SCENOGRAPHY AND SOCIETAL CHANGE: AN APPRAISAL OF SCENOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN A DEVELOPING ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Scenography is the most eloquent visual aspect of the theatre. It involves situating a performance within a specific and identifiable environment as well as the delineation of the characters as it concerns costumes, with its attendant accessories and properties and the proper illumination of the performance to enhance the audience's appreciation of the said performance. The practice of scenography therefore, involves an adequate knowledge of the principles and elements of design as well as a fair knowledge of graphics and the rudiments of carpentry, fine and applied arts, tailoring, and electrical engineering in addition to a mastery of architectural principles. The scenographer therefore must be a rounded artiste with immense creative potentials. This paper thus, examines the qualities of the trained scenographer with a view of ascertaining the potentials open to him as a professional in a fast developing and ever changing society.

KEYWORDS: Scenography, Societal Change, Economy, theatre

INTRODUCTION

The theatre is eclectic as it involves the coming together of different professional artists in the course of a production hence theatrical performances are said to be an ensemble art. The respective artistes involved in the making of theatre include the playwright, the director, the stage manager, the actor(s), the costumer, the set designer, the light designer, the properties' manager etcetera. Hence, theatre scholars also call it a composite art because it "draws on all the other arts: literature in its script; painting, architecture, and sculpture (and sometimes dance) in its spectacle; and speech and music in its audible aspects" (Brockett and Ball 14). According to Edwin Wilson "theatre is a collaborative art, where the playwright, artistic director, technical designers, performers and audience come together to make a theatre experience" (57). These artistes come together, guided by a generic design concept to achieve an aesthetically pleasing work of art; a live theatrical production. This presupposes that the theatrical experience which ordinarily begins with the conception of an idea in form of a story or an event which will either be re-enacted in form of an improvisation in which case no formal text is made or a structured text which becomes the patent of the playwright who had penned down the thought, culminates in the eventual performance on stage before a live audience after the various artists have made their respective creative inputs towards the final outcome of the artistic process. In other words, the theatrical chain of production is not complete without the audience who is the final consumer

of the artistic product. Thus, it is said that that "the essence of theatre lies in the interaction of performers and audience assembled in the same place at the same time…" (Brockett and Ball 297). Barclays Ayakoroma lends credence to this assertion when he states that:

> For any theatrical performance to take place, there must definitely be an idea, which could be documented in the form of a script, a scenario, a musical score, or dance pattern. Even where an improvisation leads to a performance, it is the interplay of all the elements of theatre that leads to the end product. But suffice to state that theatre cannot be said to have taken place unless there is a performance that is enacted before a given audience. (4)

The audience therefore, as the consumer of the artistic product in the theatre production chain, comes to the theatre to satisfy their artistic thirst and the satisfaction of the performing artiste is in his realization that the consumer (the audience) of his aesthetic product is appreciative of the presentation he had seen.

As the theatre is a collaborative art where no one artiste is presumed indispensable it follows that each individual artiste must work harmoniously towards the achievement of an aesthetically pleasing theatrical presentation. However, this singular fact is often not acknowledged by the audience who is always taken in by the glitz and glamour of the on stage action as presented by the actors seemingly tutored by the director thereby almost forgetting the contributions of the back stage artistes; the designers; who in actual fact are in-charge of the visual aspects of the theatre. These design artistes of the theatre are very important in the creation of a total theatre experience especially in an African setting as is found in Nigeria where contemporary theatre practice is always an amalgam of traditional theatre and Western oriented dramatic idioms. This is exemplified by Kenneth Eni thus;

> The traditional theatre in Nigeria from where contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria grew has a long tradition of festivals, storytelling and masquerade performances. It is a highly visual form of theatre. Its key elements in performances are costumes and dance and not dialogue. (158)

But, the importance of the design aspect of the theatre can be seen from the fact that "the visual forms come before the text in importance … there can validly exist a theatre without text while text without visual expression can only become literature and not theatre" (Nwoko 476). In other words, the aesthetics appreciation of a theatrical production lies in the expressiveness of the designs which in actual fact are the symbols through which the message of the production is made easy for the audience. Citing Michael Gillette; Etuk, Thomas and Asquo, Nsikan observe that; "aesthetics is the whole purpose of organizing the composite arts of design and theatre in general; which is what ensures the continuance patronage of theatrical productions". (499). Similarly, in an earlier study, Martins Tugbokorowei notes that;

> The place of scenography in the play production process cannot be denied. This is because every theatrical activity must take place within a given scenographic environment, scenic environment, locale, setting, scenery, or whatever name the scholar or designer chooses to call it. (365).

Thus, it can be averred that it is in the visual aspects of the theatre: design; that its (theatre's) aesthetics is most manifest.

Theatre design is that very specialized area of theatre study and practice that is as creative as it is interpretative in delineating a play's meaning. This means that the design artistes of the theatre are those that interpret the play's meaning in visual and aural forms thus creating concrete images in the audience's mind as a way of helping them (audience) understand the production better. These artistes, who are often referred to as backstage crew but are actually the "production design team" (Gillette 2); include the set, light, costume, make-up, props and sound designers; collectively they are known as scenographers and their art is called scenography.

Scenography, according to Agbo Folarin (14) literally means "the dwelling place of a play". It is "not just the ability to put rostra and flats on a stage but the art of the stage architect, the scenery, lighting and costume designer brought together". This presupposes that the idea of scenography involves the activities of all the visual artistes of the theatre. In actual fact:

> the planning, construction, layout and design of scenography as part of the general development plan for a production is a complex, multidisciplinary planning and engineering effort that involves a lot of personnel. This work involves the work of many technicians, artists, engineers and skilled craftsmen. (Eni 159)

In other words, the scenographic artist is more than an ordinary designer because his creative responsibilities cut across the entire design areas of theatre practice. Therefore, he/she should be knowledgeable in every aspect of theatre design. This presupposes that in order to arrive at an adequate design for any theatrical production that there must be a production concept upon which the entire production rests. In other words, every artiste involved in any theatrical production must work within the agreed or accepted production concept. This production concept also guides the design concept upon which the visual ideas are conceived. Thus, the designers must meet to evaluate the design ideas for a harmonious rendition of the visual aspects of the production. This is because the success of any theatrical production rests in the harmonization of all the elements of theatre as no aspect of the theatrical design process is expected to stand out hence the use of the word unity in production. Consequently, Molinta Enendu in "Modern Technology and Theatre Production in Nigeria" asserts that: "Scenographic practice is therefore an integral part of every theatrical production as it is what gives the performance form and situates the production within a culturally acceptable domain being a "dwelling place" of the production" (54). Consequently, the scenographer, being a rounded artiste with a good knowledge of the principles and elements of design as well as a fair knowledge of graphics and the rudiments of carpentry, fine and applied arts, tailoring, and electrical engineering in addition to a mastery of architectural principles is expected to make great inroads in the society in spite of the economic challenges faced in a developing economy.

This is because the practice of scenography

> … uses basic mathematical calculations and scientific principles. Drawing and drafting tools are used in geometrical and trignometrical constructions providing the bases for building efficiency. Basic construction and work tools as hammer, saw, screwdriver and even brooms, are employed. It requires the understanding and application of some basic scientific principles and rules. (Enendu "Keynote Seminar Paper on Duro Oni @ 60")

This paper will thus examine the relevance of the scenographer in a developing economy using Nigeria as a case study.

THE NATURE OF SCENOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Scenographic practice, as already established involves the activities of the designers of the theatre which means that the creative efforts of the set, light, costume and make-up, props and sound designers are included in scenography. Theatre design in Nigeria began with the pioneering works of Dexter Lindersay in the then School of Drama at the University College Ibadan. This is beyond the earlier works of amateur artistes who had been practicing with traditional troupes at various times in the early beginnings of professional theatre practice in Nigeria. The design works of those early practitioners were at best "accidents" and Molinta Enendu calls it "quackery" ("Keynote …") because the design aspects of these traditional Performances were done mainly by artisans and traditional artists who did not have any formal training in the art of theatre design consequently, the "technical and design resources of these theatre forms were largely derived from local handcrafts" (Ododo 19). This is why the beginning of professionally trained theatre designers is often associated with Dexter Lindersay who is "often regarded as the founding father of technical theatre practice in Nigeria…" (Enendu "Keynote…"). Tochukwu Okeke reports that; "the University of Ibadan holds the record of pioneering technical theatre in Nigeria, with the works of Dexter Lindersay and those of Demas Nwoko (the first Nigerian to teach design courses in a Nigerian university) as well as the works of their immediate students: Sunbo Marihno, Domba Asomba, Segun Akingbola and Duro Oni" (4).

Theatre design, until recently, is actually taken holistically in the Nigerian theatre space hence the practice is often always under an artiste known as the Technical Director. In actual fact, the training of the respective artistes usually come under the course "Technical Theatre'. According to Molinta Enendu:

> Theatre is arts, and technical theatre is certainly one of the broad arts of the theatre. It focuses on creativity with imagination as its centre piece. Technical theatre appears in Theatre Arts undergraduate curriculum in various nomenclatures: technical theatre, theatre design and technology, stage craft, theatrical design, or in titles that treat segmented units catering for its different aspects. Examples are scene design, lighting design, stage costume, theatre sound, stage carpentry, stage machines,

etc. The course embraces the conceptualization, designs, production, handling, movement sand disposition of these entities. ("Keynote…")

This presupposes that the theatre designer must have been a student of technical theatre at the inception of his career. In actual fact, the training of the would-be designer involves a journey in disciplines outside the theatre because theatrical design is a purely visual art which is the "art and craft of designing and constructing scenery, properties, lighting and sound for theatre production" (Ekweariri 40). In other words, science, artisanship and technology are involved in the training and practice of technical theatre. Molinta Enendu puts it succinctly thus, "technical theatre requires craftsmanship to translate design ideas into stage reality. Both simple and complex designs require craftsmanship, engineering and technological support and solutions" (6).

Today, the training and practice of theatre design has developed beyond mere craftsmanship. Almost every Nigerian University and some Colleges of Education has an established and accredited Department of Theatre Arts; although these departments "come in various names: theatre arts, dramatic arts, performing arts and creative arts" (Adeyemi 111), and "in recent times Theatre and Media Arts and Theatre and Film Studies" (Okeke 3). However, irrespective of nomenclature, the reality is that theatre design in Nigeria has developed in both training and practice to meet with technological advancements in the global entertainment industry. Thus:

> Within this 21st century, technical theatre practice in Nigeria is considered truly and fully grown with the capacity, in terms of equipment, know-how, personnel, ideas and creative ingenuity, to meet the technical and artistic challenges of her stage, film and even theatre-related productions and events. With the increase in the supportive roles of technical theatre and theatrical design to stage and film productions, directors, theatre managers and patrons make more demands for new production ideas from the growing theatre technology. (Enendu "Keynote…")

This is why the Nigerian entertainment scene is agog with activities of professional theatre designers. The works of Teju Kareem of ZMirage, Alphonsus Orisaremi of Theatre Project Limited, Ayo Allah Dave of Twilite Media and Tade Adekunle of Keskesee? among others speak volumes of the impact of scenographic practice in Nigerian theatre. As the universities are the training grounds for future generations of theatre designers, most Theatre Arts departments have begun the upgrading (some have completed) of their existing theatres to accommodate new technologies. Similarly, some theatre companies have modern equipment that meet world standards. The University of Ibadan, Nassarawa State University, Glory Land Theatre in Bayelsa, and the University of Lagos are a few examples. It can therefore be said that Nigerian Theatre Designers have been able to adapt to current technological advancements having realized that the sustenance of their art lies greatly in their ability to acquire new technological skills. This is because "since theatre has always reflected the total life of its epoch, it cannot in (our) age help but become the ultimate in technology" (Perry 338). Similarly, Bill Willians observes that in the aspect of stage lighting that the art has gone into the realm of

science. He states that "stage lighting is no longer a matter of simple illumination as it was less than 100 years ago. Today, the lighting designer is expected to be a master of art, science, history, psychology, communications, politics and sometimes even mind reading" (2). Also, in an earlier discourse, Francis Reid notes that;

> … the design of lighting for the stage or for any other medium is science in the service of performing art. While the "science" represents the technological bases for the making of lighting equipment, the "art" is the creative use to which such equipment is put. (9)

Theatre designers therefore have to align with societal change and current trends in order to remain relevant in the global arts space.

THE SCENOGRAPHER IN A DEVELOPING ECONOMY

Every enterprise survives based on the ability of the entrepreneurs to move with societal developments such that the needs of the patrons will always be met. Professional theatre practice in Nigeria has gained much currency in recent times due mainly because of the activities of theatre designers who have and are still attempting to compete with their contemporaries in other parts of the world. This is because they (designers) realized early that the sustenance of live theatre is in their ability to adapt to technological innovations in the theatre. This fact is aptly recognized by Adolfe Appia, one of the masters of contemporary theatre design that "actual intellectual efficiency arises primarily from new methods introduced into our work by mechanization" (Beecham 203). Here, Appia recognizes the emergence of technology and its benefits to the scenographer considering the speed at which the world was being technologically driven at the turn of the Nineteenth century. Thus, the Nigerian scenographer has "embraced technology in all ramifications from the manual to the automated and the digito/computerized encounters" (Orisaremi 3).

Since the formal training of the Nigerian theatre artiste is such that introduces the student into every art of the theatre at the early stages and allows him/her to specialize in a chosen area of competence in later years; it indirectly prepares the theatre practitioner for engaging in an enterprise that combines aesthetics with functionality. Thus, like Dexter Lindersay who pioneered the formal training of theatre designers in Nigerian universities, Teju Kareem with his ZMirage Multimedia Incorporation pioneered the practice of scenography as a full time profession being the first professional company to employ professional theatre designers on full time basis. In fact, with the emergence of ZMirage into the Nigerian entertainment scene it "opened up the horizon of theatre design and technology practice in Nigeria, marking the beginning of organization and full time professional practice of theatre design and technology as business in Nigeria" (Orisaremi 8). Hence, a new vista has opened for graduates of theatre design and technology who ordinarily would be found seeking for jobs to be self-employed in the art for which they have been trained.

The point being made here is that the theatre designer has greater opportunities being not just an ordinary graduate of Theatre Arts since he is vast in more areas than one and has the

added advantage of having the knowledge of craftsmanship. This is because the scenographer needs a working knowledge of materials in their different forms from the most basic and common of traditional to the highly sophisticated. According to Molinta Enendu:

> … technical theatre accommodates the ever expanding and increasing scope of materials and their worlds of technological possibilities and applicability. Technical Theatre deploys and benefits from the technology of the day, and in fact, helps to direct and propel the speed and growth area of technology. In scenic mechanisms and scenic devices, in sound reinforcement application and reproduction systems, in fabric materials and design technology, in light sources and intensity control equipment; and in pyrotechnology – the engineering processes are abreast with technological trends of the moment… The task dictates the tool – a paint brush, a screw driver, a needle, a measuring tape etc (are all valid and relevant), from very simple to most complex mechanical electro-mechanical or computerized machines. Technical Theatre is technology based. Most of its products claim their ancestry to human endeavours adapted to meet stage needs. The ultimate purpose of theatre is art, and must be art, technology is summoned by theatre to support art. The areas frequently explored are those of servomechanism, tube and solid-state electronics, telemetry and other electro-mechanical and computer based devices. ("Keynotes…" 257)

This explains the range of opportunities open to the theatre designer especially in a developing economy like Nigeria where graduate employment is almost non-existent. Thus, a graduate of theatre design can be employed in areas outside the conventional theatre practice. An example can be found in the recent upsurge of Christian religious shows. Most Christian groups are known to have engaged the services of fresh theatre designers in the handling of their sound and lighting equipment. Some very rich ones have even gone to the extent of acquiring stage decks and trestles and subsequently engaging the services of a scenographer in the management of such technical equipment.

However, the immediate problem that confronts the theatre designer is the dearth of training equipment in the Universities. It is a truism that there is a proliferation of Theatre Arts Departments in Nigeria's institutions of higher learning but there is no corresponding increase in acquiring new equipment or in updating/upgrading the training facilities for the students. This dearth of equipment in the training of theatre designers/scenographers was captured by Dapo Adelugba in an interview he granted Sunday Ododo thus; "…unfortunately, at the Arts Theatre, we do not yet have the money or the facilities to really do technologically inspired productions" ("Values of Technical Aids in Play Production Process" 142). The corresponding effect is that "some of these institutions are practicing howbeit, without formally equipped theatres" (Eni 160). In fact, some renowned designers have decried this menace in the training of professional theatre designer. Thus, Duro Oni notes that "inadequate facilities and equipment have always been and still remains major issues of concern to the development of technical theatre practice in Nigeria. The makeshift approaches by most practitioners needs to be revisited, especially in universities where technical theatre is taught" (14). There is therefore the danger of theatre arts

graduate who specialized in design without having had the opportunity of operating modern equipment. This singular fact can pose an impediment in the practice of scenography especially in today's society where there are constant developments in the area of theatre design and technology.

There is also the question of funding and or sponsorship of theatre practice in Nigeria especially in the face of the rising wave of the Home Video added to the falling value of the Naira especially when considered on the premise that Nigeria's economy is import based and every equipment needed for the practice of the art is made in the Western and Asian countries. Corporate sponsorship is rather difficult to get in today's Nigeria due mostly because of the decline in live theatre patronage. This creates a situation where most performances are carried out with obsolete equipment since most practitioners cannot afford the cost of modern design equipment. Kenneth Eni observes that "Nigerian theatre designers and scenographers are simply waiting for the Western world to develop new technologies so they can import" (164). But, there has been a reversal in the acquisition of technical equipment for whereas about 60% need to be imported; the remaining 40% are locally fabricated by theatre designers to meet local demands. This can be seen in the activities of Theatre Projects Limited, a theatre design and technology outfit with its headquarters in Ibadan, Nigeria. This company trains and re-trains its staff and students on Industrial Training in the fabrication and use of theatre design and technology equipment both local and foreign. According to Alphonsus Orissaremi:

> … Theatre Projects Limited is another Nigerian company that expects acquired production capital in human development capital in Nigeria. The   company operates like a theatre technology laboratory that makes wide varieties of state of the arts stage/roof systems and digital computerized   lighting systems available for students to train with. Thus, having direct access to the equipment and being aware that all over the world the industries are ahead of the Universities, they ensure periodic workshops and exhibitions of specialized students to these tools of production. (13)

This effort by TPL has ensured that Theatre design graduates are equipped to face the employment market thus, such graduates function as light designers, riggers and console operators in International Game Shows like "Who Wants to be A Millionaire" as well as designers of product launching, marketing and experimental advertising for companies that use theatre entertainment as panacea for reaching out to their consumers.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the issue of inadequate training due to lack of adequate training facilities at the apprentice stage (University days) will hinder proper professional practice. Similarly, the recent down turn in Nigeria's economy will pose grave danger to the sustenance of scenographic practice since almost all technical equipment is imported from the West and Asia. It is advised that Nigerian theatre designers should look inwards and fashion out a way of perfecting the use of local materials in the fabrication of stage and trestles and in the manufacturing of lighting and sound consoles. This can be achieved if the academic curriculum is re-structured to devote more time to the practical aspect of teaching design courses as such areas of the theatre are better understood through practice.

Governments should encourage the effective training of theatre designers by equipping Theatre Arts departments in the nation's universities with modern equipment so that the students will look forward to eventual practice after their training. This is because theatre design and technology is the growth area in today's professional theatre practice. According to Frank Whitting:

> … the greatest technical advantage that the twenty-first century theatre enjoys
>   over those of past ages lies in its comparative mastery of the art of stage lighting
> as one of the most flexible and expressive technical craft that a director can employ
> to reinforce the work of the actor. (252)

If every area of theatre design is equipped to meet current technological advancements like the introduction of Computer Aided Design (CAD) in the training of scene designers it will make for faster learning and increased productivity. Correspondingly, early introduction of theatre designers into current world technologies in theatre design and technology will make the scenographer be able to compete favourably in the global market. It will equally trigger off his/her creative potentials and help in the for a new Nigerian design formulae for technical theatre practice. According to Victor Dugga:

> It is time to rethink and redefine theories at work in the Nigerian theatre for this product is the cynosure of eyes from every corner of the globe. In other words, this art has become a global art whose participants should be adequately trained as cultural animators of a global art whose mindset extends beyond the confines of classroom and the shores of Nigeria. (14)

This is a call for a re-evaluation of the training models of theatre graduates since theatre practice has become a global phenomenon and as the professional designers have keyed into the digital technology there should be no vacuum not minding the fact that theatre design and technology is making slow progress in the developing economy. But, the potentials of scenographic practice being a powerful foreign exchange earner lies in the fact that it is the only aspect that has the potentials of boosting the tourism sector through elaborate shows as is the case with the "Star Mega Jam" and the "Maltina Dance Showz".

CONCLUSION

Every theatre artist is trained to be resourceful but the resourcefulness of the scenographer is limitless because he has to model his creativity to suit his immediate cultural environment amidst the persistent demands of modern technology. This is because "theatre presents and embodies culture and technology in its completeness. It reflects the total life of its age and place and therefore embodies the ultimate in culture and technology" (Eni 162). Therefore, for the scenographer to succeed in a developing economy he must step outside of himself to understand those aspects of his culture that aid his trade as he is wont to appropriate elements of Western and Asian technology which are preferred tools of his profession since

Nigeria is as yet, not fully equipped to manufacture modern theatre design equipment. To achieve this, aside the proper equipping of the universities where theatre is taught with the right equipment since the nation can boast of qualified teaching personnel, the efforts of private companies like ZMirage should be encouraged by both government and university authorities. In fact, there should be collaboration between these design companies and the universities to organize workshops so that where the institutions are found wanting the students will be trained using the technical resources provided by the companies.

If this is well coordinated and with adequate support from government for the training of scenographers the country would have addressed the problem of unemployment for theatre designers since by their training and experience acquired as students they would have learnt some entrepreneurial skills which will not only help them survive but become a source of revenue for government in return.

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