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BADE AJAYI AT 70

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Faculty of Arts
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© Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, Ilorin,
Kwara State, Nigeria 2014

ISBN: 978-978-937-825-8

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Printed and bound by
Chridamel Publishing House
No 3, Otunola Adebayo Street
Off Taiwo Road, Ilorin, Kwara State

COMEDY AND THE COMIC ART IN THE NIGERIAN THEATRE

ADEOYE, AbdulRasheed A.
Department of the Performing Arts
University of Ilorin
PMB 1515
Ilorin
Nigeria
rasheedmus2001@yahoo.com
Phone: +234803360654

Abstract

The universal assumption that tragedy and comedy are the two main genres of drama cannot be over-emphasised. Interestingly, the genre of tragedy, through its heroes and anti-heroes, its omnibus tragic flaws and vision have enjoyed critical appraisal in the Nigerian theatre scholarship. A contrast to this, however, is the fact that scholarly narratives on comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre are not encouraging. Through the deductive and participant observation methods of research, this study examines the drama of comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre. Historical profiling, reviewing of some major festivals and conceptual underpinning on comedy and comic art in Nigeria have enabled us to find out that comedy is a claw, a form of socio-political control, moral as well as cultural therapy that re-engineers, re-interprets and re-directs the society from the state of lawlessness to order and sanity. The paper, therefore, enjoins artistic directors who will coordinate other designers in the theatre to be alive, creative and skilful while handling comedy. Apart from the global recognition that comedy in the Nigerian literary theatre has enjoyed, the study also concludes that comedy should be treated as a special drama because comedy is now witnessing a comical turn through the success of the Nigerian comedians in the special brand of stand-up comedy and in the evergreen Nigerian Nollywood industry where they make millions of naira yearly.

Key words: comedy, comic art, theatre, festival

Introduction

The second side of tragedy with its attendant destructive concepts of sorrow, grief, anguish, lamentation and death is comedy. In the formative period of the Greek theatre, Aristophanes, the only brave classical comedian among the celebrated great Greek tragedians such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides also dares the Greek audience by re-directing their psyche to embrace the essential power of comedy as a reasoning and pragmatic tool. After Aristophanes, comedy, a universally acknowledged popular drama genre has been documented in various forms. This is because comedy is evidently part of the superstructure of festivals, traditional events, customs, rites and ritual, and the celebration of cultures of the entire people of the universe.

Laughter, merriment, wit, sarcasm, humour, amusement, joy, happiness, pun, exaggeration, diversion and birth are, therefore, seen as part of comedy. Little wonder then that life is seen as comedy for those who think and, tragedy for those who feel. Successful and great men think and act. However, feeling and unnecessary display of emotion are meant for feeble minds whose monumental giant strides are often beclouded by the pawn of tragedy.

It is also important to paint a scenario of reality in order to defend the critical age long notion that comedy appeals to reason while tragedy appeals to emotion: when we watch comedy, the glaring spectacle through various didactic, eclectic and paralinguistic aesthetics is that we are laughing away our sorrow. However, the laughter is temporary. Ultimately, the sorrow has been exposed so that we can reason instead of drenching or soaking in emotion as a tragic play will do to our psyche.

What is certain is that tragedy and comedy are two main genres of drama. This universal assumption cannot be over-emphasised. Interestingly, the genre of tragedy through its heroes and anti-heroes, its ominous tragic vision and flaws have enjoyed critical appraisal in the Nigerian theatre scholarship. However, scholarly narratives on comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre are not encouraging. This study, therefore, examines comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre. We will appraise the subject matter through different cultures in Nigeria to once again confirm the fact that culture has its "taproot in classical antiquity" (Ododo, 2014:4) and that its dynamics housed various motif and leitmotif in the postmodern world.

Meaning, Scope and Conceptual Underpinning of Comedy

Comedy is often considered the most controversial of all the genres of drama when subjected to conceptual underpinning. Comedy has various meanings because there are numerous forms and types of comedies in the theatre generally. They come in various types and in various theatrical periods.

Literally, comedy is a "Greek word *KoYos* (*Komos*) which means 'a revel' or "a procession or dance, a kind of sacred romp through the countryside" (Banks, 1985:61). John Milton (1634) also says that the word comedy is "the name of a pagan god, invented by English poet, who is the son of Bacchus and Circle and who waylays travellers and tempts them to drink a magic portion which changes their faces into those of wild beasts" (Milton in Banks, 1985:61).

Conceptually, the following six definitions of comedy from Sidney (1967), Kerr (1967), Etherton (1982), Banks (1985), Barranger (1995) and Bamidele (2001) would be considered:

1. "comedy, it seems, is the gaiety of things; it is the groan made gay... comedy is really the underside of things, after the rock of our hearts has been lifted, with effort and only temporarily" (Kerr, 1967, p. 19).
2. "an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he (poet) represented in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be..." (Sidney, 1967:1).

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3. "comedy, a form of drama in which matters work out well at the end of the play, proceeding to this conclusion by way of humour and wit" (Etherton, 1982:11).
4. "comedy, on the other hand, was worse than tragedy, since it dealt with the ridiculous... the mask in comedy, for example, made people laugh, was ugly and distorted, but did not hurt" (Banks, 1985:51).
5. "comedy... examines the social world, social values, and people as social beings" (Barranger, 1995:103).
6. "comedy as ... an unserious, therefore, very frivolous and not a purposive art when compared with tragedy" (Bamidele, 2001:1).

The definitions above and their subsequent syntheses by various theatre critics and scholars alike make the meaning of comedy reservedly complex. Nonetheless, a critical analysis of each of the definitions quoted above points to some directions. The first is that, comedy is a genre of drama with unserious theatrical manifestation. Secondly, that comedy normally succeeds through the use of wit, humour, sarcasm, hyperbole and general merry-making, thereby making the audience laugh in spite of some social problems that may form part of the art's thematic preoccupations, and, lastly, that comedy tends to make the audience to temporarily suspend and forget their sorrow, agony and anguish through exaggerated dramatic actions.

It is not easy to laugh unless there is a glaring propelling force that makes one do so. To make people laugh is also seen as a serious business. As such, comic characters are always impressively exaggerated, unexpectedly decisive, cunning, funny, unassumingly friendly when faced with death, humorously ludicrous, continuously restless with unstable characters of the robotic order.

With over-bloated yet mathematical precision or a deliberate exaggeration of various performance mediums available for staging, comedies and comic dances, for instance, must be extraordinarily choreographed if they are in the mode of dance-drama or the all-encompassing dance-theatre such that every movement, every gesture, every bend or wriggling of the body must be done with clinical precision. Laughter in comedy must be wild, temporarily casual or comically sarcastic.

When the music medium is suggested for comedy, the voice of the singers must be convincing, melodious and affectionately harmonious. The instrumentalists must also be able to use stylishly, their specific instruments. Comic dramatic movement must also be faster and slower when least expected. Comedy is, therefore, a paradox of theatrical experimentation. And what seems to be a paradox must necessarily accommodate all the garbage (theories, theses and syntheses) thrown at it and this quite conforms to Bamidele's (2001:7) conclusion that "comedy is a vibrant art that no theoretical formula can contain".

Comedy, as an art of the theatre, also subjects itself to various comic forms, dialectics and actions which can be used to further expand and extend the frontiers of human understanding about the changing nature of the genre. For instance, comic action

“slows the social disorder created by an eccentric character who deviates from reasonable values like sensibility, good nature, flexibility, moderation, tolerance, and social intelligence” (Barranger, 1995:106). All these social deviations are paradoxical moments or periods of contrast to the expectations that the society demands of comic characters in their buffoonery through theatrical manifestations.

A comparative analysis of a related concept in the same discipline to another can also help to scrutinise any unending debate or argument about a controversial concept. The following differences between tragedy and comedy can only help to extend the meaning of comedy, at the same time exposing its conceptual canon:

Tragedy	Comedy	Tragedy	Comedy
Individual	Society	Terror	Euphoria
Metaphysical	social	unhappiness	Happiness
Death	endurance	irremediable	remediable
Error	Folly	Decay	Growth
Suffering	Joy	Destruction	Continuation
Pain	Pleasure	Defeat	Survival
Life-denying	Procreative	Extreme	Moderation
Separation	Union/Reunion	Inflexible	Flexible

(Barranger, 1995:106)

Table 1: Barranger's Comparative Table on Tragedy and Comedy

Barnet et al (2001:32) in their celebrated theatre book, *Types of Drama: Plays and Contexts*, published in 2001, also draw out a comparative analysis between tragedy and comedy. The metaphor of their comparison is that “... tragedy has the solemnity, seriousness, and finality we often associate with death and comedy has the joy and fertility and suggestion of a new life we often associate with marriage”.

Sylvan Barnet and his Co-editors also go on to further discuss relevant issues in comedy such as “comic assertion, comic joy, comic isolation, comic detachment and engagement, and endings”. They, however, conclude their comparative clarification between tragedy and comedy by narrating that, “troops of friends abound in comedy. Where tragedy is primarily the dramatisation of the single life that ripens and then can only rot, that reaches its fullest and then is destroyed, comedy is renewing of the self and of social relationship” (Barnet et al., 2001:34).

Again, Dean and Carra's (1965:4) assertion that “the art of great comedy presents a special problem if we accept the common explanation that comedy is an intellectual exercise and tragedy an emotional one, it would seem to be denying that comedy is art”. This also confirms the dynamic status of comedy. This art, with its complex comic structure, makes use of ‘low life characters’, ‘rag-tag characters’ and ‘buffoons’ in the theatrical enterprises of clownish dramatisation. Thus, in spite of scholars’ diverse opinions about the problems associated with defining and conceptualising comedy, it is an art which has its own constant structure, constant mannerisms, constant characterisation, forms, methods and styles of presentation.

Concluding that “comedy in its pure form can resist definition”, Bamidele (2001:10) draws out a “Table of Comic Forms” (also in Musa 2007) with the hope that it

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would assist in further understanding of the meaning of comedy, which we see as a theatre of the sane coated in the garb of insanity:

Genre	Objective	Method	Ironic tone	Examples
Humorous Comedy	To understand and reveal human nature	Observation of behaviour with balanced criticism	Gentle, sympathetic, compassionate	Shakespeare, Synge, Fry, Sheridan
Satirical Comedy	To correct manners, morals and ideas	Exaggeration of fault, with dramatic wit or sarcasm.	Objective, rational, mocking.	Ben Jonson, Congreve, Shaw, O'Casey, Moliere, Soyinka, Gay
Farcical Comedy	To ridicule life but only for laughter	Invention of absurd situation exaggeration of characters	Light, often amoral, sarcastic, cynical, indifferent	Goldsmith, Oscar Wilde, Pinero, Rotimi, Osofisan
Burlesque	To ridicule other dramatic styles	Caricature of character and parody of language	Light, critical, often sarcastic	Osofisan, Moses Olaiya

Table 2: Bamidele's Table of Comic Forms

Perhaps the unending scope of comedy makes its meaning more controversial. The success of the genre, however, makes it to have many children. Etherton (1982:11) sees farce and satire "as specific forms of comedy", while L.O Bamidele's "Table of Comic Forms" points to four forms of comedy; humorous comedy, satirical comedy, farcical comedy and burlesque, while slap-stick is a form of comedy where performers "fall over, throw things at each other". On its own, Tragi-comedy is also an amalgamation of tragedy and comedy in one unique theatrical performance.

There are numerous forms and types of comedy in theatre history. We have Greek comedies with plays such as: Aeschylus' *Net-Fishers*, Sophocles' *The Searchers*, Euripides' *Cyclops* and Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. We also have Roman comedies in which Menander's *The Arbitration* and *Rape of Locks* (adapted by Plautus and Terence) stand out as classic comic play-texts.

Interestingly, the following forms of comedies have stood the test of time: Shakespearean comedies, comedy of menace, dark comedy, savage comedy, restoration comedy, old comedy (notably by Aristophanes), divine comedy (by Dante), romantic comedy, comedy of Spanish intrigue, comedy of error, farcical comedy, physical comedy, satirical comedy, comedy of humour, city and social comedy, comedy of manner, "festive comedy" of Ben Jonson which has been described through Jonson's play, titled *Bartholome-Fair* as "the period of allowed misrule which, like the holiday or feast-day of which it is an image, serves only to strengthen the normal social fabric" (Greene, 1980, p. 1) and many other comedies, perhaps, only help to formalise the unending scope of a drama genre which partly thrives on informal jokes.

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That the theatre is culture-bound means that it derives its strength from various cultures. Comedy also makes use of various modes and manners of wit, humour and laughter due to exceptional differences in human comic manifestations, the clear differences that human cultures pose. Tracing when Nigerians started to laugh will therefore be a subject on the controversial origin of the various ethnic nationalities that made up Nigeria. However, when comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre began to manifest will definitely be a study in historical review.

Studies in the Nigerian comic traditions have also shown that Nigerian comedies are practically present in the numerous multi-ethnic and contemporary Nigerian theatre and drama. Historical evolution of comedy and the comic art in the Nigerian theatre can, therefore, be traced to the various theatre traditions in Nigeria that have existed through 'an appreciable length of time' such as the traditional/indigenous/ festival theatre forms, the literary theatre form, the modern and the contemporary theatre traditions.

The communal nature of most of the Nigerian traditional societies has made the theatre a potent force in their naming, marriage, initiation and burial ceremonies which are all crucial in the cycle of life. Events in the Nigerian cycle of life also accommodate some undying festivals which the indigenous Nigerian societies celebrate. Notable among these festivals are the Ogun festival of the Yoruba, the Ekpe festival of the Igbo, the Ekong festival of the Ibibio, the Kwagh-hir festival of the Tiv, the Durbar of the Hausa while masquerading is present in most Southern States and Middle Belt States of Nigeria. Most of these festivals have undergone transformations and these transformational changes have made them become potent performances for entertainment, spiritual edification, historical reflection, social reformation, liberation and educational development.

Historical accounts showed that various forms and modes of comedies were present in the popular Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre which gave birth to over a hundred Yoruba popular Travelling Theatre Troupes in Nigeria. Adedeji (1981) documents the historical evolution of the formative years of the Alarinjo Theatre. His accounts of the political misadventure of the "Ghost-Mummers" and their theatrical transformation into the "Ghost Catchers" are quite comical and intriguing. Adedeji (1981:222) recalls that:

On the King's orders, the ghost-mummers were brought to court and placed in the charge of his Ologbo (Ologbin). They lived in a special building within the Afin to entertain the king... the councilors were dumfounded by this but they took the show good humoredly and departed.

Although the specific date of the formative years of the Yoruba nation is speculative, this important theatrical development, however, started in the sixteenth century. Contextually also, the Alarinjo repertory system has the "Revue" which

was a medley. As a comic sketch, music, dancing and singing were its main features. There were three categories of the Revue-abstract, sociological and

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historical. The abstract sketches were either solo or group mimes. Some represented odd physical features in the society while others were caricatures of human frailties. Example included *Dindinrin* (Moron), *Elekedidi* (Mumps), and *Onimu Oru* (Nosey), among others (Adedeji, 1981:242).

The Alarinjo sociological sketches were usually environmentally compliant because they often comment freely on the current happenings in the society or village that they often performed. Most of these theatrical comments were usually satirical and didactic and often condemned bad vices. Adedeji (1981:243) also reports that "the sketches were mainly improvised and capable of infinite changes... the dialogue included jokes and ribaldry... sometimes, the enthusiasm of both the actor and spectator resulted in unrestrained indulgence in farce".

In spite of the tragic revivals inherent in Ogun festival-Yoruba land, comic manifestations of hunting expeditions, the acceptance of sacrifice by the iron god through sacrifice, satirical praise poetry and dances all point to the presence of comedy in the Ogun festival. Comedy thus finds itself into the tragic art of the Yoruba. Okebadan festival, also in Ibadan land, has numerous songs with comic relief; vulgar comments and social satire. For example, one of the songs runs thus, "Okó olópa, kíkí béléítì, máa bú mí, jáwàjawa epòn" which is a direct comic song on "the bigness of policeman's penis and the uselessness of his scrotum". This type of comic song is also a common refrain among the Osun Osogbo festival worshippers. One of the songs goes thus; "sélèrú àgbò, àgbàrà àgbò, lòsun fí n wé omò rẹ́ kí dókítà ó tó dé, a bímo mó dáná sílẹ̀ èyìn là n pòwé mó". This song contextually and literally seeks to promote traditional medicine against Western orthodox medicine in the celebration of the Osun goddess.

A journey to the South South region of the country, Akwa-Ibom State and to the Ibibio people specifically will show the widely celebrated Offiong and Ekong dramas. Ekong, for example, is a form of drama that often comments, in a satirical manner, on the vices dominant in the community. Ogunbiyi (1981:13-14) submits that; "Ekong reflects contemporary realities... family and social tensions, rivalries and jealousies and incisively satirise ethnic groups, social types, behaviour types and disapproved individuals".

In the Northern part of Nigeria, the Kwagh-hir theatre, the Bornu Puppet shows and, most importantly, the Hausa comical theatre of Yankamanci also have some of its performers moving from one place to the other to perform as replica of the Alarinjo Yoruba Travelling Theatre, and to entertain people humorously and satirically. Gidley (1981:289) concludes that:

Yankamanci remains a comical mode of expression which has been valued by Hausa audience... the practice of the craft clearly includes ridicule of convention... on the whole the craft seems widely accepted as enlivening Hausa life... there is no harm done to authority, nor is there intentional disrespect to any individual but the

humour is at the expense of an imaginary category of people, who are also caricatured in Hausa stories.

This radical satire by highly intelligent comedians is a means for social control and it has received great "tolerance by public opinion and traditional authority of a brazen but tempered mode of satire" (Gidley, 1981:290).

Notable comedians of the Yankamanchi comical tradition include Haji Katsina who takes a strong place in Northern Nigerian theatre history, and Gidley (1981:260) also comments about him that "in all my experience of watching comedians, I have never seen one who had so much good sense and who was as entertaining as Haji Katsina. However glum a person might be, when Haji Katsina performed in front of him, he would involuntarily burst out laughing." Alhaji A. Dama and Kasimu Yaro comical aesthetics also modernised and revolutionised the contents and forms of comedy in the Northern part of Nigeria.

J.N Amankulor's article "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama" is another account of the immense theatricalities of the Ekpe festival of Ngwa of Igboland. Amankulor (1981:128) concludes that there is the "seeming odd mixture of elements of tragedy and comedy in Ekpe... such mixtures must have developed... as a result of people's wish to bring the year's events to a climactic peak, and to have the best in seemingly different worlds of suffering and enjoyment". This and many more are the various forms of comedy that we have in the indigenous festival theatre of the Nigerian societies which have hitherto found themselves modernised in the modern theatre form in Nigeria.

Hubert Ogunde remains one of the shining examples of the Nigerian modern traditional theatre practitioners through his numerous plays. In fact, it was Ogunde who first made a wide impact with modern satire or comedy in Nigeria. He took plays to all the major regions and tribes in Nigeria and thrilled his audiences with the themes of nationalism and universalism through his works. Ogunde has been deservedly dubbed "the doyen of Nigeria theatre practitioners" who

does not have a parochial conception of theatre. By this we mean his is national in outlook. He has not only included Agbor Igbo dancers into his performances but the acrobatic display from Ilorin. He has carried his plays not only to the East but to the North, Ogunde strives to propagate what unites us as Nigerians

(Asobebe, 1982:8)

Interestingly, Egun Clark also published a widely celebrated book on Ogunde titled, *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre* (1979) where she concludes that Ogunde's "folkloric content is only one of many themes that pre-occupy Yoruba theatre artists. Chief of these are satire, history and politics" (Clark, 1979:x).

Ogunde wrote many political plays that are themselves satirical and comical to lampoon the colonial masters, condemn social vices, criticise the local political terrors as aptly demonstrated by "Yoruba Ronu", a political play of Ogunde which realistically

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condemns the political actions and inactions of the late Ladoke Akintola, the former Premier of Western Nigeria. Ogunde's political puns, comical reflections and satires have variously made the government ban him from performing in Jos, Ibadan and Kano, and this has always been the case with the Alarinjo theatre's contextual technique of making use of contemporary satirical sketches wherever they are performing.

Within the Yoruba traditional theatre also, Moses Olaiya (alias Baba Sala) has specially reinvented the aesthetics of comic art and has made comedy a theatrical form that functionally speaks the truth while entertaining. Moses Olaiya, from all accessible records, professionally promotes the icons of the Alarinjo Travelling Theatre through the modernisation of Yoruba comedy.

Lakoju (1984), Tomoloju (1985), Banham, Hill and Woodyard (1995), Obafemi (1996), Bamidele (2001) and Akinleye's (2002) works are some of the insightful voices on Moses Olaiya's personality, theatre image and comical sensibility on the Nigerian stage and screen.

For instance, Tunde Lakoju in his article, "Popular (Travelling) Theatre in Nigeria-the Example of Moses Olaiya Adejumo (Alias Baba Sala)" documents the biography, public image, foundation and organisation of the Alawada Theatre and the plays and performances of Moses Olaiya. He concludes that:

The recognition of Baba Sala's artistic greatness does not terminate with private individuals or in television houses. The federal government, under the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo, accorded the ace comedian honour and respect. He was among the nine people awarded the "Member of the Order of the Niger" (MON) in 1977 (Lakoju, 1984:38).

Another theatre scholar, Olu Obafemi in his book, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (1996), also glorifies and dedicates a chapter to Moses Olaiya with the title, "Theatre of Farce: The Yeye Tradition in Moses Olaiya's *Tokunbo*". Obafemi (1996:55) captures Moses Olaiya's theatre more lucidly:

Moses Olaiya was indisputably the most popular, the most commercially viable professional theatre practitioner in Nigeria of his time... yet his ability to treat the excruciatingly funny, the farcical, is unparalleled on the Nigerian stage. His most valuable assets are his ability to provide laughter and popular entertainment.

Documenting who is who in the African and Caribbean theatre, Martin Banham, Errol Hill and George Woodyard also agree with Olu Obafemi on Baba Sala's comic versatility as they see him as "one of the most popular comedians in Nigeria today and his company (both acting and trading) is the most commercially successful, despite performance being entirely in Yoruba" (Banham et al., 1974:3).

Laanle Bamidele in one of his works, *Comedy: Essays and Studies* (2001), also reviews the aesthetics of "incongruity in comedy" and draws out a "theory of mechanical

encrustation" as it relates to comedy, using Moses Olaiya as a case study. Bamidele (2001:54) objectively admonishes that "... comic art is an art of the actor rather than of the playwright. The actor must be versatile in any comedy to draw laughter from his audience." All these comic gifts, according to Bamidele, are inherent qualities that Moses Olaiya possesses and which he willingly demonstrated on the living stage and the screen. We must also add that while comedy will make a meaning through the actor, it takes a good director for the total success of comic dramatisation.

Larinde Akinleye pedagogical article, "Comedy: A Child of Many Fathers in Nigeria?" also sees Moses Olaiya as "clearly the pioneering Nigerian comedian on TV. Our sufficiently potent source has it that he emerged as a winner of the 10th Anniversary of TV in Africa. That was in 1969" (Akinleye, 2002:31). Moses Olaiya has performed on the stage, television and the celluloid. Olaiya's comedies are witty and amusing, deadly comical yet realistic, because they are always critical of the government policies of the day and the evils of the moment. Almost all the major dramatists in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre Tradition (old or modern) have experimented with, and courted comedy because of its acceptability by the majority of the audience.

Comedy, a unique theatre form, also succeeds in the literary theatre tradition (the theatre of English expression) in the Nigerian theatre. With the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948, a sizeable number of Nigerians embraced the opportunity of studies in the Arts and Humanities.

In the early 1960s, therefore, the 'Ibadan Boys' and the 'Nsukka Boys' contributed to literary development in Nigeria although 'Onitsha Market Literature' pioneered play-lets on romance. The Nigerian dramatic circle, therefore, witnessed the publications of varieties of plays with comedy and its various forms taking centre stage. Satirical comedies with socio-political and religious undertones became materials for the literary discourse and stage performances of the 1960s.

James Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance* (1956), a widely celebrated comedy, remains a masterpiece in the Nigerian comic tradition. This is a play which Bamidele (2001, p. 72) says "provided a lot of rant and bombast and set speeches as preliminary to oratory or oratorical speech in Nigerian school plays some years ago". Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *Camwood on the Leaves* (1973), *Opera Wonyosi* (1984), *J.P. Clark's The Wives Revolt* (1991), among others, belong to the comico-satirical genre. Some of the works of the Nigerian playwrights that matter in the literary tradition also use comical form to distil, reveal, advise and correct the ills of the society. From Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1966) and his unpublished manuscript titled, "Grip Am" (1982) - a comedy which parades living images of man as characters and their desire to be dictatorial even when gripped with abject poverty to Wale Ogunyemi's *Business Headache* (1966), a Pidgin-English work and *The Divorce* (1977), 'Zulu Sofola's *Wizard of Law* (1975), Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1978) and *Midnight Hotel* (1983), Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender* (1988), Tess Onwueke's *Legacies* (1989) and *The Reign of Wazobia* (1992) to Bode Sowande's *Ajantala-Pinocchio* (1992), Tunde Fatunde's *Oga Na Thief Man* (1986) and *No Food No Country* (1986) obviously, the Nigerian literary tradition through the above Nigerian dramatists and playwrights has

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produced numerous published and unpublished play-texts that belong to the comico-satirical genre, a spring for comical and satirical performances. A combination of the indigenous and the literary theatre traditions greatly influenced the contemporary Nigerian theatre, and in each of these traditions, comedy and the comical art take many forms.

There are also numerous comedians who have influenced the Nigerian theatre scene both as actors, actresses, programme anchor men and women, masters of ceremonies and so on. Some of these comedians have acted on stage, on the screen and are great masters of ceremonies. For example, Oluyemi Adeyemi who acted as Suara in Super Story's "Oh Father, Oh Daughter" by Wale Adenuga Productions seems to have seen the beauty of comedy when he concludes that he is "a very lively person, a 24-hour comedian" (Adeyemi in Ijediogor, 2003:23). He explains further that "acting is very spiritual, it is more than physical; except God gives you the knowledge, the wherewithal, the ability to do something, you might not be able to do it, and do it well. If you fail to make your audience laugh, you become a laughing stock". Oluyemi Adeyemi has acted with the National Troupe, and he has also made a debut with Bode Sowande's Odu Themes Meridian.

Ali Baba is another mouth-seller of note. He has been described as a "Comedian, Master of Ceremony". He has also anchored programmes for the highly placed in the society such as, former President Olusegun Obasanjo, Chief Alex Akinyele (a former Minister), former Governors Bola Tinubu of Lagos State, Donald Duke of Cross River State, Lucky Igbinedon of Edo State, Obong Victor Attah of Akwa-Ibom State and many more. This ace comedian says that "nobody" inspired him, although he accepts that "he draws inspiration from Robin Williams, Bill Cosby, Aluwe, the late John Chukwu, etc" (Baba in Alade, 2002:33). This professional comedian knows his art so well that at times he demands millions of naira from prospective customers to anchor social programmes.

Julius Agwu who is meritoriously tagged "talented musicomedian" is another Nigerian comedian who jokingly concludes that if he were Mr. President, Clifford Orji, Mohammed Abacha will make his cabinet. He also says that the solution to the Nigerian biggest problem is for everybody to "become a comedian", while recommending that Aso Rock (Presidential) occupants should read "Lolly Magazine (Dauda the sexy guy)"... (Agwu in Umukoro, 2003:19). He also plans to relocate the National Assembly to Zamfara State and will be glad to "stay in Aso Rock with Jennifer Lopez". He has undoubtedly created a comical image for himself and made a fortune out of comedy.

James Iroha (Giringori), late Gbenga Adeboye "the prince of humour", Babatunde Omidina (Baba Suwe) the one who says that "comedy makes him rich", Bolaji Amusan (Latin), "Baba Sabiko... Baba kuete, Dogo Baba Kafi and so on... are the various names for child of comedy" (Akinleye, 2002:21).

In the 21st century, the Nigerian comedians are also flashing their comical art wherever they find themselves. One only hopes that the literary tradition will not be left behind through the publications of comical classics that would seek to promote modern comedy as witnessed from 1960 to year 2000.

Directing Comedy and the Comic Art in the Nigerian Theatre

The generally accepted notion is that comedy is an actor's theatre. However, the stage interpretation of comedy goes beyond that. The director willing to direct a successful comedy should resist the temptation of leaving the business of dramaturgy solely on the hand of actors. His first assignment after play selection, however, is to cast essentially humorous, flexible and adaptable, friendly and humour merchants to interpret his comedy. He should note that appearance matters in picturisation. Therefore, he should not cast stone-faced, unfriendly, inflexible and insensitive actors for his comedy.

Artistic directors should note that comedy triumphs on improvisation and the instinct of on the spot creation. He should assemble people who can crack jokes and who can create intuitively. Here, current jokes, puns, wits and happenings within the local, national and international market should find their ways easily into his comic art.

Songs and music are two inseparable instruments that should be skilfully used in a comedy. The use of current songs should be encouraged though the director will need to create more songs whose lyrics will celebrate and rejuvenate the social structure and the psychology of the members of the audience.

Director should distinguish farce from comedy and slapstick from burlesque. Though farce, slapstick and burlesque are children of comedy, they have special creative demands than comedy. Movement in comedy should be fast, but this should not obstruct dramatic communication. Costumes should be elaborate, flashy and of brighter colours but the design of costumes should not affect movement of actors.

The actor's dialogue through acting should be clear. This should not be sacrifice for movement and noise. Shouting should be avoided and speech should be perfect. This is to avoid the general but wrong style of focusing on spectacle at the expense of dramatic communication.

The power of exaggeration and its logicity in dramatic interpretation should be considered while directing comedy. The implication of this is that every performance contexts and icons of body carriage, body contact, spectacle, acting, pantomimic dramatization, movement, dance, use of song and music, costumes, make-up, hand and set props should be creatively exaggerated to situate comedy as a ridiculous social instrument of laughter.

The key important essence of comedy is entertainment. The director should make members of his audience to laugh in a sizeable time of the performance. The implication of this is that he has to create humour, wit and situation that will entertain his audience. The second face value of this is that the director must sustain dramatic tempo and he can do this by making recourse to the triangular dramaturgy of CMI (Character Mode Intensity).

Conclusion

It has come to the fore in this study that comedy is a claw, a form of socio-political control, moral as well as cultural therapy that re-interprets and re-directs the society from the state of lawlessness to that of order and sanity. This paper, therefore, enjoins artistic directors who will coordinate the designers in the theatre to be alive, creative and skillful while handling comedy. Directors should also resist the temptation

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of seeing comedy as an actor's theatre rather; they should accept responsibility by producing aesthetically entertaining comedy on the Nigerian stage.

Apart from the global recognition that comedy in the Nigerian literacy theatre has enjoyed, we want to conclude that comedy should be treated as a special drama because comedy is now witnessing a comical turn through the success of the Nigerian Comedians in the special brand of stand-up comedy and the evergreen Nigerian Nollywood industry where they make millions of naira yearly.

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