

## **CONNECTING BRIDGES THROUGH THEATRICAL DESIGN: AN EXAMINATION OF “ASIRI NLA” IN PERFORMANCE**

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### **Abstract**

The theatre provides an avenue for the expression of very salient and topical issues about a people through the presentation of performances. These performances, which are often in form of plays, are always created by playwrights and that is why playwrights are said to be the watch dogs of the society because their works x-ray past and present situations while proffering solutions for the future. However, the theatre is a composite art which involves the collaboration of many creative artists: Playwright, Director, Stage Manager, Actor(s), Designer(s), amongst others. The designer(s) are the creative artists that interpret the play in visual terms. Their creativity gives a better understanding to the play in performance as the dramatic piece is given further expressions through the actors' costumes, properties, lighting and scenery. This essay will interrogated the use of costume and set design in bridging ethnic divides using a Workshop performance of “*Asiri Nla*” as performed by students of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka at the Arts Theatre. The study found that through an effective set design and appropriate use of costumes that the production was able to unite different peoples under one roof without acrimony thus, it recommended at the effectiveness of design in theatrical productions is a sure way of enhancing national integration.

### **Keywords:**

Connecting bridges, design, theatre, integration.

### **Introduction**

The art of the theatre involves the collaboration of different interpretative and creative artists who come together for the realization of a theatrical production. This is why the activities involved in the theatre are referred to as the arts of the theatre. These arts of the theatre are likened to the vine and its branches. Toyin Beatrice Bade-Afuye (415) observers that:

The theatre profession is a field with many parts like it is a tree with branches. The branches are referred to as the arts of the theatre and they include: playwriting, directing, acting, set design, costuming, properties, make-up and lighting.

The collaboration of these artists of the theatre does not happen fortuitously, it is a product of carefully designed and executed process which culminates in the performance before an

audience. This idea of theatre as a collaborative enterprise is also expressed by Amanda Swann, former President of the California Educational Theatre Association (CETA) thus:

Theatre is a creative, collaborative, and cooperative art form, dependent upon audience, performer and playwright. Each learning opportunity and each performance is a unique experience created both by the performer and the personal experience of each audience member. Taking part in theatre either in an informal classroom experience or an elaborate production as a performer, audience member, director, designer, writer, or technician is fundamental in experiencing the ensemble process. (5)

This presupposes that for theatre to happen all the artists involved must come together and agree on the best way to satisfy the artistic demands of the audience who is the consumer of the creative exercise. In fact, the theatre production chain is not complete without an audience. This is because, the audience is the evaluator of the success or otherwise of a theatrical production especially when it is considered that the experience of the theatre is direct and immediate.

Every theatrical performance is guided by a production concept which is the operating principle upon which the performance is built. This concept is often a summation of the theme of the play. Thus every artist involved in the interpretative process works around the concept to achieve an aesthetically pleasing performance. Dexter Lyndersay explains the depth and importance of the collaborative nature of theatre as art in his analysis of the significance of costume design thus:

The creation and evolution of a stage costume is guided, primarily by the requirements gleaned from the scripted text (where available), the combined and collaborated visions of the director, the scene and lighting designers, sometimes the performer and, finally, the costume designer. It is the costume designer's research, concepts, inspiration, aesthetic considerations – tempered by the economics of the production – that will influence the other collaborators to accept the costume choices... (67).

The designers involved in the theatrical enterprise are those described as “collaborators”: set, lighting, costume, make-up, sound and properties, because they work within a production concept to ensure unity of purpose especially as their work is mainly visual. These artists work with the principles and elements of design. Thus Maureen Ndu-Udeji asserts that; “the creation of any production is guided by the available script and the concepts and visions of the director and other designers – scene and lighting” (190). The efforts of these interpretative artists, therefore, must ensure that line; colours, shape and texture are balanced and harmonized in a rhythmic way to ensure variety which in turn gives the audience a satisfying production. This study will focus on the use of costume and set design as an effective tool of ensuring tolerance and unity in theatrical performance through the production of *Asiri Nla*.

***Asiri Nla*: A synopsis.**

*Asiri Nla* literally means ‘Big Secret’. It is a Yoruba phrase which encapsulates the message of the play. The play tells the story of *Falana*, a business tycoon, though illiterate but wants his children to have good and qualitative education. In his bid to have male children he marries three wives from three major tribes in the land hoping, at least, that the gods of his in-laws will favour him with male children. Out of desperation for an additional male child and to curb the excesses of his not-too-literate wives, he marries a fourth wife, an educated and psychedelic lady believing that his problems will end with that union. Regrettably, he discovers at the death of his only son that none of his numerous kids were actually his biological children.

**Connecting Bridges through Costume Design in *Asiri Nla***

The 2018 workshop production of *Asiri Nla* (Big Secret) was supervised by Tochukwu Okeke. It was carried out by the 300 level students of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in partial fulfillment of the course TFS 313 (Production Participation). The whole exercise began as an improvisation then ideas began to emerge on how to make the story topical considering the ethnic tensions in Nigeria as a result of the persistent clashes between herdsmen and farmers in various communities across the nation. Consequently, a story that has unity and togetherness as its underlying theme was agreed upon. A production secretary was chosen and as dialogue develops, it was penned down. Subsequently, other crew members were chosen: set, costume, lighting and properties’ designers.

The sketch of the designs for the costume and set of the play were eventually brought to the group by the respective students in-charge and after series of meetings with the supervisor, and the director, final renditions of the designs were done. It was agreed that each of the wives will be costumed in her native ethnic attire to emphasize the unity in diversity as is represented by the wives who were brought together under one roof but were from different ethnic backgrounds. However, to emphasize the fact that unity can be achieved in spite of the differences in ethnicity, the *Falana* household wore same costume according to their categories; all the wives wore Lace Materials (*Iro* and *Buba*) and the children were also attired in the same colour and texture of lace materials although different in quality from what their mothers wore.

Costume is one of the most expressive visual aspects of a theatrical performance. This is because, as the actor’s tool is his body and voice and costume is what the actor puts on in terms of clothing as a covering for the body, the audience has the tendency of easily associating costume with the actor that adorns it. Thus Edwin Wilson observes that “costumes are the most personal aspect of the visual elements in theatre. To members of the audience, a performer and his or her costume are perceived as one. They merge into a single image on stage”. (361) Similarly, Jacque Govier in her estimation of the invaluable contributions of costume to theatrical production says that:

One of the greatest assets to both audience and actor in this interpretation is the costume that the actor wears. A good costume can convey immediately all sorts of visual clues to

the play as a whole or to scenes within it—its place  
in time, its location geographically, whether it is a serious  
or humourous enactment, the mood, the style, the intent (8).

This presupposes that the costume design of a play can visually summarize the message of the performance. Costume therefore is an indispensable interpretative aspect of a theatrical production especially when it is considered that costumes are ever on the body of the actors. Through costume a lot of information about the characters in a production is conveyed to the audience. Maureen Udeji observes that:

National costume expresses identity, which is usually associated with  
geographical area or a period in history, but can also indicate social,  
marital and/or religious status. Such costumes often come in two forms:  
one for everyday occasions, the other for festival and formal wear (160).

Costume designs for *Asiri Nla* were highly expressive as it helped in delineating the message of the play for the audience's better appreciation. *Chief Falana*, the father of the house and the protagonist in the play was fully decked in Yoruba native attire showing the man's love for tradition and culture. *Falana* goes to his office in native Yoruba dresses with *Fila* (cap) to match. Even in his brief appearances in the house, he is costumed in his native wears.

However, his wives, who are drawn from three different ethnic groups, appear in their respective ethnic costumes. For instance, *Iya Mutui*, the first wife, is Yoruba. She is always in the native Yoruba *Iro* and *Buba* and sometimes with matching *Gele* head tie when and where the occasion demands it. The second wife, *Iya Opeyemi*, is Igbo, she is adequately costumed in native Igbo wears to depict her ethnic origin. Hence, she is attired in a two-tiered *Ankara* wrapper with blouse and a matching head tie in her formal outings but, when she is about the home, she dresses informally in a loose blouse with a wrapper tied across her upper body.

*Mama Onos*, otherwise known as *Iya Bidemi*, the third wife, is from the South-south, Warri, preferably, this is evident mostly from her attire more than her speech which is heavily accented to suit her role. *Mama Onos* is costumed in Tee-shirts and shorts when she is about the home and in the traditional gown of the Warri people which is often mid-way between a formal western outfit and local designs when she is going outside the house. The fourth wife, *Shanel*, is costumed in English wears because she is presented as an educated woman, enlightened and exposed to foreign culture. Govier asserts that this aspect of costume design is most apt and expressive. She maintains that:

Notwithstanding that character is explored through voice and  
intonation, through body language and facial expressions and  
numerous other acting techniques, the costume makes an  
enormously powerful visual statement which has an immediate  
effect and needs to be stated correctly (8).

Thus, in spite of the differences in the cultural attires of the wives of *Chief Falana*, who by some stroke of fate chose to marry from different ethnic regions in his search for male children, the women are always united in their duties as wives and mothers of *Falana's*

many children. Throughout the play, the children stay together as one family, eat as one and go to school as one. The costume of the children is equally significant in the designer's effort at bridging the ethnic divide in the family as all the kids were costumed in the same school uniform. This is an indication that the costumer used his/her designs effectively in ensuring unity among the children not minding the fact that they have differences in motherhood. They realized the fact that they are connected as a family in their father, *Chief Falana*, irrespective of the differences in the ethnic background of their mothers. Similarly, the family photograph shows all the wives and kids attired in traditional Yoruba costumes an indication that the bond of fatherhood as represented in *Falana* is supreme. This aspect of costuming as an eloquent means of expressing unity is also evident in the choice of colours and materials for the actors' costume. For instance, lace materials were dominant: an indication that the fabric is one that has no ethnic domain, meaning that all Nigerian cultures use the materials in making clothes. Similarly, the colours of the costumes were drawn from the predominant colours in the nation's flag and coat of arms. Hence we see the children's school uniform in green and white even Falana himself wore white coloured materials most of the time as a symbol of peace. Through effective costumes therefore, the play *Asiri Nla* depicted a union of different cultures connected by design as is seen and expressed in the costume designs of the characters in the play.

### **Set Design of *Asiri Nla* as a Unifying Factor**

Set design or scenery is the simulated locale or setting of any theatrical performance. It is the environment within which the characters in a production live while the play lasts on stage. In other words, actors re-enact the message of the play before an audience in the set or scenery designed for that particular performance. Through the set design the exact location or environment of the play/drama is brought before an audience. Thus, like costume, set design is the most eloquent visual element of a theatrical production because it is the first thing the audience beholds on entry into the theatre and throughout the duration of a performance, the set is constant (irrespective of the fact that there could be changes in location according to the story of the drama) because every action of a performance takes place within a specific location. Yet, the set/setting of any play production as designed dominates the environment of the play and tells its own story while re-enforcing the theme of the drama being presented.

The indispensability of set/setting in a theatrical production cannot be overemphasized because the set gives information about the nature of the characters: their social and economic status, their race, ethnicity, religion, occupation and moral standing amongst others. Thus, the setting of a play as designed by the set designer evokes a lot of feelings in the audience and helps the audience's further understanding of a production especially when it is considered that design (set) is an interpretative element in a production. According to Peter Muford, "set design remains the art of pruning, because the simple allows the imagination free play..." (5). This presupposes that in its interpretation of the play, the designer could evoke feelings in the audience as the scenery is designed to give a further understanding of the play. It makes its demand on the audience through the feelings it evokes because every set signifies meaning which is mainly visual. The codes embedded in a set design can be given interpretations by an audience depending on the experience the mood of the play evokes in the audience. Similarly, John Iwuh posits that:

Design in theatre and performance involves the creation of a background that enables the audience not only to be in the same environment as the dramatic characters but also to imbibe the message thereof for attitudinal correction, self-development and societal change (110).

This presupposes that the message of the play as is manifested through set design must be apt and have a direct effect on the audience.

In designing the set for *Asiri Nla* the designers considered the effect of the story on the audience especially as the aim is to preach unity and peace on the ethnic diversities in the country. Since a multiple setting has the tendency to be misinterpreted by the audience, the designers resolved to create a single locale for the actions. Hence, actions in *Asiri Nla* happened in *Chief Falana's* living room. The designers had to consider the audience's reaction to their design because:

The proper goal of every dramatic production is to project a complete and accurate theatrical effect to the audience, such that an effect is a composite pattern of visual and auditory stimuli which produces an intellectual or emotional response on the part of the spectator. (Olufemi 170-1)

The set designs for the production of *Asiri Nla*: aptly fulfills the visual stimuli considering the fact that it evoked intellectual and emotional responses from the audience. Thus, Chief Falana's sitting room was created to be a microcosm of a multi-ethnic nation where the people come together to perform their individual and collective responsibilities.

It is an expansive room depicting the economic status of the protagonist. It is designed in a way that it could contain the entire household as was evident in the opening glee when the whole family came out for a family photograph. The set has two doors. Up Stage Right and Up Stage left respectively. There is a set of upholstered chair in the living room. The three-seaters is put in the centre and is flanked by the single-seater. There is a centre table where some properties are kept to complement the setting. There are expensive art works on the wall. The centre table is adorned with flowers. The door Up Stage Left leads to the Children's and wives' quarters while the door Up Stage Right leads to *Chief Falana's* room.

The set was used as a connecting bridge between the different characters in the play in two ways:

(1) that all *Falana's* children share the same quarters. It is presumed that they stay together irrespective of their differences in motherhood; the wives also stay together especially in the kitchen where they take turns to cook for the entire household:

Mama Onos: (*advancing menacingly, pot in hand*) ...  
who ate the meat I left in this pot...?

This is an indication that the kitchen is shared by the wives and the children also have unrestricted access to it;

(2) *Chief Falana* has a room where all the wives take turns to perform their wifely duties. In fact, *Chief Falana's* room is the second "conference" room for the wives besides the living room. It follows therefore that the design of the set is conceived to depict the

psychological state of the protagonist who believes in the traditional African concept of male domination. Consequently, we see *Chief Falana* dominating the living room whenever he calls his wives and children out for any family discussion. He sits alone on the largest seat in the room while the wives and children manage the remaining space.

The colours of the sitting room, like the colours of the costumes also show a man in an unstable emotional state. The colours of the window and door blinds are at variance with the colours on the wall such that it does not adequately depict the economic status of *Chief Falana*. Whereas the walls are painted white and green, the windows are painted a mixture of black and brown. The dull colours of the windows is to depict the “dark” side of Chief Falana’s life: his inability to bear children and the dominance of female kids in his house which is un-African because the average African would rather he has male children than female ones. But, the dominant colours of green and white the fact that there is prospect of pro-creation: where green stands for fertility and white represents hope.

### **Conclusion**

Theatre aims at an elaborate expression of events, ideas and situations in a visual and auditory way. The nature of theatre makes its message indelible in the minds of the audience not minding the fact that its actions are immediate and could be transient. However, because what the eye beholds the mind tends to believe, the theatre has become a strong weapon in the hands of artists to make salient statements about the society. The theatre artist therefore becomes the watchdog of the society. As theatre does not happen by chance, every artist of the theatre creates time to ensure that what he presents is aesthetically pleasing to the audience. The domain of aesthetics in the theatre is always the design/technical areas which are the set, costume, make-up, light and properties. Through effective designs therefore, a play is seen as complete. In the production of *Asiri Nla*, the costume and set designs were used as veritable means of preaching the message of unity and peace in a nation where the cloth of unity appears to be breaking at the seams. Through adequate use of the elements and principles of design, the designers of costume and set for the play did make eloquent and convincing call to all that there is every possibility for harmonious co-existence of the different ethnic groups in the country.

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