

## THE EDITORS

Ziky O. Kofoworola holds B.A. Hons from the University of Ibadan and Ph.D in Drama from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He is widely travelled and has attended conferences, workshops, seminars, teaching and theatre performances in the United States of America, United Kingdom, India, Bulgaria, Germany and Ghana. His published plays *Futonje* and *Queen Ghasengeh* have been nominated for the Association of Nigerian Artists Prize (2007) and Nigeria LNG Prize for Literature (2010) respectively. He was Awarded the British Council Fellowship which took him for research at London University as well as the Centre for West African Studies at Birmingham University in U.K. he has worked at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; Ohio State University; Columbus; Wilberforce University; Technical University; Mansfield; College of Education Technology at Marion; and Graham School, Columbus where he served as Director of Culture all in the United States of America. He also worked at the University of Cape-Coast in Ghana. He is currently a Professor of the Performing Arts Department of the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria where he also serves as the Editor-in-Chief of the West African Theatre and Performing Arts journal (WATPAJO).

Martin O. Owusu is a renowned professor of drama and theatre. He is the Head of Department of Theatre Arts at the Methodist University, Accra, Ghana. He is also an adjunct lecturer with the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Before his current assignments, he had taught at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana. Martin Owusu has supervised many postgraduate students in several universities and also presently doubles as a mentor to several younger lecturers in different Ghanaian Universities. His professional achievement is largely in playwriting and directing where he excelled in his unique directorial styles which are in conformity with African folklore. He is one of the inventors of the unique African folkloric theater known as *Ananse* in which dramatic communications and dialogue are composed in metaphoric language for metaphoric messaging. He is well travelled and has attended seminars, conferences and workshops in different parts of the world. He is a member of several national and international organizations and is today regarded as one of the pioneers of modern Ghanaian drama and theatre.

Abdul Rasheed A. Adeoye is a Professor of Performing Arts and the present Head, Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. He holds Masters Degrees and a Ph.D. in Theatre Arts from the Universities of Ilorin and Ibadan respectively. He has taught Play Directing, Playwriting, Acting, Theatre History, Media Arts and Theatre Practical/Workshop Courses in the Performing Arts Department, University of Ilorin, Ilorin since 1999 to date. He is a member of several theatre organizations including the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA), International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC), International Theatre Institute (ITI), International Research and Development Institute, Performance Philosophy, Committee for Relevant Arts (CORA), among others. He has edited eight volumes of the *The Performer: Ilorin Journal of the Performing Arts*, the official journal of the Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. In addition, he has directed many African and non African plays including Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tewfik Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, Wale Ogunyemi's *Queen Amina of Zazzau*. Bode Sowande's *Tornadoes Full of Dreams*, Kola Ogunmola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* and others. He is also presently a member of the Governing Council of University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

# AFRICAN THEATRE: STUDIES IN THEORY AND CRITICISM



EDITED BY  
ZIKY O. KOFOWOROLA  
MARTIN O. OWUSU  
ABDULRASHEED A. ADEOYE



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**FOREWORD**

Our colleagues, Ziky Kofoworola, Martin Okyere Owusu, and AbdulRasheed A. Adeoye deserve commendation for this book. Impressively, they have assembled, in one volume, a dazzling array of voices in the field of dramatic theory and criticism, drawn from departments of theatre in various universities and higher institutions and from two different countries, namely, Ghana and Nigeria.

It is a unique achievement: rare indeed it is to find instances of such rich and divergent collaboration, where at one single source students and scholars can encounter multiple perspectives and a near-comprehensive mingling of views.

And the diversity is not only geographical: contributors come from different intellectual generations as well as across the gender divide. Besides, because each of them is also a practitioner of many years standing, they speak with authority on their areas of expertise, drawing on concrete knowledge rather than abstract theory, and sometimes questioning prevailing precepts.

Almost all the areas of the arts of the theatre are covered: there are essays on dramaturgy, directing, acting, theatre design and aesthetics, on music and management. There are also very informative interviews with some of the acknowledged icons of the profession, where they offer illumination on their exemplary, innovative visions.

It is inevitable therefore, as it happens with works of similar ambition, that the book's strength may also, paradoxically, constitute its principal flaw. Thus the informed reader will find, for instance, that, although the departures from orthodox positions that we find in some of the essays are undoubtedly daring, they are not, for all that, always convincingly advanced nor, regrettably, supported with irrefutable evidence.

I suspect, however, that this kind of controversy will be very much in accord with the aims of the editors who seem in my opinion to have brought these essays together more in order to stir us into further exploration, than to merely reinforce our entrenched positions. I recommend the book therefore to both the general as well as the specialized readership.

**Femi Osofisan**

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# **SECTION A: INTRODUCTION**



coordinated and systematized manner. This coordination involves the provision of a roadmap which comes in the form of a production schedule that clearly outlines dates and time for various actions. Even at the risk of being accused of frolicking in overused expressions (cliches), it is said that "practice makes perfect" and that "he who fails to prepare is prepared to fail". Rehearsals, therefore, offer the opportunity for sustained preparation in order to perfect practice. In the process of rehearsing the play, the script must be read individually and collectively several times for its surface and inner meaning and blockings given to reflect the desired ambiance. An effective use of the various arts of the theatre such as set, lighting, costume, make-up, sound and props must be taken seriously for they imbue a production with eye-filling details and meaning-providing auditory account. The place of discipline in the process of play production cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, discipline is the pivot on which the entire production gamut revolves. Run-throughs cannot be compromised for they build confidence and provide the prospects for reevaluation.

Finally, the director must be a hardworking and knowledgeable man or woman of impeccable character for it is only then that he or she can assuredly inspire confidence in other members of the production team, interpret the text faithfully and provide meaning for the audience which constitutes the focal point of a performance.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Approaches To Play Directing: Quintessence In The New Creative Interpretation of Mohammed Ben-Abdallah's 'Step Aside'

Tayo Simeon Arinde

#### Introduction

The art of play directing in the theatre, when examined from different stages of its development, has witnessed unprecedented metamorphosis. These transmutations are what make scholars who have been following the trend of its development to describe it in various ways. Scholars such as Wole Soyinka cited in Musa (2007, p.214) describe it as a complex business while Hodge (1971, p.1) describes it as art of leading dramatic performances. The various processes of change that the art of directing has witnessed have manifested both in the Western (the Greek, Roman, Elizabethan etc) and African theatre traditions as exemplified by the developmental processes in Nigeria, Ghana Kenya amongst other African nations. This chapter examines a Ghanaian theatre director, who ranks high amongst creative theatre inventors in Africa. His major contribution has been how he has brought creative directional invention into the art of play making in Ghana and thus provide a new direction in the art of play directing.

Ghana is one country in Africa where a penchant for theatre and dramatic performances manifests in the various shades of ingenuity that are encapsulated in the historical performances of the Bob's i.e. Bob Cole, Bob Williams and Bob Johnson. The trio are renowned as Ghanaian Concert Party front-liners. In spite of the glowing tributes paid to these theatre geniuses, the attention paid to the codification of their works and the performances record of other theatre professionals in Ghana is nothing to write home about in comparison to the record keeping skill of Western theatre practitioners. Inattentiveness to the codification of records on theatrical performances is responsible for the dearth of archival performance records in most African countries. This explains why theatre directors and theatre scholars, who have made significant contributions to theatre practice in Ghana, are mostly not referenced. This is in spite of the fact that Ghana, in the area of theatre arts; playwriting and directing, no doubt, has produced prominent theatre practitioners and geniuses, amongst them ; Efua T. Sutherland, Joe De Graft, Kobina Sekye, Ama Ata Aidoo to mention just a few. It is our effort to contribute to the codification of works of Ghanaian theatrical scholars that this paper illuminates on Mohammed Ben-Abdallah's directorial style. His approach, which we describe as a new trend in the art of play directing, is considered his contributions to theatre development in Ghana. The revelations about the theatrical exploit of our case study: Mohammed Ben-Abdallah is a sieve from our study of his work through participant observation and interview approaches. This researcher



understudied him in action at the National Theatre of Ghana, when he was commissioned to direct one of his plays; *The fall of Kumbi*, which he wrote in 1989 to commemorate the centenary celebration of a foremost Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkrumah in 2010. The play, which was performed at the National Theatre of Ghana, was also rehearsed at the same venue. The cast and crew for the performance were players of Abibigroma, a professional theatre group he established and housed as the drama unit at the National Theatre of Ghana. Apart from being fortunate to having an on the spot assessment of his directorial exploit, we also interviewed him and other theatre practitioners, such as Dzifa Glipoe, Ebo Maffuel, Martin Owusu Sandy Arkaust to mention just a few, who had at one time or the other worked with him. Specifically, the researcher tried to find out what informed his of the choice of the play for that occasion and discovered from Ben-Abdallah that the choice was not his, but that of the centenary celebration committee. Nevertheless, he guessed that the choice may not be far from the fact that the play is purely of African setting, and since the ceremony was to celebrate an African icon, and a political warrior, the choice cannot be said to be inappropriate.

#### Operational of Terms and Concepts

It is apt to define some terms and concepts that we shall frequently come across in this work. We shall take time to define them in the context of their usage in this work. These terms include: *Directing*, *director*, *style* and *quintessence*.

**Directing:** Directing as an art of the theatre has been variously described and defined by scholars; for instance, Hodge (1971, p.1) describes directing as the art of leading dramatic performances...art of coordinating the element of the theatre...art of communication. He also sees the art as a sensitive craft. Wole Soyinka, cited in Musa (2007, p.214) sees play directing as a complex business. This study adopts the definition in the *Free online Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia* (2008, p.1), which describes directing as art of coordinating and controlling all elements in the staging of a play. Therefore, directing is the art of harnessing all elements of the theatre with a view to achieving an artistic entity.

**Director:** A director in the theatre is an important personality whose role and duties cannot be over-emphasised. Indeed, Wilson and Goldfarb (1991, p.34), state that in the modern theatre, the director is indispensable. Brockett (1996, p.449) also describes the director as the person with primary responsibility for interpreting a script, rehearsing the actors and coordinating all elements of a production. For the purpose of this study, we adopt the definition of Wilson and Goldfarb (2000, p.525) who describes the director as the person who is responsible for the overall unity of a production, coordinating the efforts of the contributing artists...in charge of rehearsals and supervising the actors in the preparation of their parts.

**Style:** Understanding style is germane to this study. This is because this study examines the directorial styles in the works of Mohammed Ben-Abdallah, a director. Benedetti (1976, p.12) defines style as "a quality which results from a characteristic mode of expression or method of presentation." Akinwale (2000, p.116) again expands on Benedetti's earlier definition by describing style as the method employed by the director in harnessing all the elements of the theatre, to achieve a meaningful communication with the audience. For the purpose of this study, we see style as a way of doing things that is unique to an individual or a trademark for which somebody is known and identified.

**Quintessence:** *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2005, p.1346) defines quintessence as "a perfect example of something". This is not different from the way the concept is defined in *Encarta Dictionaries* (2009) but with an additional adjective "the purest". Therefore for the purpose of this study, we adopt the description of quintessence as the purest and or a perfect example of something, which we see in the 'step aside' directorial approach of our case study.

The terms will be examined to evaluate the significance of Ben-Abdallah as an African Theatre director. For that reason, we will examine his works and pre-occupation as an Artistic Director. This approach will enable us to evaluate his unique style of directing and assess the quality of his unique style. We will analyse his directorial concept to evaluate its conformity with the Western concept and the content of his unique experience to the African theatre and the global theatre platform in general. We want to know, for example, the benefit of his 'Step Aside' directorial style. What are the guiding principles of the Step Aside technique and the quantity and quality of the values it has provided to the production crew as well as the cast members in the staging of a play? For those reasons, we will examine the contributions of selected African directors in order to justify the reference to Ben-Abdallah's style as perhaps quintessential.

#### A Biography of Mohammed Ben-Abdallah

Mohammed Ben-Abdallah was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1944 in Kumasi, Ashanti Region of Ghana to the family of late Ben-Abdallah. He had his primary and secondary education in Kumasi and Accra before proceeding to Wesley College, Kumasi for his post-secondary education, where he obtained a Teacher Certificate 'A' in 1966. He began his theatre education at the University of Ghana, Legon, where he obtained a Certificate and Diploma in Theatre Studies in 1970 and 1972 respectively. He later proceeded to the University of Georgia, Athens, and The University of Texas, Austin to obtain MFA and Ph.D. in Theatre Arts in 1976 and 1980 respectively.

He worked briefly in a few government establishments before joining the University of Ghana, Legon as a Lecturer in 1982. While in the University, he



served in various capacities including the Ag. Head, Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ghana. During his time lecturing at the University of Ghana, Legon he undertook some major projects and dramatic productions as part of his academic research projects in the University and for Abibigroma, a professional theatre outfit, which he founded. Some of the plays that he directed most of which are plays he wrote include: Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*, Mohammed Ben-Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti*, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, *Verdict of the Cobra*, *The Alien King*, *Land of a Million Magicians* and *The Fall of Kumbi*.

He served his people, his community and the government of Ghana in various capacities. He was the Chairman, National Commission on Culture (1989-1993); Chairman, Executive Committee, Pan-African Festival (PANAFEST)-Foundation (1998 to date), and Member, Board of Directors, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (1998-2001). He was also appointed as Chairman, Board of Directors, National Theatre of Ghana (1998-1999) and member Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). He was appointed Secretary, National Commission on Culture, then Chairman and later Minister for National Commission on Culture (1989-1993). He later served as Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Secretary (Minister) for Information (1988-1989), PNDC Secretary (Minister) for Education and Culture (1986-1988), PNDC Secretary (Minister) for Culture and Tourism (1984-1986) and Deputy Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Secretary (Minister) for Culture and Tourism (1984). He attended many conferences and workshops both at home and abroad. Apart from his published plays, he has unpublished plays and a few articles in reputable National and International Journals. He is married with four children.

The exact year that the art of play directing became an art of playmaking in the theatre has been a subject of debate as there is no emphatic written record of when it started. Even Wilson and Goldfarb (2000, p.25) in their wild research exploration could only submit that: "there are times in history when many elements come together to create a remarkable age", perhaps that was the period that theatre was born. However, after several years of academic research *vtheatre.net* (2011) confirms that the art became a pronounced element of the theatre around 1900. Prior to that time, the Greek theatre, which started as far back as the fifth century B.C. did not have any name for the art of play directing as a method in playmaking. However, Didaskalos, who Brockett (1999, p.24) literarily referred to as "Teacher" and in *Wikipedia Dictionary* (2011, np) as playwright-director is said to be occupying the role of the play director in the early Greek theatre era. In another instance, the director was referred to as Choregus; the theatre personalities who play leadership roles in the art of Greek theatre play making process. Wilson and Goldfarb (2000, p. 5), in their relentless efforts identify when the art of directing actually became a playmaking tool in the theatre, identifying one I-kher-nafet, an Egyptian, as a theatre personality who first gave account, perhaps as a director that: "people played the roles of characters in the story and acted out

episodes from the life of Osiris". More pungently, *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition posits that: "The 19<sup>th</sup> century interest in realism, coupled with far-reaching technical advances, made indispensable the director's function of integrating the various and increasingly complex aspects of play production". This buttresses the fact that by 1900, the art of directing and play director as a theatre de-facto in the play making process was in existence in the theatre. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1796-1807) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883) were among the fore-runners in applying this art of play directing in the theatre. Antohin (2006, p.3) describes Goethe style as: "Very strict, distrusted others talents". Antohin, in also describing styles of the other theatre practitioner; Richard Wagner (1813-1883) informs that Wagner takes "total control over the production, and focused on illusionistic theatre", He conclusively describe the style as: "an important factor in the development of realism".

In the train of the western theatre practitioners who used the art of play directing and assumed the status of a play director is George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's (1826-1914), whose directorial exploits span through 1870-1890. Antohin (2006, p.4) recalls that Saxe-Meiningen took his theatre troupe to tour Europe and while directing them emphasised: "historical accuracy and realism (particularly in costumes and settings)...a pictorial style [that] focuses on composition and crowd scenes and "ensemble." Later were André Antoine (1858-1943), whose stylistic disposition is: "Fourth-wall realism-real beef onstage for slaughterhouse", Vesvolod Mayerhold (1874-1940) who applied "dictatorial directing style", Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) an authoritarian and eclectic director to mention just a few. Thus, by 1900, the term play directing and play director finally came to stay as an art used in play making in the theatre.

Over time, many African scholars who studied theatre abroad were observed to have been influenced by the directing styles of their trainers. Most of their approaches, as we identify in the directing works of many African theatre directors are akin to the approaches of their instructors. One of them is Ola Rotimi who Akinwale (2010, p.31) describes as "a master craftsman of stage iconography". Nwadike (2007, pp.7-8) also confirming Oga's (2000) findings on Rotimi's style, identifies "Pressure Cooker" approach as Rotimi's rehearsal technique. A style that was described by Rotimi himself as "Convoluted concourse of juxtaposed and variegated actions...method of bringing realism on stage by allowing actions to flow in their "naturalness" as if the audience is witnessing an unrehearsed slice of life". Emasealu (2010, p.266) summarises the expertise in Rotimi's directorial style as that which "favours a tenacious textual analysis that involves a robust examination of the theme of the play; the emotional and intellectual substance of the play; the conflict involved and the forces that sustain the conflict". Oga (2000, p. 107-9) earlier identifies a few other directorial approaches that are uniquely his. They include his penchant for both "solicited private audition" as well as "general audition". Another notable African theatre



experimentalist and director is Dapo Adelugba, a notable speech expert. Adelugba's directing style is that which does not compromise good speech delivery, correct pronunciation and rendition of lines by his actors in all the plays he has directed such that Musa (2001, p.135) describes him as "speech expert" who always "insisted on correct rendition of lines from his prospective actors". Dapo Adelugba was the first director of *Langbodo*, a play written by Wale Ogunyemi for the Festac 77 event hosted by Nigeria and which was adaptation of D.O Fagunwa's book entitled *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*.

Martin Owusu is another African theatre scholar who's philosophical and stylistic contribution to play directing cannot be forgotten. Owusu who lectures at the University of Ghana, Legon is noted for his play presentational style, which he refers to as "cyclic presentational style" Owusu, (2011, an interview). His cyclic play presentational style is based on directing his plays with one scene running from one scene into another scene without black out, which is equivalent to Akinwale "straight-take style" that we shall enumerate later.

Ayo Akinwale another African theatre director is noted for his "Outer Technique" and "Inner Resources" blocking styles. The styles, allow directors leverage for blocking variations; depending on the kinds of actors that the director is working with. "Outer Technique" as propounded by Akinwale (2010, p.35) is a blocking style, where "the director dictates the blocking the actors note these blockings on their scripts and run the lines with them". On the other hand, he describes the "inner resources" as a blocking style, where the director asked the beginners to go on set and they perform by moving themselves. The director approves some of their movements while he disapproves some". Although, we found out that he uses the latter when dealing with professionals actors as he did when he directed *Langbodo* in 2000 for the Nigerian Independence with the likes of Peter Fatomilola, Kola Oyewo, Clarion Chukwura, Ayo Mogaji, Felix Akinsipe to mention just a few as some of his casts. Again, depending on some variables, he employs the two techniques. We note that Outer Technique (pre-blocking) pays when a director faces the challenges of time. For instance when Akinwale directed Olu Obafemi's *Naira has no gender* in 2000, he used the outer Technique because he had just one week to prepare for performance of the play for the celebration of Olu Obafemi's 40<sup>th</sup> Year Birthday. This confirms that one can use the approach irrespective of whether one is working with amateurs or professionals. More importantly, it establishes the director's authority over his productions. However, the bad aspect of this style is that it puts actors in a disadvantaged position since it makes a robot out of them and simply does not leave room for actors to be creative in initiating movements but instead short-circuits their creativity.

Ayo Akinwale created another directing style in (2009) called the "Straight-Take Style" The "Straight-Take Style", according to Akinwale (2010, p. 36), indicates that "the play opens and from the beginning to the end there is no light out". The style has been found to be beneficial to Nigerian theatre audiences

because it is renowned for arousing and sustaining the interest of theatre audiences. It offers them the experience of benefiting from uninterrupted and undue suspension that often characterise the theatre due to black out. Except for spectacle, in which case there is light out, 'straight take style' during play production encourages continuous action in play performances. This style was used by Akinwale when he directed "Mountains of Wealth" in 2001 and Don Pedro Obaseki's *Azagidi* for the University of Ilorin Convocation play in 2008. The style is regularly used for performances at the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin.

We also found another directing style propounded by another African play director; AbdulRasheed Abiodun Adeoye. The style is an offshoot of Brecht's theory of 'Alienation Effect'. The style as reworked and revitalised is christened, 'Neo-alienation Style'. It is described as an approach carefully weaved to blend with the African concept of establishing the aesthetics of the audience-actors' rapport. It is also an improvement on the Brecht's 'Alienation effect'. Adeoye, (2009, p.vi) describes the style as "a theatre that gradually seeks for the decline of long dialogue or wordy plays in performance – a theatre in which every word is capable of numerous meanings." The above enumerated directing styles are by no means exhaustive as there are other African directing styles.

Mohammed Ben-Abdallah, having been trained abroad and grounded in the art of play directing, has contributed to the art of directing by constructing and deconstructing, turn inside out and built on the various directorial style that he had been noted for. One of his ingenious directorial styles is what we designate 'step aside'. An examination of the style is the main thrust of this paper. However, in addition to exploring the style, we discover other directing approaches that he employs in directing his plays, which amongst others include: script selection, audition and casting, rehearsal and run-through style and of course his approach to dress and technical and performance night (which we shall expound on later in this work). Just as we earlier mention these various African directing styles reflect a hybridisation of the Western and the African directing approaches.

#### Mohammed Ben-Abdallah's 'Step Aside' Directing Style

The success of every play director in his play making rests on his interpretative approach that he puts to bear at his rehearsal venue; the play director's laboratory. A rehearsal venue, which can be likened to a scientists' experimental laboratory, is a place where rigorous artistic experimentation takes place. While the rehearsal process as defined in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1995) is "a process of testing hypotheses about the play and its production", it is apt to state that what goes on there are the theatrical process of transforming both the script and actors into artistically finished products. No doubt, rehearsal periods consume more time and energy than all other aspects of play production and it calls for all kinds of creative inventiveness. Hence, Ben-Abdallah during an interview he granted us in 2009



submits that the success of every theatre director in every play production process rests exclusively on his approach to rehearsals. It is in this direction that he enumerates what he requires as a director to have a hitch free rehearsal. He started by saying that he lays emphasis on securing the services of a good stage manager in his submission thus:

I believe in the authority of the stage manager. I think the stage manager is a very important person in the production process. Therefore, I like to have a good stage manager, probably, because I am a lazy person when it comes to doing certain things during rehearsals. I am the first person to admit my laziness. For example, at the early period of my rehearsal, I am irritated. That is when actors are struggling with their lines. You will see me walk off (Laugh). For that reason, I valued the services of my stage manager, whom I always leave to do the preliminary work. I will later come to polish. Later in my life, I started to use that shortcoming of mine to develop people. Through that approach, I developed Dzifa Glikpoe of the National Theatre who learnt a lot from me being my long standing Stage Manager.

Although Ben-Abdallah describes himself as a 'lazy' director when it comes to certain aspects of his rehearsal, which perhaps is why he clamours for a good stage manager, his position that: "I do not like blocking my plays when actors are still struggling with their lines" seems to be a blessing in disguise. We realise that it is at that stage that he allows his stage manager to have the first opportunity of a contribution in his directing process. The picture that this approach immediately presents to us is the style that we describe as "Step aside style". "Step aside", according to *Encarta Dictionary* cited in *Encarta DVD* (2009) is "withdraw from a position so that somebody else can fill it". A critical look at Ben-Abdallah's disposition, would tempt one to conclude that his conviction to describe himself as a 'lazy director' was to absolve himself from being blamed, but at a second look, and contrary to his own perception, we see it as a unique method, which can be analysed from two positive angles. Firstly, it shows the quintessence of dynamism in him and the extroversion trait he carries. Secondly, it enables him to make more directors out of his stage managers whenever he employs his "step aside" style. We no doubt believe that the service of a stage manager is of necessity for any director who wants to have a successful play production. Prince and Jackson (1997, p.261) also buttress this when they conclude that the stage manager "sees that everything backstage is ready for the rehearsal and then work closely with the director". Nevertheless, the director's presence, even if he was not going to interrupt the freedom he gave his stage manager, is of great essence. It engenders in the stage manager an aura of protection and responsibility which in the overall underscores

Abraham Maslow's Motivational theory, which expounds that motivation excites ability to lead as well as promote creative optimisation in trainees.

Ben-Abdallah's approach, from our point of view is a radical departure from the hitherto despotic and autocratic leadership style that places a play director at the apex of the directorial platform of all-in-all, a leader who neither allows his actors or theatre co-workers a bit of creative contribution to his directorial interpretation, although, he seems not to realise that that was what that style is capable of doing to the theatre.

In directing, there is no single process through which a play production can be realised; usually directing thrives within the ambience of hybridisation of styles. Having examined Ben-Abdallah's 'Step aside' style, which we have found very profitable to his play production and an approach to making the theatre productive, we expound on some of his other directing styles. We start from his script selection approach.

**Script Selection:** Many scholars have underscored the artistic importance of script selection in play production process. One of such is Frerer (1996, p.4) who submits that in the play production process, script selection is "the first and one of the most important tasks of the director." In another work, DeKoven (2006, p.47) describes play selection as "the beginning for a director...the first order of business". The two submissions above underscore the importance of play selection in play directing. Play selection is a very important step in the play production process because it gives a director an insight into his intended assignment. It also affords him the opportunity to respond to the demand of the society, which naturally should be the first consideration that spurs a director to selecting that play he intends to direct.

Ben-Abdallah's approach to script selection is that with a tint of penchant for African plays. We found that his fondness for directing African plays is hinged on the fact that he is able to have unfiltered opportunity to explore the total theatre idioms that is unique to the African culture, which are found in their plays. This may not be unconnected with why most of the plays he has directed so far were plays that he wrote and plays of other African playwrights like Nguigi Wa Thiongo and Mugo Micere's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Efua T. Sutherland's *Marriage of Anansewa*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anoowa* as well as Ola Rotimi's play, *The Gods are not to Blame* and many others.

**Audition and Casting:** Ben-Abdallah's other creative interpretation is also evident in his audition and casting style. Audition and Casting is another process in play directing that Ben-Abdallah regards as very important. He aligns with Taylor (1996, p.75) who submits that: "By far, the most important element of preparation the director must undertake is casting for your play". In the same vein, Ben-Abdallah treats casting as critical. It is noted that in embarking on casting actors for his productions, he begins by calling for open audition, which he describes as an approach that directors use to shop for actors. Therefore, he embarks on this all



important process, using both private and open auditions. His private audition is usually arranged for actors whom he had worked with in the past while his open audition is for all comers. During the latter, he gives all audition attendees opportunity to compete to prove their acting skills. He gave his reasons for using both approaches. In respect of the former, he says when he casts for the plays he wrote, he uses private audition as revealed in his submission during an interview he granted us in 2009 that: "when I write my plays, I write with some personality running through my mind". So, Ben-Abdallah casts drawing from his past interactions with some of the actors that starred in his plays. Even though he said it is not applicable all the time, one fact remains that he type casts as he did in the production of *The Witch of Mopti* (1989). In the play, he used the real names of most members of Abibigroma performers such as Togbi, Koffi Onny, Nii Sai, Osabutey Nii Kwei, Dzifa Glikpoe and Adwoa Mensah as characters in the play and made all of them storytellers. The character Dzifa whose dialogue in the play is produced below attests to this assertion:

DZIFA

Wo nim ho ampa. Eho foo na wokyere nsuo mu nam, ho, deko Bandiagara ko ton no (*Witch of Mopti*, 1989, p.7).

Literarily translated below:

DZIFA

You really know there. It is exactly the place where you catch fishes from the river and take them to Bandiagara to go and sell.

**Multiple Casting:** We note that Ben-Abdallah does not cast any actor for a single or a particular major role in his production. Rather, he casts actors to play multiple roles. This style appears unclear to us initially but on a further interrogation, he sheds light on why he uses the style. He submits that:

Every artist in my production must be potential players of musical instruments, be a dancer and a singer at the same time. In addition, when I cast an artist for a role, I arrange for one or two other persons to understudy and carry lines of that character. Therefore, for every major character we have one or two others who would be able to play the role in case of any eventuality.

Indeed, Ben-Abdallah used multiple casting styles in *The Fall of Kumbi*, the play that this researcher used to understudy him and we found out from him why he uses the style. His response indicated that he is a director who does not take chances in his production, believing that taking undue chances in respect of the selection of actors might ruin a director's production.

**Run-through:** Another important segment in the rehearsal process is run-through. Ben-Abdallah's run-through style is done segment by segment and on every day of his rehearsals. This approach, Martin Owusu, a colleague of Ben-Abdallah at the University of Ghana, Legon, in an interview in 2011 describes as the "looping style". Looping style, as Owusu describes it means; an endless curve that bends around itself, simply put, a continuum. This researcher, through the participant-observation was privileged to confirm this when understudying Ben-Abdallah during the rehearsals of *The Fall of Kumbi* in December 2010 at the drama studio of National Theatre of Ghana, Accra.

**Blocking Style:** Another notable style Ben-Abdallah uses during his rehearsal is his blocking style. He explains: "I pre-block but I do not insist on my blockings. When I have pre-blocked a scene and we are moving the actors, I change as we go along. My own blocking is based on what is going on". This heightens the fact that the dynamism of a director is in the degree of freedom that he grants his actors/performers.

**Straight Rehearsal:** One other very fascinating style that permeates Ben-Abdallah rehearsal is straight rehearsal approach. Straight rehearsal indicates that the director runs his rehearsal without stopping his actors when they are rehearsing. Rather, he takes notes and discusses his observations with his performers after the rehearsal. This we found him do during several rehearsals of the *Fall of Kumbi*, which took place on 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> December 2010 at the National Theatre of Ghana. There is a lot of wisdom in this style, which is akin to Bertolt Brecht's style of directing, where actors are given uninterrupted opportunity to express their creative instincts. A look at this style and his run-through style, would indicate a thin line of difference. While Ben-Abdallah runs-through segment by segment, usually at the early stage of his rehearsals, he caps with a straight rehearsal at the later stage of his rehearsals. This researcher captured this essence of his art after the rehearsals of *The Fall of Kumbi* at the drama studio of the National Theatre of Ghana, Accra in 2010. After the day's rehearsal, he gathered his performers to discuss his notes with his actors as contained in the picture in *figure 1* below.



Figure I



Ben-Abdallah discussing his notes with his performers after one of his rehearsals of *The Fall of Kumbi* at the Ghana National Theatre, Accra Ghana on 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.

**Total Theatre:** Ben-Abdallah has been identified as a director who employs the total theatre aesthetic that is uniquely African in his productions. He also ensures that features of total theatre manifest in all the plays he directs. In the performance of the play, *The Fall of Kumbi*, for instance, he used songs, dances and pantomimic dramatisation. We captured this in the maiden dance at the eve of the traditional wedding ceremony of Zainata, where Zainata maiden pals rendered the bridal traditional farewell maiden songs and dance. This kind of dance is notable in African traditional wedding ceremonies. The pictorial illustrations of the event at the eve of Zainata's wedding in *The Fall of Kumbi* are captured in pictures (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv) in Figure II below:

Figure II



(i) (ii)



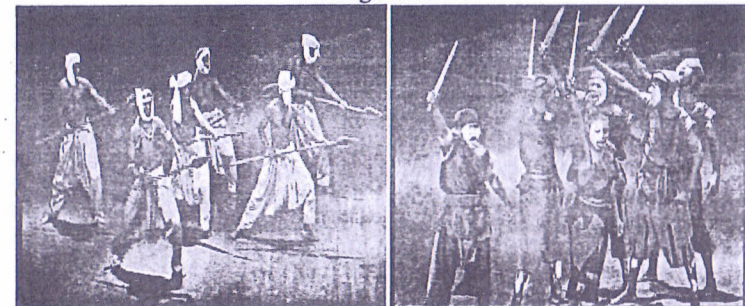
(iii)

(iv)

Maidens dancing and singing in (i)-(iv) pictures above at the wedding eve of Zainata (in stripped wrappers), the princess of Audoghash who is betrothed to Prince Aklil in *The Fall of Kumbi* performed on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010 at the Ghana National Theatre, Accra, Ghana

In the same play, when Audoghash warriors were preparing for a vengeance attack, they performed a warrior dance. Their dance reflects tension, which signifies impending reprisal attack on Kumbi. In the same vein, the Kumbi warriors also performed their own warrior dance. The dances show features of armies who are preparing to defend their territorial integrity. Although, the warriors dances were contained in the stage direction in the play, *The Fall of Kumbi* as we quoted here: "commotion and preparation for war...Dancers perform a ballet depicting the attack on Kumbi by the Marabout army" Ben-Abdallah artistically packaged it when the play was performed. The dances were presented in the play in a way that one can appreciate its aesthetic finesse.

Figure III



(i)

(ii)



Warriors of Kumbi and Audoghash in Figure III (i) and (ii) respectively above doing warrior dances in the play: *The Fall of Kumbi* when performed at the Ghana National Theatre, Accra, Ghana on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.

The aesthetic quality in Ben-Abdallah's style, which makes his total theatre approach unique, is that in spite of the fact that he is the playwright of the play under review, he introduced some dances that brought aesthetic value to the production. The warrior dances that he puts together reflect the cultural nuances of the two kingdoms. He ensures that the costumes and the properties that the warriors used are those of their ethnic and cultural entity. This consequently, brought to the fore, the aesthetic and the theatrical message that he as a playwright intended to pass across. This is illustrated in figure V (i) and (ii) above. The artistic prowess, which Ben-Abdallah used, underscores the sixth sense in him. Commendably, this artistic ingenuity permeates all his directing works. The picture in figure VI below also presents an illustration of another choreographed dance in *The Fall of Kumbi*, which further attests to Ben-Abdallah's total theatre approach in his play productions.

Figure IV



Singing, drumming and dancing in *The Fall of Kumbi* (1989) directed by Ben-Abdallah and performed at the Ghana National Theatre, Accra, Ghana on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.

**Dress and Technical Rehearsal:** Dress and technical rehearsal is another very important process in the play production process. It is at the technical rehearsal that a director determines whether his play is ready for performance or not. No serious director will ever want to treat his dress and technical rehearsal with levity. Our case study is not different. He, in fact, prefers to have his dress and technical rehearsal two days before his opening night, so that his actors can have a day of rest before the opening night. However, when he is using students for

his performance, his attitude to dress and technical night is different. He elucidates more critically:

I usually want to do everything that I needed to do and have at least one evening free before the opening night. But if wishes were Horses...(Laugh) When you are dealing with professionals, one could do that. But when you have students who are amateur in your production, you will have dress and technical rehearsal very many times before the performance.

This style underscores the motivation trait in Ben-Abdallah.

**Performance Nights:** The importance of the performance night to a play director cannot be over-emphasised. Performance night to every play director is supposed to be a night of fulfilment, which every theatre director should look forward to. Every play director who has worked through the tortuous period of weaving the bits and pieces of all elements of his play together should naturally look forward to seeing the result of his labour. Surprisingly, Ben-Abdallah's disposition to the performance night of his play is unenthusiastic. He detests being present. Rather, he insists that:

I turn away so I hand over to the Stage Manager, whom I tell that from this point the business is yours. Again, nowadays, I have relaxed it a little bit. Now I come on the opening night, go backstage with them and give them a little pep talk. When they begin their prayers, I walk off... I do not like watching my performances.

**Observation:** We are of the strong opinion that since no one can claim monopoly of artistic wisdom, directors should see performance nights as glorious nights. We strongly disagree with Ben-Abdallah on the position he's taken not to watch his performances. Every director who is dynamic and willing to improve should see attending the performance nights of his directed plays as a night of reckoning. It is a night that the director will not only benefit from the comments and criticisms of the audience, but he will also have the opportunity to see his own work in action. Contrary to his position, which he earlier expressed to us, on the day the play, *The Fall of Kumbi* (1989) was performed, he attended the show. We found out from him why he broke his tradition. He told us that he attended the show as a demonstration of his respect for the person of Dr Kwame Nkrumah (even in death), in whose honour the Centenary celebration was organised.

## Conclusion

We have in the course of this study been taken through different trends in directing that makes African directors to be listed as contributors to the new trends of theatre



direction in African theatre practice. Ben-Abdallah's "Step Aside" directing approach reinforces the ingenuity in the contributions of African theatre directors as we see the procreation process of our case study in his directing approach.

Our findings reveal that deeply seated in African theatre directors are bundles of interpretative ingenuities, which transcend the overused western directing style. It is clear from Ben-Abdallah's creative ingenuity that a theatre director can make more directors in his theatre co-workers. He can excite confidence in stage managers and make them potential play directors.

It is sad to note however that dramatisation of plays on African stages these days are limited because home video phenomena has become the order of African source of entertainment. In order to bring alive play performances on stage, our national and State Theatre Arts should be made functionally alive. This will provide avenue for play directors to evolve their directorial ingenuities.

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