

'SHUFFLISM' IN PLAY DIRECTING: THE CASE OF "SUNSET AT NOON?"

By

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Introduction

One incontrovertible fact is that every theatre theory is rooted on a foundation. Theories are therefore, significant to theatre productions, because they are the bedrock on which every performance is built. Just as there are rules and ethics guiding every human endeavor, so also are styles serving as the guide on the path of theatrical voyage.

Dynamic theatre scholars, who have propounded one theatre theory or the other in the past, came up with their styles in response to the societal demand, brought about by environmental change in compliance with the trend of the moment. The need for momentary compliance was buttressed in Martha Flecher Bellinger's article, which was originally published in *A Short History of the Drama*, titled: *Aristotle, Classic Technique, and Greek Drama in 1927*. Bellinger observes that "many writers failed to recognize the new life, in their own art, and missed seeing the truth that a first hand observation of life is always more valued than rule of any sort out" (Bellinger, 1927: 64).

It is obvious that the world is changing so also is the fact that societal demand is not static, it yearns for reformation. So for its inhabitants to be compliance, especially the propounders and recipient of the theatre, there must be quest for innovative changes. Any inhabitant, who failed to move in tune with the societal phenomenal changes, may be forgotten. Refusal to change or be part of the vanguard of change may be inimical to the expected growth.

Little wonders why Bellinger again observes that:

Immemorial war has been waged between the sticklers for old laws, in the one side, and on the other, the genuinely creative writers. In no Art has this war been more apparent than in the Drama: and in no art have rigid rules been more oppressive. There have been long periods when the dominance of theatrical rules, wholly or partially outgrown, has sterilized and all but killed the theatre (Bellinger, 1927: 64)

From the above, it is obvious that failure to submit and be an advocator of change, especially in the arts and particularly in drama is killing the arts. We see it, therefore, as a welcome development that theories and styles are being postulated as erudite and humble contributions to the development and growth of the art of drama nay theatre.

The Notion of the Theatrical Style of 'Shuffism'

Inventing this style is not isolated from the fact that every style is based on an existing word, the extent and the usage of such word to suit ones postulation is what we regard as inventing a new style. 'Shuffle' is an existing word which Quirk et. al.(1995), in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines as: "to work very slowly and nosily without lifting your feet up the ground: To move something such as papers into a different order or into different positions". (Quirk, 1995:1329). We are also in agreement with multiple adjectival description of the meaning of 'shuffle' as contained in the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1970). It caps the detail meaning of the word shuffle. It says that shuffle is:

To mix at random, as playing cards; to jumble, to put (out off in) surreptitiously, evasively, scrambling or in confusion: to manipulate unfairly to patchup: to shove (the feet) along without lifting ear to perform with such emotions: to move by showing the feet along....(Davidson, 1975: 1255).

This style, which we call 'Shufflism', carries all the literary features that are enumerated in the meaning of the word 'shuffle'. The style came out of the conception where theatre is portrayed as a dynamic institution, a terrain full of scholastic and inexhaustive innovations.

The movement of actors on stage as we postulate, could be compared to the shuffling of playing cards in readiness for a game. In a performance where we employ the style 'Shufflism', all actors and actresses will remain permanently on stage and throughout the period of the performance, thereby allowing some theatrical transfiguration to take place in readiness for the composition of a new scene. There are some inherent features and characteristics of style 'shufflism' that are presented here, which we hope will convince our readers and sustain their appreciation of the style as a style that is good for the theatre.

Features of the Style, 'Shufflism'

The postulation of this style was borne out of a copious idea and our intention to making theatre practitioners and producers, including crew members, get detached from the regurgitated belief that as prelude

to every performance, stage construction in term of sets, using paints and bogus properties are necessities before a production could be said to have been properly packaged. This style is meant to detach the theatre from such regurgitated process, which we regard as archaic and unnecessarily rigid traditions, giving the scientific phenomenal trend that our jet moving and artistically compliance society is going through.

The play, "Sunset at Noon?" produced in year 2005 is a story supplied by one of us during the M.A. Performing Arts' class, in the University of Ilorin during the 2004/2005 Academic Session. After series of interactive and brain stormy sessions, the play was realized by improvisation. We also experimented on various aspects of the theatre i.e the stage/ space, actors' entrances and exit, keeping all actors and actress on stage throughout the period of the performance. This explains why we called the work an experimental piece. By experimental theatre, we mean an attempt into a new area of activity of the theatre. Using 'shufflism' style to direct the play was an experimental voyage into a new area. Roose-Evans says; "to experiment is to make a foray into the unknown it is something that can be charted only after the event" (Roose Evan, 1984: 1) Experimentation in theatre is as old as the history of the theatre. Every theatre theorists/scholars have made attempt open up new area in order to make theatre more meaningful to all theatre stakeholders. Some based their experiment on perspective, some on performers; others lay emphasis on the actors and their audience etc. This, therefore, gave rise to different kinds of postulations. Taking a cue from the experimental postulation of Stanislavski 'Magic If' to Peter Brook's *Empty Space*, one would realize that each of them tried to open up new possibilities that would make theatre more interesting and meaningful. Roose-Evans observes that the idea behind experimentation is not limited to theatre theorists/ scholars he observes that

in this century, psychologists, painters, scholars, writers, poets, dancers, have been concerned with the attempt to build a bridge between the known and the unknown, between the conscious world of the ego and the unconscious world that lies within out (Roose-Evans, 1984: 1).

This increased awareness and the urge to do something new and tangible is what we see in Stanislavski, whose postulation revolves around the importance of the actors.

It would be seen from the various works of pioneers of experimental theatre that, the idea behind experimentation is taking a dive into the unknown and coming out with something new. The idea of experimental theatre therefore, is the way Grotowski sees it. Roose

Evans, quoted his ideology thus "The road is a matter of moving forward" (Roose Evans 1984:153), indicating that you came up with a new thing and you make meaning out of it.

It is in our bid to come up with something new that we decided to realize "Sunset at Noon?" as an experimental piece using the style "Shufflism" for its realization. It is to be noted that the idea behind realizing the play by improvisation is inherent in our intention to explore the ingenuity of our actors and actresses, who were then undergraduate, students in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin. Some of them, from the interaction we had with them have never had cause to act in an improvisational play. Again, we try to explore the idea of Peter Brook as propounded in his theory the "Holy Theatre." He says "we encouraged actors to see themselves not only as improvisers lending themselves blindly to their inner impulses but as artists responsible for search and selecting amongst form" (Brook, 1968:52).

Therefore, in this experimental piece, we explored into our own stage iconography; using actors as the wall, as against the use of flats. We also allowed entrances and exits to be observed right within the acting arena. Artists are made to wear their costumes right on stage, using our invented Shuffling style

A similar but remarkably different style was used in Musa, R.A's presentation, which he called "Neo-alienation" style when he staged his play "The Smart Game" (Musa, 2002) at the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin's Lunch Time Production in the year 2002. This is also the main thrust of his Ph.D Thesis recently submitted to the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. He critically reworks the Brechtian Alienation effect to his new experiment, the "Neo-alienation" style which he valorized into twelve aesthetic projections through Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in year 2004 to achieve a bridging gap between one movement and the next, which was part of our new style.

The totality of styles that formed the core of the experimentation which we explored in realizing the "shufflism" include the notion.

Some of the features of the style are enumerated below:

- All actors/actresses will be on stage permanently and throughout the performance. This is to make, realizable the crowd movement, which is the tonic for achieving the style.
- At the end of each scene, before moving into the next scene or locale, actors will be made to move around like in shuffling of cards so as to

allow characters that would act in the next scene to change to their new costumes and properties.

- When starting a new scene, actors would move in a slow motion posture from the back stage to their entrances points, after which, they will transform, come alive from their transient posture and enter their role and character.
- All actors, because they are all on stage are members of the orchestra, handling various instruments.
- There is room for role transfer, especially by any members of the orchestra crew when the need to play another role arises.
- The stage lights will be in full view of the audience.
- The style abolishes the boring and uneventful moment theatre audiences often go through as a result of incessant black out in the theatre. There will be uninterrupted free flow of action throughout the performance, since all actors/ actresses will be on stage.

Synopsis of the Play

The play; "Sunset at Noon?" is an event that takes place in a Yoruba speaking village of Ollala in the South-Western part of Nigeria. Born to the family of the Tanimolas, is a bouncing baby girl after twenty years of fruitless search for a child. The joy of the arrival of a baby after a long waiting is greeted with merriment. The excitement that greeted the moment does not make anyone notice that a gift presented to the new baby and the self-coined name the village Chief Priest, Baba Faponle gives the child on the eighth day carries some clandestine connotations, which is to later in life of the baby, truncate the fruitful future of the innocent girl. The parents of the girl refuse to offer the sacrifice prescribed by the Chief Priest as the only condition for having children by the couple. The Chief Priest, having been aware that they seek for help from elsewhere sees their attitude as spite on the Ifa deity. He therefore, stands at a literary corner, waiting for revenge.

Morenike, on attaining marriageable age got married. After her marriage, she is in deep sorrow because her husband died mysteriously. She is also hit by terrible ailment that defiled all orthodox medication. She is taken back to the village, before the Chief Priest who informs the Tanimolas that their daughter will only live on the condition that she will marry him, the Chief Priest. Unknown to the parents that that is the condition the unknown covenant; the gift and the coined name he gives to the baby on her eighth day carry. Will the parents agree to marry out their

daughter to the wretched looking herbalist? Or would they allow her sun to set a noon?

Directing "Sunset at Noon?": The Case of 'Shufflism'

In keeping with the cardinal principles of the fundamentals of play directing i.e. composition, picturization, movement, rhythm and pantomimic dramatization, we commenced our stage composition by arranging the actors at the beginning of the performance; all of them sitting back stage and backing the audience, thereby demystifying the use of flats. The position carved for them was to represent them as the cyclorama. Again, their backing the stage was to de-emphasized them and eliminate distraction of the audience by being in that position. At the points earmarked as the entrance, the actors are used to represent the door.

In establishing the entrances and exits that are different from the conventionally theatre performers entering from the apron, in this piece, actors and actresses were made to observe their entrances and exist in a different way. Actors were to move as if in trance from their backstage position to the edge of the stage, from where they will transit to life and take their cue into the stage of performance. This is done to educate the audience that theatre can take place anywhere devoid of observing the conventional stage requirement; all that is required is getting a space.

In term of actors' movements, at every point when our actors and actresses needed to move on stage, we ensured that album pictures are created. Movements were not at any point awkwardly created. When the need for a specific type of body position is required, particular attention is paid to the tonal requirement of the situation. The pictures created at a particular scene; Oju Elegba, (a rowdy area in Lagos) in the play for instance, was so arranged that all movements were clearly executed and no masking of one actor by other actors. This we did, putting into consideration both the technical and the mood value requirement of every action.

One significant thing that we did was that we employed "shuffling style," where actors were instructed to move freely, filling the stage as if in a market scene, dancing slowly to specific rhythm, until the incubation for re-composition was completed. This was to allow the audience to maintain a glued view on the performance while actors; especially those who acted in the previous scene have sufficient time to change into their new costumes for the next scene. This was what

majorly dominated our production scheme while all other aspects like dance, costume, lighting etc. were tied to it. This "shuffling style" was what made realizable through the flash back into the first scene; the naming ceremony scene, linking the past to the present.

In observing rhythm in this experimental piece, we took a radical departure from the conventional rhythmic pattern by not using the complete drum ensemble. We effectively used percussion instruments i.e Agogo (gong) Sekere (calabash skirted with beads) and the smallest of the bata ensembles; Gudugudu and Omele. The rationale behind this was to give the audience distinct hearing, understanding and appreciation of every word of our songs, which we felt the use of complete drum ensembles may erode.

Conclusion

We have examined few, but very notable theatre theories that have sustain the theatre to date. While those theories are noted and appreciated for their effect and contributions to theatre improvement, we want it to be noted too that this new style is a further contribution to scholarship in the area of play performance and production. It is aimed at making easy and affordable, play production. The style's aesthetic essence is designed in a way that actors, audience and other stakeholders would benefit from the style. All kinds of boredom that members of the audience often experience due to prolonged suspense arising from scenic transition are removed; audience views are tastefully and permanently glued to the stage at every performance where 'Shufflism' is used. The theory is also appreciated for its economic consideration to Producers and Directors alike, as the problem of having to incur huge expenses on set construction would be removed.

In the same vein, there will be unlimited and uninterrupted power packed moments of action. In the final analysis, the audience, actors' relationship will be more pronounced and appreciated as all rudiments of how theatre happens is laid bare, to the audience, who hitherto were in the world of ignorance. The importance of this theory cannot be overemphasized, our conclusion is simple. Shufflism should be tried as a potent experimental style.

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