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THE CRISIS OF INTERMISSION IN THE AFRICAN THEATRE: A RE-INTERPRETATION OF RECENT PERFORMANCES IN THE NIGERIAN LITERARY THEATRE

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Abstract

The beauty of African theatre lies in its holistic total theatre nature. Interestingly, African theatre has a unique production style rooted in the African culture yet it is artistically tied to the Western theatrical aesthetics. However, intermissions are antithetical to the African theatre because they are clear Western theatre and the proscenium stage imposed stop-gap or a break during performance time. Intermission should, therefore, be seen as one of the major hindrances affecting free-flow performance of the African theatre. This has created a disconnection between the performance and the audience on one hand, and between the performers and the directors on the other. Through the participant-observation and the interview methods of research, this study reviews and interrogates the production style of intermissions and their attendant crisis of artistry in the African literary theatre. Recent performances in the Nigerian literary theatre are used to foreground our analysis. We conclude this study by condemning intermissions and offer plausible artistic alternatives that can be used to solving the problem of intermissions in the African literary theatre.

Introduction

Through comparative, explorative, textual and critical interrogations, Nzewi (1981), Dugga (2002), Adeoye (2008) and a few others have written on the intervention of modernization, creolisation and hybridisation of the African literary theatre. Importantly, the African literary theatre cannot be divorced from the historical experience of colonialism and Western education imposed on the African nations by sheer accident of history. The Nigerian example is typical of most African countries. Consequently also, scholars such as Soyinka (1975), Osofisan (2001), Ododo (2001) and Okoye (2007) among several others have also written extensively on the weaning and tutelage-ship that African literary theatre has gone through and still going through.

Linked to colonialism and Western education is culture, the undying rhythm which is critically and constantly re-invented by change. Change, in the human process, has thus intervened to create a synergy between a group of people and the stands and impositions of culture. Importantly:

> *When one watches a performance at one of the many university-based theatres or of the state owned cultural troupe or one of the many mutations of indigenous performances in urban centres in Nigeria, what one is watching is the process as well as a product of social change (Dugga, 2002:12).*

The Intervention of cultures (a gamut in the postmodern theatre) in one performance has thus led to split interpretation and the crisis of identity if such performance is analysed within a particular cultural praxis or setting.

Certainly, cultural dislocation in the performance process through a clearly articulated production style will create a looser. The ultimate looser is the audience who must have grown

metaphorically with a style and become accustomed to it through his culture and who will now be made to accept new theatricalities into his psychology and viewing eyes.

Out of the numerous theatre traditions in the African theatre, the literary tradition is fast gaining ascendancy and it is gradually moving from been an elitist theatre to the theatre of the majority especially in a multicultural society where English language is a binding force and a means of communication. English language is also a generally accepted official language of government in most Anglophone countries. This is also a language for socio-cultural and socio-political fraternisation. The literary theatre in Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa, draws linguistic resources from the icons and canons of the English language.

The use of English language has thus created a dilemma for the dramatist, especially the theatre director. If the director must produce a literary theatre of English language, for folk or native audience, what production style should he use? Should he be overtly Western in spite of the proscenium stage imposed Western theatre halls available to him or imposed African production styles and resources available in his culture on the performance? Should he mix the two cultures (African and Western) together in his performance? This scenario underscores the crisis of intermissions in the African theatre. This crisis is also our continued search for the authentic African theatre.

Intermissions are antithetical to the African literary theatre because they are clear Western theatre and the proscenium stage imposed stop-gap or break during performance time. Intermission should, therefore, be seen as one of the major hindrances affecting free-flow performance in the African theatre. This has created a disconnection between the performance and the audience on one hand, and between the performers and the directors on the other. Through the participant-observation and the interview methods of research, this study reviews and interrogates the production style of intermissions and their attendant crisis of artistry in the African

literary theatre. Recent performances in the Nigerian literary theatre are used to foreground our analysis. We conclude this study by condemning intermissions and offer plausible artistic alternatives that can be used to solving the problem of intermissions in the African literary theatre.

Intermissions: A Brief Historical Review

In music, intermezzo has been confirmed to be a very good but sharp and short piece of music played between the main parts of an opera while intermission is ostensibly, a "short break in the middle of a play, film, concert" (Shovel, 2007:791). Interestingly, intermissions can also be interpreted as silence performance if we are to construct it within the icons of postmodern or postcolonial theatre.

The landmark achievements traced to the Greek theatre often made it a historical reference point in the annals of theatre history. No matter our disagreement with this, the fact is that the Greek theatre housed the best of theatricalities and European scholars have also built a castle of success around it through incisive documentations and reviews of the main themes and tendencies that make the Greek theatre thick. Ironically, intermissions are not emphasized in the Greek theatre. The Greek chorus and performers, and the sheer theatre-in-the round structure of the Greek auditorium clearly negate the celebration of intermissions.

> *To buttress this, Arnot (1991:2) has affirmed that: In the Greek theatre complex, the central and characteristics feature was the orchestra or dancing floor, a cycle of flattered earth (later paved with stone), on which the chorus performed. In the theatre of Athens the orchestra is large enough to give angle room for a large chorus and complex dance passions. The Greeks themselves traced the origin of drama from local festivals of songs and dance, and the design of the theatre seems to bear this out.*

Therefore, the socio-cultural worldview of the Greek people was considered in the architectural design of the state founded Greek theatre. Consequently, the Greek theatre simply gives to the Greek people their culture. Of course, the chorus and the orchestra in any theatre are antithetical to intermissions. They weave the play around its plot structure, bridge the gap for scene changing and comment, very dramatically too, to the action of the play by locking and unlocking the dramatic conflicts and actions.

Paradoxically, the Roman theatre and most theatre houses in the Euro-American confluence, even before William Shakespeare lean heavily towards the amphi-theatre and, mainly the proscenium stage. We should not forget that the proscenium stage is a box stage and to deconstruct intermissions, the creative directors must think out-of-the-box. The proscenium stage has little room for exits and entrances except if it is adapted for that purpose. This stage type, narrated in the introductory part of this study is one of the cultural impositions on the African literary theatre through Western colonialism and education. This is a sharp contrast to the African theatrical heritage of theatre-in-the round that gives room for adequate performer-audience, and audience-performer's fraternisation.

Intermissions can, therefore, be validly seen as a barrier to the tempo, speed, rhythm, Character Mood Intensity (CMI) and the general semiotic articulations of a performance. The outlay of intermission is such that it disrupts the flow of dramatic action and dislocates the audience from enjoying theatrical performances to the fullest. As an unfortunate and inartistic break in theatrical transmission, intermissions are moments used for scene changing from one locale to another and performers' transformation time from one dramatic movement to the other. Intermissions are mostly used for production with many settings and movements.

With this in mind, directors often use this gestation period to prepare performers for the next dramatic sequence.

Intermissions are powered in the production process by simple blackout or through sharp reduction of the intensity of light and when it is time for the play to resume, the intensity of light will be brightened and the audience will be made to resume viewing. Intermissions, however, confront and affect audience psychology through the unfortunate waiting period and thus engendering decompartmentalised dramatic interpretation which is not dialectical for Brechtian style is dialectical within the aesthetics of decompartmentalisation.

Deconstructing Intermissions

The search for authentic African theatre is our fruitful search for the place of African culture in our performances. Here, culture should be seen within the content and form of a performance. The form of culture represents production style and its peculiarities in arts generally. This is why Uwatt (2002a:2) submits that the "subordination of the form to the content of the modern Nigerian theatre has serious implications. Any criticism, which subordinates form to content invariably, undermines the very fundamental element, which makes literature distinct from other subjects". The form of any work of art cannot be trivialised because form is partly influenced by culture. Form also distinguishes one aesthetic style from the other through the creative intervention of the dramatist.

To deconstruct intermissions, is to examine, once again, the factors that make the authentic African theatre important. Here, Uwatt (2002a:8-9) in consultation with other researchers such as Fagg (1968), Rotimi (1971), Ogunba (1978), Nzewi (1981) and so on lists five major cogent points as important in our search for authentic theatre in Nigeria nay Africa. They are:

A. Roots in traditional ritual, story, and festival theatres.
B. The conceptual and creative approaches of open space or arena or the round performance.

A. Possession of three aspects of the spirit and forms of the traditional Nigerian festival theatre. These are the stylised, participative and total theatre nature theorised to include emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual synergy.
B. Stage presentations to involve large crowd as a common spectacle of communal participation in traditional ritual ceremonies and that
C. It must approach realism through poetic symbolism or expressive method.

In all the above staging and contextual icons, intermissions have no place and they are deconstructed within our own socio-cultural reality.

Perhaps, late Ola Rotimi, the confirmed master of Nigerian stage iconography stands out as a radical voice against proscenium staging laws and intermissions. While reacting to questions from Dapo Adelugba another versatile and tireless Nigerian theatre director, Ola Rotimi submits that:

> *I've done away with intermissions. And I loathe slow scene-shifts. I've come to describe this fusion of textual matter and directorial technique as engendering a "convoluting concourse of juxtaposed variegated happenings" whose aim is to give the audience scare respite, till the play is over (Rotimi cited in Uwatt, 2002a:55).*

In another vein, Ola Rotimi recaps that:

> *Intermissions are unheard of. My productions attempt to do away with intermissions, you see... so as to accord the audience an experience of sustained sharing in the production before them... from beginning to the end... To me, these days, directing for the proscenium is such drudgery. Most uninspiring and lifeless.*

Even where I ineluctably, have to use a proscenium for mounting a play, I deliberately violate the laws of proscenium staging (Rotimi cited in Uwatt, 2002b:65).

Ayo Akinwale, Bakare Ojo Rasaki, Segun Adefila, Sola Fosudo, Femi Osofisan, Sam Ukala and the researcher are some of the few Nigerian theatre directors who are creatively inventing directing icons and resources to bring compact productions without break in transmissions especially in the Nigerian literary drama which Eni (2009:78) says "require a new form that is akin to its cultural heritage".

A Re-interpretation of Recent Performances in the Nigerian Literary Theatre

This section of our research will be divided into three main sub-headings which will be titled; personal experience at play directing in relation to intermissions, the university of Ilorin's production of "Time for Change" for Association of African Universities (AAU) at Abuja and the death of intermissions and two recent performances of the University of Jos and the problem of intermissions. Separating the performances under review will enable us to pay special attention to the pros and cons of the performances in relation to intermissions.

Personal Experience at Play Directing in Relation to Intermissions

Experience is the best teacher but who is the teacher of experience? To us, success and failure are teachers of experience. In 1998 at the University of Uyo, Nigeria when we directed *The Killers* written by us, we can conclude here frankly that we:

1. Dissipated more energy on cleaning up and very creatively too, each of the Ten Movements in the play.

1. Total theatre resources of dance, music and ritual aesthetics Were culturally and comfortably infused into the play.
2. The status of the play was not valued in terms of runs during the rehearsals process. Consequently, the rehearsals were heavily decompartmentalised.

During the preview, Dr. Inih Ebong, the then Acting Head of the Department of Theatre Arts and the Directorial Consultant to the performance was busy laughing and clapping and with a simple but all important refrain: why should you direct this great work and leave gaps at the level of transition? The point has been made, intermissions have been over-used and scene changing, poorly managed. These errors were remedied during the technical nights that were saturated by tension and uncertainty. Happily enough, this play stands, till date, as one of the major productions at the Uniuyo's Little Play House, the official venue of the proscenium adapted malleable stage of the University of Uyo, Nigeria. We learnt greatly through the Uniuyo's experience.

Second also, was when we directed Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Micere Mugo's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* in May, 2000 at the Arts Theatre, University of the Ibadan for an M. A. Course titled: "Theatre Practice". The crux this time was that actors and actresses attendance at Rehearsals were a dismal failure. Consequently, to run the play together was simply a nightmare. Confronted with this reality, we moved to students' hostels to rehearse them and using any available space for picturisations and creative interpretation. The artistic dialogue at the level of individual characterisation was simply superb but the organic unity of production needed to be achieved. Three days to performance, we managed a fairly artistic run this time but without props and without consideration for performers' time for role changing from one character to the other. On the day of performance, setting the Court Scene in the play and clearing the Mau Mau war scene that we explored as physical and energy sapping theatre were not successful in our own estimation although the Examiners (Professors Dapo Adelugba, Femi

Osofisan and Dr. Sumbo Marinho) commended us and mainly hammered on the problem of transition.

In year 2002, *The Smart Game* (*A Neo-alienation' Script*) was directed by us and the performance has zero tolerance for intermissions through the aesthetics of neo-alienation style and theatre. This style, which has been valourised into twelve aesthetic projections, was also adopted in directing Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in year 2004. This performance was the kernel that our Ph.D Thesis: "Directing Soyinka's Comedies on the Nigerian Stage" partly relied on. Our experience has thus shown that the African theatre in whatever tradition will succeed through the adoption of the theatre of performance rather than theatre of literature's model (Adeoye, 2009: vii).

The University of Ilorin's Production of "Time for Change" for Association of African Universities (AAU) at Abuja and the Death of Intermissions

The Department of the Performing Arts University of Ilorin, Nigeria was commissioned to produce a play of 25 to 30 minutes for the 12th Conference and General Meeting of the Association of African Universities (AAU) holding at Abuja. Importantly, the Head of Department and the Artistic Director of the Play, Ayo Akinwale, a professional to the core constituted a production team with the researcher serving as the Assistant Artistic Director, Solomon Ikibe and Austin Emielu as Music Director and Composer respectively. Jeleel Ojuade choreographed the play; Adesina Adegbite was the Technical Director while Peju Shuaib served as the Costumier and the Make-up Artist. The workshop approach was adopted for this performance and from conception to the last day of performance, the play was wearing new masks, shedding irrelevant loads and constantly reshaped through positive directorial epistemologies.

The play, "Time for Change" starts with the historical validation of the past with Sango, The Yoruba's god of thunder and lightening and his wives depicting and celebrating the

quintessential African's ways of life. Paradoxically, this play satirises the decadence in the educational sector of Africa through the destruction of the ever-green Tower by the military man in a display of bravado. Consequently, a lively Convocation Ceremony is also disrupted by the Military men and this leads to students' protest. This, however, results in the death of one of the students. The elongation of the students' protest eventually attracts the attention of the members of the Association of African Universities (AAU) who console the protesting students and assure them of the provision of better facilities which leads to the building of the destroyed Tower, ironically, with the assistance of the Military men. The reconstruction of the Tower dramatically leads to collaboration among the Military Men, Students, Parents and AAU Members. Coloured and crafted in the total theatre experimental footing, the play, "Time for Change" also highlights the systemic failure, through inconsistency in policy formulation and implementations in our educational sector.

With the keen and eagle eyes of professionals, the play cleverly celebrated the "syncretization of music, dance and drama", the hallmarks of total theatre. The problem of intermission was simply solved by frequent rehearsals (twice per day and for two weeks) of active dramatic activities.

Intermissions and Two Recent Performances of the University of Jos for SONTA 2009

For a long time to come, the memories of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists' 22nd Annual Conference hosted by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria will continue to be a reference point in the management of human and material resources. The feminist scholar and playwright's Head of Department, Professor Irene Agunloye-Salami was simply in her best throughout this historic Conference. She also doubled as the Convener for this Conference.

Three major performances; Irene Salami Agunloye's *Sweet Revenge*, Victor Dugga's *Hope Harvesters* and *Dear Lola*

by Bose Tsevende necessarily sent us to the drawing board due to the artistic and directorial challenges posed by the three performances in relation to intermissions, the subject of discourse.

Sweet Revenge, a dream and an absurdist play that condemns African culture of male domination (a clear extension of feminist manifesto) was directed by Mr. Ellison Domkap. The performance was a success in characterization, speech delivery and performers' transformation through the available paralinguistic aesthetics of costumes and appropriate make-up. Performed at the Unijos' Open Air Theatre on the 3rd of January, 2009 between 7.00pm and 8.45pm, the Director also acknowledged, very creatively too, the issue of feminism.

There was, however, a consistent directorial error of judgment. The performance was inartistically decompartmentalised and we (audience members) were made to wait endlessly especially during scene changing. Curious to know why such as a beautiful performance lost theatrical gripping through transition, the following interview between the Director and the researcher may be instructional:

Adeoye: What is the directorially concept adopted for this production?

Domkap: Elements of realism and minimalism of textual aesthetics.

Adeoye: Are you satisfied with your performers' movement on stage in relation to dramatic conflict?

Domkap: Not really. Time constraint is a factor that militated against blockings and movement.

Adeoye: I appreciate your effort but are you satisfied with your transition, my main problem with your directorial effort?

Domkap: Not really. It is a technical problem.

Adeoye: What could you have done to solve this directorial error?

Domkap: Sufficiency of time and crowded activities would have helped.

This interview was conducted on the 4th of June, 2009, 1.00pm at Unijos' ASUU Secretariat, the venue of the Conference.

Young, dynamic and energetic, the Director of this particular performance sincerely made a mistake and he innocently accepted his error. Many have made the same error of breaking a performance for up to twenty times for lack of deep creative vision and shallow interpretation. The errors discovered in the performance of *Sweet Revenge* are common with dialogue based plays where other African aesthetic resources inherent in our total theatre are left untapped.

The performance of *Hope Harvesters* by Victor Dugga suffered the same fate. However, Bose Tsevende's *Dear Lola*'s performance was simply good. The performance has depth in terms of artistic interpretation yet the scene changing could still have been better handled. The little gap caused by intermissions should have been overcome.

Some Plausible Artistic Alternatives to Solving the Problem of Intermissions

The following suggestions, if adopted, may signal the final death of intermissions in the African literary theatre tradition:

1. When directors direct African plays within the ambit of the literary theatre tradition, artistic revolutions within the confluence of African culture must be considered along with the technical and dramatic qualities of the play-text. This is because "those directors who have contributed to what is distinctly 'Modern' in today's theatre stand in much the same relationship to the dramatic texts they work with" (Innes cited in Fuegi, 1987:NP). The text should be the starting point to the deconstruction of intermissions. This can be done through intelligent editing where scenes and movements can be restructured for easy dramatic communication.

2. Blackout should be avoided while attempting to avoid intermissions. The fact that this is the universal alternative often conditions the psychology of the director to easy way out kind of attitude. If it is decided from the onset that blackout will not be entertained then creative solution would be found.
3. The use of narrators or multiple narrators' artistic intervention. They can even be called linkers of story or of the performance, narrators, multiple narrators or linkers are theatre human instruments that can be used to bridge scene changing and performers' transformation, if they are creatively used.
4. Naturally, music, dance, pantomimic dramatisation, acrobatic displays are inherent African total theatre aesthetic resources; they should be used to bridge scene changing. This simply means that the orchestra must be functional, lively and critically alive to entertain and intervene in breaking the barrier of intermissions.
5. Fundamentally, the Brechtian style can be used for scene changing. This presupposes that nothing is hidden in the theatre. Here, the theatre will rely on symbolism and all icons under impressionism. For example, chairs, stools and general décor will be built into the performance. Performers can dance or move to the stage rhythmically with their own props and when leaving the stage, they can carry the same props out of the stage while linking the performance for the next dramatic action. Costumes and make-up too are creative sights that can be worn and applied on stage and to the admiration of the audience who will now see this style as part of the performance's concept and interpretation. Stage paralinguistic fascinations of the application of make-up and costumes' changing are unique and this can be used to mesmerise the audience and that

6. The master-craftsman directing style humbly created through the Craigian physical theatre method is also recommended generally in the African literary theatre because of its participative nature and specifically for transforming the stage into the house of creative happenings. Rotimian directing aesthetics created by late Ola Rotimi is closely related to the Craigian master-craftsman directing style. This can be explored to solve the problem of intermissions.

Conclusion

All dramatic spectacle and paralinguistic aesthetics causing and made to cause intermissions in the African literary theatre tradition must be broken down. The audience must have value for their money through superb interpretation of a play-text which rests squarely with the artistic director with the collaborative efforts of other theatre designers. The director must thus interpret a play-text very well and consider the essence and power of a flowing performance as attention catcher by removing attention "distracter" which intermission represents.

Though our world, the African world has been altered and radically reshaped by the Western power; we must begin to make subtle cultural revalidation of our existence. This, we must begin to show in our arts generally and our theatre in particular. To conclude that we have not benefited from Western education will be a fallacy and a lie. We cannot throw away the baby with the bath water. This is because "we are in a world where comparisons have become inescapable and indeed, inevitable" (Uka, 2000:29).

Our literary theatre tradition in Africa cannot be divorced from Western and African theatrical resources and aesthetics. We must thus make use of the two without sacrificing the essence of culture and the more important essence of dramatic communication which is the hub of creative interpretation. We, therefore, conclude that all the suggestions made to tackle

Intermissions should be considered and for the growth of our theatre academy.

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