educational training programme is not properly conceived, designed, implemented and reviewed, sub-standard output is expected.

The academic curriculum of higher institutions in Nigeria where Theatre Arts and other related programmes exist need be reviewed by the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) and school authorities to take into consideration, scenography, which is a practical oriented study. This is an area of theatre production that requires specialised training and orientation which

can either be acquired through serious apprenticeship, and/or concentrated formal academic and professional training in relevant institutions. This will improve the level of knowledge, understanding and execution of scene designs.

With inadequate equipment, it is apparent that designs cannot be "well conceived without the right tools and equipment for animation" (Ododo, 2000, p. 94). It is, therefore, necessary that Nigerian designers/engineers design and fabricate equipment that will aid the creation of suitable stage setting, "it is in these situations that we can improve ourselves" (Ododo, 1999, p. 86). Designers and engineers in Nigeria also need to be creative and innovative. In fact, Musa (2002, p. 110) states that "creativity is an exercise in navigation and a reflection of the inherent difference in man's inspiration and imagination". With options such as: Improvisation, Experimentation and Fabrication, theatre personnel must look inward in order to sustain the theatre profession. Ogunde creative pioneering work and that of others are considered as "relevant here as most of the theatre equipment were fabricated and fashioned out to aid their artistic fare...perhaps, if they had held onto them functionally, they would have undergone serious productive modifications to suit our modern needs" (Ododo, 1994, p. 53).

Conclusion

Theatre, like any other aspect of the arts or human life in general, is undergoing various transformations in its literary, physical and theatrical forms. Some of these changes are natural development or extension of traditional theatrical forms. All these changes affect designs in the theatre. Creating of a scene in a theatrical production is therefore important. We also want to conclude that scene design should be created as a separate course in the University instead of lumping it under the ever expanding Technical Theatre course.

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