

# JOURNAL OF PERFORMING ARTS

Volume 4, 2011 Number 2

# JOURNAL

PUBLICATION OF THE  
SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS,  
UNIVERSITY OF GHANA.  
LEGON. ACCRA



*Defining Arts*

ISBN No. 0855-2606

# JOURNAL OF PERFORMING ARTS

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Printed for the School of Performing Arts, Legon, Accra by  
Black Mask Limited (bmask4u@yahoo.com)

## DIRECTING STYLES IN THE NIGERIAN LITERARY THEATRE

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### Abstract

*Performance in the theatre through the players is the last phrase of artistic communication to the audience. Consequently, the art of performance, whether social, cultural, religious, improvisational or scripted can only become a reality through the creative endeavour of the theatre director in the complex art of play directing. Through the descriptive, interview and participant-observer methods of research, this research work examines some directing styles that are clearly articulated by some of the creative and experimental theatre directors in Nigerian literary theatre. These directing styles are explored and documented so that directors in Nigeria and elsewhere can learn theatre practice from them. Even though individuality, aesthetic experience, education and so on cannot be ruled out for theatrical concepts of directorial style, we conclude that the intellectual and practical mastery of these directing styles will further help the theatre directors grasp the reality of play directing.*

### Introduction

Skill, dexterity, creative imagination, versatility, diligence, mental alertness, the love for research and also style are some of the positive qualities that a good theatre director should possess in the creative work of artistic interpretation. Consequently, Soyinka, Rotimi, Akinwale (2010), Adelugba, Musa (2000), Ukala (2007)<sup>8</sup> have examined the style as the hub and essence of play directing.

Two important reflections from Bayo Oduneye (the former Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria) and Dapo Adelugba (a seasoned theatre scholar and artistic director of over forty years) will be recalled here to drive home the point regarding the failure of style and directorial interpretation on the part of the present crop of Nigerian theatre directors. First, Bayo Oduneye's venom.

Most times, I find it difficult to cope with some of these mediocres who parade themselves as directors...some of those who call themselves super directors can't even tell me where they trained.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Most of the scholars mentioned here are seasoned theatre directors in the Nigerian literary theatre who have worked to re-define the Nigerian theatrical space.

9 Bayo Oduneye in an interview with Shuaib Hussein, 1992. p. 29.

Secondly and most importantly is Dapo Adelugba's reflective criticism that:  
a theatre director should always observe life  
and I found out that young theatre directors  
do not observe life adequately enough. That I  
think is a major kind of problem that I have of  
the current theatre directors. There should be  
greater observer of life whether on life stage  
or on anywhere else. There should be no hurry  
as well in getting rounded education. I do not  
think that the present younger theatre  
directors read widely enough or give  
themselves enough time to watch productions  
of good works done not only in Nigeria but  
also in countries outside Nigeria. That is part  
of the equipment of a theatre director<sup>10</sup>.

From the two statements above, one can see the expressions of dissatisfaction about directorial laziness and arrogance that have dominated the Nigerian theatre. This has led to the artistic destruction of the art of play directing by the present crop of Nigerian theatre directors whose directing is based on haste and hurry, trial and error – an extension of the crisis of cultural identity in dramatic communication.

Certainly, the theatre director is important because the art of performance, whether social, cultural, improvisational, scripted, commissioned or religious becomes a reality through the creative endeavour of the theatre director in his art of play directing. This is why various theatre scholars and theatre directors have accepted the complexity of play directing in their various conceptual postulates. For example, Robert Cohen (1988:144) sees directing as "an art whose product is the most ambiguous, perhaps the most mysterious in the theatre", while Francis 7(1991:1) concludes that directing is:

a highly sensitive craft involving intensive play  
analysis, exceptional skills in communication  
and approaches to the making of  
style...stimulation and arrangement of the  
doing of the others, a very complicated  
process requiring many exceptional skills of  
its own.

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10 Dapo Adelugba in an interview with Musa Rasidi Abiodun, 2000. p. 24.

Wole Soyinka, a theatre director par excellence also accepts the reality of the complexity of play directing. He submits quite frankly that play directing is a:

complex business. It is a sociological phenomenon. It relates to the environment, the cast in hand, how much time one has, how many actors there are, how to balance the amount of time given to each actor in view of just how much time one has to put a play on stage and of course the overall theatrical images which one wants to represent, the dynamic tensions of the various special images which one want to create on stage<sup>11</sup>.

Both Dean and Cara (1965) and Goldfarb and Wilson (1993) have also written extensively on the complex dynamics of play directing.

The theatre director is also one of the important image makers in the theatre business. The director, in the word of Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb (1993:1) must be "responsible for the overall style, space and visual appearance of the production. The entire process requires skill at organization as well as aesthetics sensibility, qualities the director must have in abundance". As a gifted artist in the theatre, the director is no doubt a creative artist, peacemaker and an anointed leader in the theatre who Peter Brook (1966:38) says "does not asked to be God and yet his role implies it" The director is also someone whom Cruthrie Tyrone says must partly be:

an artist presiding over a group of other artists, excitable unruly, childlike and intermittently "inspired". He is also the foreman of a factory, the abbot of a monastery, and the superintendent of an analytic laboratory. It will do no harm if, in addition to other weapons, he arms himself with the patience of a nurse, together with the voice and vocabulary of an old-time sergeant major<sup>12</sup>.

Script selection and interpretation, audition and casting, picturisation and composition, the coaching and teaching of actors on movement rubrics,

11 Wole Soyinka in an interview with Okorie C. and cited in Musa Rasidi, 2000. p. 3.

12 Cruthrice Tyrone in Frank Whiting, 1961. p. 156.

characterisation and general coordination of theatrical activities are some of the functions of the theatre director in the business of play directing. These functions are dynamic because they often change with time. So, the non-static nature of theatre means that the director must be very intelligent, educative, creative and disciplined. Furthermore, as a trainer the director "must also train and labour on the speech, voice, expression, body movement and character portrayal of each actor"<sup>13</sup>. The acquisition of these qualities will make him or her to be the true "master of all the arts of the theatre".

To stem the current tide of directorial laziness and arrogance, and for play directing to grow to new heights of artistic excellence, the current young Nigerian theatre directors must observe and learn from renowned Nigerian theatre directors. What we therefore emphasise in this research work is the need for the understanding various directing styles available in the Nigerian literary theatre. Most of the directing styles that we will be discussing in this work are in reference to the directorial works of notable Nigerian theatre directors such as; Dapo Adelugba, Bayo Oduneye, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Chuck Mike, Akanji Nasiru Ayo Akinwale, Ziky Kofoworola, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola.

### **Style and the Nigerian Literary Theatre**

Style suggests that "every play has an intrinsic quality, an identifiable structure and texture and that handled according to the rules. It's likely to produce a certain type of response... detailed matter, and more elusive... something deeper"<sup>14</sup>. Style is an affectionate and emotional mode and method of aesthetics by a designer in the theatre. Hodge (1971) and Akinwale (1993 and 2002) have defined style in relation to artistic cum directorial interpretation. Francis Hodge sees style as what makes form individual and specific.<sup>15</sup> Ayo Akinwale states that the "style employed by a director becomes visible during the performance. Some styles are related to periods and hence such terminologies as realism, symbolism, expressionism, surrealism and so on."<sup>16</sup> Within the conservative traditional school of directing, style relays to us three polemics:

- A. The individual creative interpretation of the theatre director is intrinsically linked to the director's vision, passion and emotion in his theatre.

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13 Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra, 1965. p, 26.

14 Hugh Morrison, 1984. p. 127.

15 Francis Hodge, 1971. p. 279.

16 Ayo Akinwale, 2002. p. 122.

- B. The interplay of culture, society, period and or convention which the audience sympathise with is what the theatre director may draw his experience from.
- C. The technical and dramatic demands/qualities of a play can radically influence the theatre director.

Consistency is, however, the dominant key to style. Once a theatre director has used a method of directing throughout his directing career it then becomes his directing style. Directing style can, in turn, be influenced by other factors such as education, creative experience, socialisation and the nature of the play contemplated for directing. The major problem associated with style, particularly in the modern plays, is that "a modern play seldom has a pure style, and there are almost as many styles as plays"<sup>17</sup>. This implies that a play in the modern sensibility can have elements of tragedy, tragi-comedy, comedy, melodrama and so on. Directors handling modern plays must be careful while inventing styles. If undefined styles are imposed under the illusion of the director's artistic superiority or self-indulgence, this can be an invitation to directorial suicide and artistic disharmony within the *mise-en-scene* and the *mise-en-actor* on the living stage. Style is important and must be determined because style "will tell the degree, kind and amount of composition, the simplicity or complexity of form to be used in the groupings. It will settle the actors' body position in relationship to the audience, the use of area and level"<sup>18</sup>.

Linked to style, is the classification of the Nigerian theatre. This is also controversial because many scholars treat this subject matter from various evolutionary, historical, practical, ideological and aesthetic angles. Through Nigerian theatre scholars such as M.C.J. Echeruo, Yemi Ogunbiyi, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Ossie Enekwe, Olu Obafemi, Meki Nzewi, J.A. Adedeji, Biodun Jeyifo, Demas Nwoko and Wole Soyinka we have heard various traditions and divisions. In fact, Olu Obafemi analysed some of the traditions in the Nigerian theatre as: the dramatic ritual: popular tradition: literary drama: traditional drama: theatre for development: the conservative: the reformist: the revolutionary: historical (pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial): formal (traditional, modern): thematic (including ideological structures and determinants): the residual: the dominant and the emergent.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, not much historical writing has been done in Nigerian play directing. However, we have heard of some such directing traditions, such as the Olofin

17 Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra, 1965. p. 322

18 Ibid ..., p. 323.

19 Olu Obafemi in Yemi Ogunbiyi 1988 p. 54.

Ologbojo of the Alarinjo traveling theatre and those of Ogunde, Duro Ladipo's and Kola Ogunmola's. Likewise in the Nigerian literary theatre, directing traditions have evolved through Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Zulu Sofola, Olu Obafemi, Dapo Adelugba, Bayo Oduneye, Ayo Akinwale and many more. Their works are familiar with us through their consistent use of directing styles suitable to their theatre and accepted by their audience. It is important to note that "specific individuality" and "special characteristics of an individual production" make the theatre "director a stylist".

### **Leadership Sensibility and Style in the Directing Process**

The theatre director is an indisputable leader, especially when play production is contemplated. However, the key to leadership is the ability to influence others to carry out his instructions. Perhaps this is why Paul Jersey and Kenneth Blanchard (1969:60) define leadership as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group toward goal achievement in a given situation". As an influential member of the production team, the theatre director's individuality and character can make or mar any production. The director's leadership acumen will ultimately be put to test when performing the crucial directorial functions such as play selection, casting, blocking and actors' coaching. The director's leadership individualistic style will also determine the output of his theatrical directions, for as policy maker in the theatre he or she are representing themselves in the art. However, once a theatre director has total control of the theatre through good leadership, he or she can then begin with one of the important functions of play directing - which is play selection.

Quick frankly, it seems that most Nigerian theatre directors select plays based on the choice of the audience, the financial strength of the producer, the space or the performance area, the available manpower and "technical and dramatic qualities" of the play.

Robert Cohen (1988:135) also suggests that "three basic considerations go into play selection; the director's interest, the interest of the intended audience, and the capacity of the director and the producer to acquire, conceptualise and produce the play". A play should not be selected on the basis of the popularity of the play or the playwright, but rather on the theatre director's artistic, intellectual and creative abilities to direct the play. Wrong choice of plays for directing is the beginning of failure because it will mar the image of the theatre director and his or her directing style. Play selection has to be negotiated with the producer based on the strong conviction of the director. Then, once a final agreement has been reached on a

play to select, the theatre director can then begin to experiment with the directing style familiar with him or her.

### Directing Styles in the Nigerian Literary Theatre

Most of the directing styles that we will be discussing in this research work are the ones that have been consistently used in the Nigerian theatre by famous Nigerian theatre directors from the literary theatre tradition. We must emphasise here very clearly that directing styles should not be confused with production styles, though there are points of connection between the two. In analysing a directing style, the individuality of the theatre director in his creative intervention through his or her passion is non-negotiable. Production style on the other hands is the holistic soul of the production: costumes, make-up, set construction, lighting and preliminary factors of *mise-en-scene* and *mise-en-actor* represent. The directing style will ultimately influence the production style as if it is the 'whistle-blowing referee' who controls the affairs of the players.

The endless and changing paradigms of the theatre are, perhaps, two other factors that make directing styles in the Nigerian theatre a zero-sum game of intellectual misconceptions. Certainly, the theatrical contention that a play is capable of dual interpretation and that a directing style employed for "play A" may not work for "play B" belies the endless space of creative interpretation. In this study, ten major directing styles in the Nigerian literary theatre will be analysed within the multi-media and multi-cultural aesthetics:

#### 1. The Preconceived or Pre-blocking Directing Style

This is a directing style where the theatre director writes down his directorial movements and actors' body positions about a play he or her is directing on paper and directs the actors according to these instructions. Complaints are not entertained from the actors, and the theatre director often acts faithfully to his or her pre-blocking designs. Bayo Oduneye, the former Artistic Director of PEC Repertory Theatre, Lagos and the National Troupe of Nigeria is one of the proponents of the school of pre-blocking directing style. He has:

committed over forty years to the service of the theatre. He has produced and directed a number of stage productions among them: *The Visit of Bishop Alaba*, *Coloted Miseum*; *Nadrian*, *The Seventh*; *Spirit of Lagos*; *Ayege*; *Death and King's Horseman*, *The King Must*

*Dance Naked; The Lion and the Jewel; Langbodo; The Silent God; The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen; the stage adaptation of Things Fall Apart, John Brigg's Paradise and lately Efua T. Sutherland's play Marriage of Anansewa*<sup>20</sup>.

Bayo Oduneye has accepted the fact that he "takes the same process", i.e. that the theatre director is a 'super artist' who should 'play God'. This is also one of the main directing styles rooted in the Craighan theatre school and it saves time as it emphasises the infallible power of the artistic director in the theatre. However, it can turn the actors into mere mechanical robots, who cannot think and create.

## 2. Actor's Freedom Directing Style

This style of directing gives unlimited power and freedom to the actor in the theatre. It is dialectically opposed to the pre-blocking style. Constantin Stanislavsky and Arthur Hopkins created this style. Another who belonged to this school of directing is Dapo Adelugba who started his directing career with Geoffrey Axworthy when he adapted Moliere's *Les Feuberries de Scapin* to "That Scoundrel Suberu" in 1961 at the University of Ibadan. Theatre directors who are in this directing school tend to create pictures and see directing more as picturisation. In fact, Dayo Adelugba defends this school of directing when he submits that "I do create pictures. I think they are unlikely to be aware that I am creating pictures because I don't make fetish out of it. But I am just as interested in the visual aspect of the directorial art as in the verbal aspect."<sup>21</sup> Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra (1965:320-1) also support this directing style.

Although there is, of course, no standard formula for directing a play, repeated productions have taught us not to work out particular details of scene, its composition, picturisation, movement, rhythm, or business, but to consider the general tonal and emotional values of the play and how they may be sensed by an audience. Only by the actor's

20 Bayo Oduneye in an interview with Shuaibu Hussein 1999 p. 29.

21 Dapo Adelugba in an interview with Musa Rasidi, 2000. p. 142.

conveying these qualities in a performance will the director be able to direct six or seven plays a season.

The actors need freedom in the theatre, as this will help them to act intuitively and accept the reality of "magic if" and the essence of "transubstantiation" while acting. This directing style, therefore emphasises not only the need to condition the actors to the directing style of the director but to allow the actor to develop and interpret the play in the best natural sense possible. Whether we like it or not the actors are the communicators of the director's vision in the theatre enterprise. This style enjoins that they should be given the freedom to bring their creative endowments to bear in their acting. That the theatre director owns the theatre should not mean turning the actors into robots and this seems to be the statement from directors in this school. Apart from Dapo Adelugba, Femi Osofisan and also Olu Obafemi to some degree belong to this school of directing.

### **3. Inner and Outer Resources Directing Style**

For the inner and outer resources directing styles the theatre director uses a combination of styles. For instance the pre-blocked play may be used in the working paper but the director also allows the actors to creatively, imaginatively and intuitively give the best interpretation to their roles and characters. Ayo Akinwale, the former president of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) propounds this style which he christened 'schools of inner resources and outer technique'<sup>22</sup>. He leads the this school of directing style which includes other theatre directors like Israel Eboh, Tunde Bakare, Ini Eboh, Yemi Akintokun, Oforime Inyang and Linus Osemene.

### **4. The Traditional Directing Style**

Directors who accept this notion of their function usually retain the time and place specified in the script and follow the playwright's prescriptions about staging<sup>23</sup>. This directing style implies that the play as written by the playwright is not edited by the theatre director. Every movement, moods and all stage instructions are followed by the director. Nothing is removed and nothing is added. Such plays must be directed with a view to retaining the intentions of the playwright through a 'closer examination of the script'. Sola Fosudo of the Lagos State University Theatre School experimented with this style of directing through the performance of Femi

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22 Ayo Akinwale in his inaugural lecture, "And the Journey Begins... The Travails of a Theatre Sociologist", presented at the University of Ilorin on 29th of April, 2010. p. 35.

23 See for instance Oscar Brockett 1992 p. 310.

Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*, performed at the 2000 Convocation of Lagos State University. Most dramatists who are in the group of the playwright-directors conventionally strive to retain the vision of the play at the expense of other radical directorial styles within the experimental gamut. Most playwrights prefer their plays to be directed through this style. However, a good theatre director should not please the playwright. Rather, he or she should please the audience and satisfy his or her artistic curiosity.

### 5. The Improvisational Directing Style

Young Nigerian theatre directors often make use of this style of directing. It is a directing style without definite focus but whose theatrical intention is to do everything possible while attempting to put the play on stage. 'Àrúkù' which literally means 'anyhow' is a local name for the improvisational style of directing. It becomes necessary when there is not sufficient money to really provide for all the necessary human and material resources in the theatre. The time factor, or the director laziness or lack of expertise are some other factors responsible for this style. Yet, improvisational directing style has the advantage of allowing the theatre directors and the actors to create a workshop theatre, storyline or a play-----let which ultimately forms a working document for a performance in which the performers "thrives on spontaneity and ingenuity"<sup>24</sup>.

### 6. The Director's Theatre Directing Style

This style of directing strongly re-states the power of the theatre director. Richard Gilman states the intentions of some theatre directors and explains the rationale behind the director's theatre.

What are we to make of this production? Is it liberated and innovative; as a few critics have said? Or is it an outrageous violence of Shakespeare's intent? One thing is certain... director's theatre - a performance in which the director imposes his own extreme vision on a playwright's classic work, radically changing the original in the process<sup>25</sup>.

The overbearing influence of the theatre director who is of this school is so great that when they pick a script they can start the play at the tail end, or introduce

<sup>24</sup> Iyorwuese Hagher, 2000. p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Gilman in an interview with Chris Nwamuo, 1983. p. 69

[special] visual aesthetics and speeches at the beginning of the play. Daniel Merguich, Ntozake Shange, Andrei Serban and some Nigerian theatre directors (Effiong Johnson, Bakare Ojo Rasaki, A. A. Adeoye, Felix Emoruwa and so on) often use this style of directing. It is even artistically rewarding to use this style if the cast of the play is made up of greenhorns and inexperienced actors. Here, the vision, mission and direction of the play rest squarely with the director.

### **7. The Editing Directing Style**

This is a directing style where the theatre director edits a play and decides on the aspect of the play he or she intends to direct. It is different from the improvisational or the director's theatre style because the remaining edited part of the play is used as a guide. Long dialogue based plays and published novels contemplated for stage adaptation often fall under the hammer of the editing theatre directors. Most often they re-write the play for the playwright, with many things having to be removed for a meaningful and compact performance

### **8. The Computer Directing Style**

The late Professor Ola Rotimi<sup>26</sup> originated this trend which is similar to the pre-blocking style. This is a style where the actors' body positions and movements are programmed into the computer and played for prospective actors to subsequently imitate during rehearsals and performances. This style is another hi-tech innovation that can positively change the art of directing. Importantly, computer education is now crucial to the growth of theatre scholarship. Theatre arts should not be left out in the exploration of this modern technology. We are currently working on a software that will accommodate the basic Western and African directing icons which we hope, will save time and cost in the directing process.

### **9. The Straight-Take Directing Style**

This directing style, propounded by Ayo Akinwale, asserts the essence of a free-flow performance in the African theatre. Akinwale says that this style allows the play to open from beginning to the end without the stage light going out. This is to increase the audience's interest in the production<sup>27</sup>. This style is dialectically opposed to the intermission of Western theatre.

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26 Late Professor Ola Rotimi, a confirmed master of Nigerian stage iconography (Ayo Akinwale and Emmanuel Oga) radically changed the face of the Nigerian theatre through good productions that relied on African artistic resources.

27 Ayo Akinwale, 2010. p. 36.

## 10. The Folkist Directing Style

Sam Ukala, a versatile Nigerian playwright, critic and director is the originator of the folkist style of directing. He has written extensively on this and this is celebrated through the broader perspective of folkism. This includes the "language of African folktale in performance", "the use of Members of Audience (MOA)", "a large measure of accessibility, authenticity and popularity within Africa" and the use of the "eight laws of aesthetic response in folktale performance."<sup>28</sup> This style is a search for "a viable audience-performer relationship" and directors who wish to use it must internalise the folkist's icons by studying some of Ukala's plays such as *The Slave Wife*, *Break a Boil* and *The Log in Your Eye*. Furthermore, to be able to tell a folk story very well and impact this on the performers, Ukala wants the African director to be in the garb of actor-director.

### A Reflection on the Directing Styles in the Nigerian Literary Theatre

For clarity, it should be emphasised again that several scholarly works have been done to foreground Nigerian literary theatre styles. Wole Soyinka has his "ritual" aesthetics and style, Ola Rotimi is always at home with "theatre-in-the round", "fabulous theatre" is the fancy of Femi Osofisan while Dapo Adelugba has also deployed his style within what we called "Daoduism" in play directing.

The second point of reflection is that directing styles are often confused with production styles. We have remarked briefly on this before. Ayo Akinwale's two works mentioned in this study dwelled on the historical review of production styles and the essence of theatrical traditions in performance analysis. But on directing style, Ayo Akinwale (2000:135) concludes that:

In terms of staging, it is difficult yet to talk about a Nigerian directing style because there are not many directors whose passion is to direct plays and direct them well. When this occurs, we would then have a school of directors and be able to talk about the Nigerian directing styles.

This style statement was made ten years ago. However, the documentation here, though not exhaustive, attempts to celebrate the likely directing styles which close to twenty Nigerian literary theatre directors have created, adopted and used for the

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<sup>28</sup> Sam, Ukala, 2007. pp. 24-34.

proper location, identification and articulation of Nigerian performances. Directing style is simply individualistic and can make or mar a production. It gives the production its spine, whilst the production style itself is built the flesh of a good performance.

### **Conclusion**

We started this research work by stating the growing dissatisfaction of the educated founding fathers of play directing in Nigeria on the works of the young Nigerian theatre directors, in terms of leadership sensibility and play selection. We also discussed the prevailing directing styles in the art of directing. This was done with a view to making theatre directors in Nigeria and elsewhere e sensitive to the directing art, and to see constant research and learning as crucial to the survival of the art of play directing. As one of the theatre makers, the theatre director can, therefore, explore the icons within the directing styles to build and develop a style for himself or herself.

The theatre director is a leader and leadership sensibility is a prelude to directorial sensitivity: an unavoidable factor in the art of play directing. It was noted that the theatre director must understand the prevailing directing styles in the theatre, yet not all the best directors are identified with a definite style. Moreover, while controlling the "exhibitionist actor" the director must also avoid the superiority toga of "observe me and do likewise". Also and as Hugh Morrison puts it (1984: 157):

The director should never stop learning. His schools are theory and practice. The varied techniques of acting, speech, movement, interpretation, design and theatre technology... His creativeness is his willingness to learn, to try to understand other people's creative process and the skills.

While learning, the director in the literary theatre in Nigeria and elsewhere must do more documenting of and theorising on his directing style. This is important because as E.K. Efakponana, puts it (2009:78) "the literary dramatist is considered a determinant of the future advancement" of the African literary theatre.

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