

Aesthetics: The Oil on the Canvass of Play Directing

By

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Introduction

Theatre in the real sense goes beyond being just a vessel of entertainment. It is a didactic weapon, it is an instrument for correcting societal ills. However, before theatre could become an acceptable tool for correcting societal ills and serve as an instrument that would educate, one particular theatre concept comes into prominence. It is the saying of the wise that if you must take something sweeter. If the society must be rid of the ills, a better substituted must be put in place, the medium of communication must be involved. If theatre/Drama must perform its didactic role, it must be packaged in a way that the society would be eager to watch. Packaging a theatrical meal that would be inviting to the audience must have all the production ingredients embedded. One of such ingredients, which we regard as very germane to play production, is the concept of "*aesthetics*". We have come to understand that *like* a palette is to a painter, so also is aesthetic to an artistic director in his directing expedition.

In this work, we intend to illuminate on the concept of *aesthetics* and dig dip into the physiology and anatomy of the concept. Examining it would afford us the opportunity to exhume its importance and values to play production process and why it is a useful tool in the hand of an artistic director in his directing work. The end product of this research work will show us that aesthetic is the oil on the canvass of play directing.

Every academic work, this inclusive, is a build up on the past works. In going about this study, we shall reference works of some theatre scholars, who have in their works identified the importance of aesthetics in life and situations. Works of theatre directors who have used the concept to better their theatrical production will also be examined. Therefore, an

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empirical study of works of such theatre scholars and directors shall be our guide. We shall also by way of building our facts, systematically examine scholarly articles, monographs and researchers opinions as they have dealt with this concept. In its entirety, this work focuses on seven segments; Introduction, conceptual clarifications, aesthetics as the oil on the canvass of play directing, aesthetics in composition, picturisation, movement, rhythm and conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

We see it as imperative to illuminate on some theatre terms that we shall be coming across in the cause of this work. They may not be new to some readers while to some they may be new. However, we are of the opinion that the intertwining nature of the terms and the concept we are examining will further wet the understanding of those who know and the novices. Such terms/concepts are 'theatre', 'Drama', 'Directing' and the 'Artistic director'.

We shall also briefly look at scholars' definitions of aesthetic, the definition will put us on a path of understanding to appreciating the usefulness of the concept to the theatre, hence we will appreciate why we described it as the oil on the canvas of play directing.

Theatre and Drama Examined

Two very commonly used terms in art world are 'theatre' and 'Drama'. These two concepts to many people mean the same while some see them as different. Our pre-occupation in this work is not to go into any argumentative expedition on the differences and similarities in these two terms. But we want to examine them in order to place our thought path on a pedestal of understating the concept we want to examine. Theatre as defined by Bertolt Brecht in his work, "*A short Organun for the Theatre*" and quoted by Brockett (1992:5) says, "theatre consists of making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings, and doing so with a view to entertainment" Bertolt Brecht sees theatre as "reportage of happenings presented to entertain group of watchers" while Etherton (1982:12&19) in the glossary of his book *The Development of African Drama*, defines 'theatre' as "the circumstances of a live dramatic performance" and in another perspective sees theatre as "a building for live dramatic performance."

Interestingly, Sinclair John et al in the *BBC English Dictionary* defines 'Drama' as "a serious play for the theatre, television or radio". They

go further to say its not a documentary, but a drama based on one man's memories" (Sinclair, 1992:342). Etherton also sees it not too different from the definition above. He defines 'Drama' as "a type of performance...an intellectual discipline" (Etherton, 1982:12)

Drama as we see it, is the enactment of happenings or occurrences and presented before a groups of audience. Such presentation may be for the purpose of entertainment, to warn against an impending phenomenon or to correct an existing societal ill. Whichever way we look at it, drama is a performative art. We look at 'theatre' also as a performance or house of performance. 'Drama' and 'theatre' simply put are two terms that both carries the same feature. The inter-twined nature of their features made them inseparable. The efforts we have made to elucidate on these two term is to put readers in an assuring shore that the two terms which are imperative to this study, when we use them interchangeably convey the same meaning. Our position tallies with the definition of Dean and Carra who succinctly says theatre' and 'Drama' are products of recalled images" (Dean and Carra 1965:3)

Directing

Another conceptual term that we shall come across more often in this work is '*Directing*'. The performance of every play is made possible through the art of directing. Directing is the art of putting the bits and pieces of theatre elements together and woven into an artistic finish-up. Scripts (otherwise called play text) are nothing but lifeless object, it is only directly that weaves flesh around its skeleton and makes it a bride to be betrothed to his suitors (audience). Directing therefore, is an important art in the theatre. We shall share from the experiences of some theatre scholars and their definitions of directing. Dean and Carra (1965:65) for instance, defines directing as "the presentation of a play on stage for an audience, interpreted in terms of dramatic action and dramatic sound and in term of emotional and intellectual concept of an authors scripts." Directing as we also see it is the art of co-ordinating, organizing and harnessing of all resources in the theatre for presentation to the audience. Theatre glossary put together by Fine Arts Curriculum Standards and theatre underscores the responsibilities he carries, which we also agree, is that of a harnesor and a co-ordinator and an impostor who is to show the theatrical path and depth. In performing his responsibilities he ensures that he confines himself within the three unity of the theatre, such as time, space and place. He also uses the five fundamentals of play directing: composition, picturisation, movement, rhythm and pantomimic dramatization as his tools in executing his

directorial task. These various artistic components are what the artistic director harnesses together that make his work completed. He in order to heighten his production adds some embellishments, which makes his work beautiful and inviting. These embellishments are what we described as 'aesthetic'. Aesthetic is very important and that is why we identified it as the oil that lubricates the wheel of all dramatic presentations. It is what we likened to the petrol that would make a well-designed car perform. Hence we described it as the oil on the canvas of play directing.

Aesthetics

The ultimate aim of this study is to showcase the importance of aesthetics to play directing. We say without over-emphasizing that aesthetics, as a concept is a tool that an artistic director must make his companion. It is the life of the theatre; it is the ornament of all theatrical presentation.

Aesthetics has been traditionally defined in the *Encyclopaedia Americana* (1998:234) "as a branch of philosophy concerned within beauty and the beautiful in nature and art". Other philosophers who also define aesthetics include Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762), a German philosopher who consider the above definition as too general and narrow to describe the importance of aesthetic, expanded on the above by tracing the source of the concept. He posits that it has its root in Greek word 'aisthesis', which means "sense of perceptions". His definition, therefore, is that aesthetic is "a not very tidy intellectual discipline," rather "a heterogeneous collation, of problems that concern the art primarily but also relate to nature". (Baumgarten in *Encyclopaedia American*, 1998:234). From the above description and definitions many other philosophers like, Susan Langer, Trevor Pateman, David Hume and so on, who also defined aesthetics say defining it is 'an excruciating task. However, they say aesthetic is approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education on 31st August, 2001, under the Directorship of Jeanette Crosswhite, defines directing as:

The process of guidance, both external and internal, incorporating the development of leadership skill, the unification of a production forum, its basic interpretation through all the acting and technical phases up to the time of performance.¹

The above definition looks all encompassing, it describes directing as the art of organizing, co-ordinating and presentation; which are the core

pre-occupation of play production. This work centers on directing, this brief definition therefore, became necessary since the concept we are examining is an ingredient required for Directing.

Artistic Director

Let us examine another theater term, which of all the terms we have been examining is imposing. The term is the 'Artistic Director', he is in charge of the theater affairs. If there must be play to be produced at whatever level, either in an open-air theater or in theater in the house, the artistic director handles the art of directing that we just described above. He is the one that harnesses all the theatre resources. Debra Brunch in Chapter Eleven of her book *Directing Theatre*, place on internet say, "for theatre to actualize its potential, a person would need to impose his or her point of view that would penetrate all aspects of the production."² The director's imposing status was also described by Peter Brook, when he concluded that the director:

Does not ask to be God and yet his role implies it. he wants to be fallible, and yet an instinctive conspiracy of the actors is to make him the arbiter, because an arbiter is so desperately wanted all the time. In a sense, the director is always an impostor, a guide at night who does not know the territory, and yet he has no choice, he must guide, learning the route as he goes. (Brook, 1965:38)

Other theatricals like Benjamin Donna, in his unpublished Ph.D thesis on "Australian Women Theatre Directors" see the role of directors as "most often one of illuminating the meanings offered by the playwright". This he said, this the directors does by "the stitching together the seems of the scenes into a careful and flowing narratives or by composing the structure of the work".³ The above definitions and descriptions of the roles of the artistic director in the basically a concept that can be regarded as a self-defining concept. Aesthetic from our view-point had assumed modern status, hence it now must be seen from a wider realm. The realms are described in the New Encyclopaedia Britannica as 'the realm of the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime and the elegant; of taste, criticism, ad fine art and of contemplation, sensuous, enjoyment and charm' (*New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998:9). Aesthetics from whichever realm we look at it is better accepted as it has been defined in the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. as "not only with the nature and value of arts, but also with those

responses to natural objects and find expressions. In the Language of the beautiful and the ugly" (*New encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1998:9)

The definition above, seems to be relevant to our study of which we sees aesthetic as the oil on the canvas of play directing, would be measured by responses to theatre performance in the language of the beautiful and the ugly. The extemporaneous expressions that we describe as feed back that every theatre director would be willing to receive from his audience. Whether a theatre presentation has been able to positively or negatively touch lives of the audience would largely depend on and be determined by the aesthetic qualities that are inherent in the production. In David Cooper edited works, titled: *A Companion to Aesthetic*, he sees aesthetic from an angle of being a member of the immediate family of the art. He describes aesthetics as "property of art". He looks at aesthetics alone and describes it as being inherent in "*beauty, elegance, grace, daintiness, sweetness of sound, balance, unity, harmony, expressiveness depth, movement, texture and atmosphere*" (Cooper, 1995:7).

Immanuel Kant's position on aesthetic quoted in Cooper edited works, says the best way to have aesthetic attitude is to have a judgement devoid of interference but independent with a view to giving room for an objective conclusion. This he succinctly puts down below that:

To call something beautiful is to put it on a pedestal and demand the same delight from others. The disinterestedness helps to explain why we feel entitled to do this. For where any one is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all man (cited in Cooper, 1995:252).

This is in essence saying that judgement of beauty should be independent of emotion.

Ogden and Wood (1946) says: "Aesthetic is that which is equivalent to synaesthetic equilibrium, that is, a particular and harmonious kind of response in the audience brought by the stimulus of a work of art" (Ogden & Wood 1946:68). The response to work of art by theatre goers or theatre admirers should be based on the quality of aesthetic components that are inherent in such work. Naturally audience in the theatre should be held spell-bound, captivated and emotionally arrested if it must be assessed that such a theatre presentation had an emotional impact on them. This John Hoppers, (1969) agrees when he says:

An object is aesthetic only when he holds the audience or the readers attention. Consequently aesthetic parts include the linguistics, stylistic

and the dramatic stimuli that bring about a kind of instant response in the audience, during and after performance, Aesthetic includes the general metaphysics of the lives of a people (Hoppers, 1969:21).

Having examined the features of aesthetic as it affects the emotion of the audience, we are left in no doubt that aesthetic is the ingredient that should be added to every theatre production to achieve an emotionally lasting and referenced performance. Every good theatre director no doubt needs the touch of the concept in his production. For instance, to achieve a perfect theatrical balance in scene composition, a pleasing picture that would on its own communicate a scene mood and a purposeful movement that would heighten the effect of an action including the next and the subtext of an action, a touch of aesthetic is required. Aesthetic touch in every theatrical work therefore is the artistic finishing that is required in making a production a perfect one. The judgement on the quality of the production would then be left for the audience who would determine the measure of pleasure that they have been able to deduce from the performance.

We noted that aesthetics belongs to the one big family of the Arts. We also observed that in every works of art, before it is regarded as pleasing and good, value of aesthetic is inherent. We have also come to understand that what we call beauty is aesthetic.

Aesthetics as the Oil on the Canvass of Play Directing

For one to derive pleasure from any object, such a person is to be left independent of interference. His mind should be left devoid of threatened emotion within his immediate environment, Zikky. Kofoworola, quoting Gibram Khali in his book. *"Wisdom of Gilbran"*, where he defines aesthetic and says:

The thing called beauty or the pleasant is intangible. Its emblem or traces could never be found in the object perceived neither in the properties that make the whole but in the hearts of judgement and reactions. (cited in Kofoworola 2004:3)

The aesthetic judgment we have briefly enumerated above is intended to give independent posture to the recipient of the pleasure of aesthetic object. That is when the concept we are examining would be properly and systematically understood.

We have seen aesthetics from the perspective of beauty, in which case we said aesthetics is a philosophy that concerned with beauty and the

beautiful. We have also seen aesthetics from the point of perception; hence we say beauty is in the eye of a beholder. We have also broadly looked at aesthetics in a more glorifying adjectives such as: nice, beautiful, elegance, grace, daintiness, sweetness of sound, bakery design, unity, harmony, expressiveness, judgement, depth, movement, texture, atmosphere and so on.

If aesthetics carries these infinitesimal auras and it is described as a concept that carries the stigma of impartiality, which is judgement is devoid of interference, then it is an important concept in the field of the theatre arts.

It is a concept that an artistic director should partner with for successful theatrical expedition and presentation. Adedeji who directed *"The Third Women,"* a play to mark the Silver Jubilee anniversary of University of Ibadan's Foundation, recalled his interaction with Hubert Ogunde, whom he invited to his rehearsal to see his first run-though of the play. He picked these from the discussion he had with him (Ogunde) after the rehearsal session. He recalled that, Ogunde made it categorically clear that: "Aesthetics belongs to the content of art appreciation and it deals largely with clarifying certain basic concepts used in thinking and talking about works of Arts as well as setting up the criteria by which to judge works of art". (Adedeji, 1998:64-65).

Adedeji goes further to state some basic aesthetic concepts, which he drew from Ogunde's wealth of experience and described them as aesthetic ingredients to a meaningful performance. These concepts, he said Ogunde called '*significance*', '*rapport* and '*celebration*'.

Looking at the ingredients described by Ogunde critically, one would agree that any works of art that does not have "significant" notion, will lack communication (rapport) ingredients and will be devoid of public acknowledgment (celebration). The success of such performances through aesthetic will necessarily make them significant on the desk of audience glorification.

The right choice of casts in a play is in itself an aesthetic infusion, so also is the use of the matching costumes, sociologically compliance props, make-ups and music. Each of these theatre aesthetic components will bring satisfaction to the audience. It will sustain the beauty of the production and expose the ugliness of the societal ills, which in its totality would present a socially appreciated production. Because the aesthetic appreciation of each production depends on the mood of the audience, an artistic director would do well by ensuring that each of these moods and social requirement within that environment are taken care of, so that the purpose for which the production is meant would be achieved. Looking at

the use of these aesthetic components in play production process, one would be left in no doubt that aesthetic is the oil on the canvass of play directing. We have come to be convinced that in all fatest of edeavour, aesthetics makes a copious significance. It could also looked at as the pleasure of imagination.

Aesthetics' tentacles spread beyond the scope of any critics because it subsumed the notion of both the beautiful and the ugly; which are the two basic natural phenomenons of life and drama being a microcosm of it. in life experiences there is no one single straight jacket approach to achieving life result. This is why the importance of aesthetics leaves its first print on a all spectrum of endeavour, in sculpture, architecture, politics, religion, etc. Therefore, and artistic director pick various aesthetics components and uses them to register a meaning in the minds of its targeted audience. A performance where the spectacle of aesthetic is absent, such a performance would lack the oil of beauty and spectacle of appreciation.

If we appreciate drama as an art that stir emotion so much that it is able to perform its didactic preoccupation then, we say drama teaches as it goes beyond mere reading play scripts. To us this is partial, as emotional stir will be incomplete. When one goes to the theatre to watch a play, the emotional arrest should be higher because of some theatrical ingredients that are added to heighten the effect of the performance. These ingredients are what we call theatrical embellishments. They are what make a performance more inviting to behold. These embellishments are what can be described as aesthetic value of performance, the oil that lubricates the directing process of such production. Our earlier reason in this paper for elucidating on various theatre terms is for us to appreciate their uniqueness as member of the family of the art, an education that will further illuminate our understanding the main concept, '*aesthetic*', which we are examining.

Let us examine aesthetic in the following directorial processes, then we will agree with us that aesthetic is very important to play production process. In driving home our postulation \, the Aristotlean definition of a theatre genre; tragedy is our first point of call. Aristotle defines tragedy as:

An initiation of an action that is serious, complete and of certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kind being from in separate puts of the play, in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgaton of emotions (Aristotle 350 BC)

It is an indisputable fact that whatever we call tragedy is an extreme of sad event or situation. The above definition painted the true content of a

tragic situation, when it describes it as an action that is serious, complete and of certain magnitude. The only way by which such a situation is ameliorated is when it is enacted and presented as a drama. Even when it was presented that way, we have the greatest problem of distancing some audience from the emotional effect of the contextual theatrical situation on that performance. The only way by which that could be done is through Bertolt Brecht's postulation called '*alienation effect*', otherwise called '*distancing effect*'. Alienation is the art of creating in an audience a distancing effect from the reality of a tragic dramatic enactment. This can only be made possible through the use of certain language embellished with some artistic ornaments that we call theatre aesthetic components. The totalities of these artistic embellishments are what we, in this study, refer to as addition of aesthetic in play performance. It may be in form of physical or plastic embellishment.

Aesthetics in Play Composition

Composition is the foundation of every directorial work in play production process. It is the scenic arrangement, which require a great deal of skill. You will no doubt agree that a play cannot just be put on stage if scenes are not properly composed. What the audience would see would be nothing but an awkward and incomprehensive scenic posture. Dean and Carra (1965) describe composition as: "the structure, form or design of the group...capable of expressing the feelings, quality and mood of the subject through colour, line, mass and form". He further sees composition as "*the rationale arrangement of people in a stage group through the use of emphasis, stability sequence, and balance, to achieve an instinctively satisfying clarity and beauty*" (Dean and Carra, 1965:109).

In directing a production, emphasis becomes another very good aesthetic ingredient in scenic composition, especially when a director uses strong body positions, areas, planes and levels to present a cute performance. All these variety use of body positions keep the audience out of being bored. Again, Dean and Carra (1965) see one hypothetical example to buttress how audience values good composition. We produced below, remarks of a lady, an audience, who watched a theatre production at a newly established Summer Theatre Company in America. Dean and Carra (1965:109) quoted her thus when she was asked how she felt after watching a performance, she said:

Oh they did excellent work, and we enjoyed them even so much. But there was one very peculiar thing about them you never knew who was

speaking. You could hear them, but your eyes were always trying to find out who it was that was speaking.

What this person was obviously saying was that the scenes were not well composed, neither was the character distinctively placed for viewing. In a mass scene, aesthetic in composition can only be achieved when an artistic director makes his composition devoid of rowdiness. He distinctively presents his actions without one activity masking the other. An artistic director, who is aware that the first critics he has to contend with are the audience that will watch his performance, must then ensure that the core aesthetics value he would inject into his production are those that would earn his work a far above average applause.

Aesthetics in Picturisation

Picturisation in theatre presentation is another very important element in directing, when you compose, you would have succeeded in having neat arrangements, but this is not enough. In play directing each scene composed must be able to tell a story of what the scene is all about, even without actors and actresses saying a word. This story telling quality is what we refer to as picturisation.

Hauser and Reich (2003) in their book, *Notes on directing*, submit that:

Whatever does not tell the story should be subject to a very fifth examination. It does sometimes happen that decoration will salvage a weak play, but we are concerned with strong plays and the audience has come to the theatre to believe, to respond to the magical words, "once upon a time..." not to admire a laser show (Hauser & Reich, 2003:9-10)

Decoration has many aesthetic components that are injected into a play to uplift its quality. Apart from the fact that such decoration tells a story, it helps to leave a lasting impression in the mind of the audience. The ability of an artistic director to tell a story about every scene he packages, through picturisation, shows much of him as a quality, creative and aesthetically compliance director. Its production is bound to hold his audience spell-bound.

Dean and Carra (1965) describe picturization as: "the visual interpretation of each moment in the play". They say, "it is the placing of characters in their locale so as to suggest their mental and emotional attitudes towards one another so that the dramatic nature of the situation will be conveyed to an audience without the use of dialogue or movement". (Dean and Carra, 1965:173)

Obviously, an artistic in his directing work, whose mind is blinded toward aesthetic value, would be oblivious of adding details that would effectively communicate his scenic intention to his audience.

Aesthetics in Movement

Movement, which we regard as contributory agent to play quality, has its toner qualities when properly directed. Movement dictates mood, character, evaluation and emphasis in a play production. An aggressive movement towards another character when the intention is to show appreciation for a good earlier done obviously present an anti-climax impression. It takes a director who value aesthetics in his directional work to direct actor to take the right movement in his production. The right movement either through the use of body movement or stage movement if they are correctly directed brings out aesthetic pleasure in such performance. For instance, actors movement from stage right, which is regarded as a stronger stage area to stage left, a weaker stage area leaves an impression of humility, compromise or peaceful expedition. A situation where an actor movement is marred by incompetent directorial placement, then such a movement lacks aestheticism.

Aesthetics in Rhythm

The tempo of a play depends on the style of the artistic director. The style bothers on the aesthetic value a director introduced in directing his play. We describe the pace, speed and tempo the artistic directors require for his production as rhythm. Rhythm dictates the degree of emotional climax in a play. Dean and Carra, (1965) say that:

The secret of our aesthetic pleasure in rhythmic experience has probably a more practical basis than we suspect. For rhythm seems to satisfy the natural longing for progressive movement which is ordered rather than chaotic and haphazard. (Dean and Carra 1965:234-235)

It is clear from the above that rhythm, which is one of the dynamics of play directing is an agent of satisfaction. Rhythmic application to production may look excruciating, but ability to apply it gives the play a special aesthetic effects and a lasting pleasure.

Another emotional stimulant in the theatre which artistic directors introduce in his directing work is mannerism (a typical gesture) he gives to his character apart from the character qualities dictated by the playwriting.

The mannerism a character wears further elevates the production. This inclusion is an aesthetic injection, which has its toner appreciation.

Conclusion

Though aesthetic is an abstract phenomenon, as natural air is to human existence so also is the psychological induction of aesthetic to play production. Additions of aesthetic value in play performance heighten the beauty of a theatre production. This has been clearly reviewed and can not be over-emphasized. Like some scholars have earlier observed, defining aesthetics is an excruciating exercise. Aesthetic pleasure is relative, it is a matter of choice and interest, and it is a matter of personal acceptability. What one may consider, as aesthetically pleasing to one may be unpleasant to another, but without mincing words, it is obvious that at every point in time, there is something that is satisfying to a person out of a situation. That satisfaction, which may be relative, is the aesthetic pleasure that an individual derived out of a particular situation. The ultimate intention of every artistic director is to leave a lasting impression in the minds of his audience. This is where the addition of aesthetics comes in. Every fundamentals of play directing used to bring up a production will be incomplete if a lasting embellishment of 'aesthetic' are not added. It is the inclusions of aesthetic that will make a performance reflect the true image of reality of life. At this point, we say with all boldness that aesthetic play significant role in play performance.

One question, therefore, that remain germane to this study is; can an artistic director, who would want to leave a lasting impression in the minds of his audience and admirers, jettison this basic ingredient of perfection, which we call aesthetic? Definitely NO!!! aesthetic is the oil on the canvass of Play Production.

Notes

1. Crosswhite, Jeanette (Eds.). 2001. *Fine Arts Curriculum Standard Theatre Glossary*. Approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education.
2. Brunch, Debrah. 1990 In chapter Eleven of her Book: *Directing Theatre*, downloaded in page 1 of 5, [tp://www.danillitphil.com/base.html](http://www.danillitphil.com/base.html)
3. Benjamin, Donna. 1994. Australian Women Theatre Directors being an unpublished thesis downloaded from the net, <http://www.pumble.or/dram/thesis.html>

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