



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY
Volume 14 Issue 7 Version 1.0 Year 2014
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Theatricalising Democracy: The Language of Light in the Stage Production of Ben Binebai's *If Not... a Play of the Gods*

By Benedict Binebai & Kenneth Efakponana ENI

Niger Delta University, Nigeria

Abstract- This paper examines the appropriation of the aesthetics of stage lighting as an agency of narratology and communication in theatre. As a communicative art, theatre thrives fundamentally on verbal and non-verbal communication. It speaks in many possible ways. But most people hold the wrong notion that the centre of communication in drama and theatre is the written word. Technical inputs such as scenographic art, costume and make up, stage lighting and sound are theatrical elements seen by most people within and outside the school of theatre as decorative arts that only assist to dramatise a play without significance given to them as forms of expression. This paper argues that all other departments and compartments of the theatre are directly involved in the language system of the theatre; the written and spoken words do not stand apart. This implies strongly that theatrical communication is a collective communication of words and para-verbal and non word communication arts. It is against this setting that the paper attempts to explore the aesthetics of light as a language of communication in the stage realisation of democracy in Ben Binebai's Drama, *If Not... A Play of the Gods* by the final year students of the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University. The paper concludes that stage lighting is an effective aesthetic power that clearly unfolds the deeper, meanings, intention, mood and temperament of an organized spectacle on the legitimate space.

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GJHSS-A Classification : FOR Code: 170199



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Theatricalising Democracy: The Language of Light in the Stage Production of Ben Binebai's *If Not... a Play of the Gods*

Benedict Binebai ^α & Kenneth Efakponana ENI ^σ

Abstract This paper examines the appropriation of the aesthetics of stage lighting as an agency of narratology and communication in theatre. As a communicative art, theatre thrives fundamentally on verbal and non verbal communication. It speaks in many possible ways. But most people hold the wrong notion that the centre of communication in drama and theatre is the written word. Technical inputs such as scenographic art, costume and make up, stage lighting and sound are theatrical elements seen by most people within and outside the school of theatre as decorative arts that only assist to dramatise a play without significance given to them as forms of expression. This paper argues that all other departments and compartments of the theatre are directly involved in the language system of the theatre; the written and spoken words do not stand apart. This implies strongly that theatrical communication is a collective communication of words and para-verbal and non word communication arts. It is against this setting that the paper attempts to explore the aesthetics of light as a language of communication in the stage realisation of democracy in Ben Binebai's Drama, *If Not... A Play of the Gods* by the final year students of the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University. The paper concludes that stage lighting is an effective aesthetic power that clearly unfolds the deeper, meanings, intention, mood and temperament of an organised spectacle on the legitimate space.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The point has been made that theatre is essentially a communicative art. Of all art forms, theatre is more like life. It is a combination of text and performance-the spoken word and action, presented in an environment that speaks to its content and nature. The characters in theatrical presentation are biological living entities that live life in the created environment of the stage. They marry, die, grow, and embody all known human strength and weaknesses. Hence, it is often said that theatre is life. The text of a theatrical performance may be literary or oral. Consequently, some scholars call theatre surplus drama. But theatre is not all about drama. Theatre entails both performative and visual arts. These include, dance, music, choreography, painting,

architecture, sculpture and other forms of design art. In preparing the performative arts for the legitimate stage, the silver screen or the cinema, the use of other equally significant accoutrements of theatre like, the visual arts, known in performance parlance as visual trinity: light, set and costume and make-up is inevitable. No matter the application of such theatrical theories like minimalism and Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre tradition, such theatrical elements like stage lighting and locale (the created environment of the dramatic action) remain indomitable in the realisation of the theatrical production. In fact stage-lighting and scenic-design are, perceptibly, obligatory trappings for theatre productions which provide wide-ranging implication of the storyline in a gradual and logical sequence. This is done in accordance with the lyrical flow of the artistic mechanism. Scholars of stage lighting like Duro Oni hold strongly that the theories and principles of a modern aesthetic of theatre production, particularly in stage-lighting and scene design, have formed the bedrock of contemporary stage-lighting practice. They include the idea of plasticity in lighting as well as an inter-relationship between the parts of an artistically successful theatrical production and the relationship between creativity and human progress (14). Nigerian playwrights have long acknowledged the benefit of creating with the theatrical idiom of lighting as a linguistic device that strongly participates in the processes of decoding symbols and significations within the universe of the very art performed.

An interesting aspect of the language of stage lighting is that it offers a clear and exact picture of words spoken on stage. Light can be used in most instances as a visual meta-language that deepens, expands and extends the true meaning of the spoken word in a pictorial form. Essential, the nature of the lighting art empowers it with functional and acceptable narrative capabilities. Playwrights plot light as a narrative agency into their script. This is because light, whether natural or scientifically generated functions by the method of illumination, to locate, situate, shape and activate the created universe within the performance space into a mechanical organism. It has representational ideas and participates as language in the arguments that populate the fictional space. Light is one of the most important multiple narrative centres of a theatrical production. The

Author α σ: Department of Theatre Arts Niger Delta University Wilberforce Island Bayelsa state. e-mails: ebimotimi7263@gmail.com, kennenyeni@yahoo.com

theatre across the ages and across continents in its sophisticated scientific form, is a human based activity that has dramatised human misery and hope, disaster and reconstruction, slavery and freedom, it has given attention to culture and nationalism and has been used to explain philosophies, ideologies and political systems on the stage with light playing a key role in the theatricalization process. The contemporary mission and agenda of stage lighting is to give the audience a fuller appreciation, an understanding of reality. Light helps the playwright to explore a range of forms of self-expression. Expressions that are beneficial to human survival and knowledge. Stage light creates atmosphere on stage. It creates the mood which may be dismal and delightful. Stage lighting is deployed to awaken a particular impression of the subject that is being dramatised in the eyes of the spectators. It greatly contributes to the generation of imaginative representations on stage and elicits their social implications. The significance of stage lighting is captured in the works of Robert Kümmerlen when he states that

The space to be contemplated is given its brightness by the lighting; stage performances are only made visible by light. The first function of lighting, the simple provision of light, creates, with the brightness, what might be called the atmosphere in which the space exists. The light-atmosphere, achieved in the most diverse ways, varies the space; through the lighting the performances take on a characteristic mood. The space creates an effect in its totality; the lights of the spatial representation produce a self-contained impression; the space stands in a unifying light. With the illumination of the whole scene a "unified character" is produced. A uniform mood emanates from the space; for example, the representation of space is subjected to a "muted" light. We find that three-dimensional objects "gleam" in a regular light; the space appears, for example, as "charming" or "sombre". The lighting on its own generates a fluid between the individual structures of the performance. A specific mood is contained in the space represented through the ethereal effect of brightness. (36)

Light becomes a living form of energy that surrounds the living actor, shaping the stage picture and "completes the process of making a living environment within which the actor can perform" (Pillbrow 14). This paper is based on the role played by stage lighting in the stage presentation of Ben Binebai's *If Not... A Play of the Gods*. The central concept of the play is the dramatisation of democracy on the acting space. It is therefore germane to briefly examine the concept of democracy through the eyes of scholars.

Democracy is a political system of command. It is a system of government in which political power is vested in the people through elected representatives. As

a system of government, democracy is predicated on the principles of majority rule and individual rights and liberties. Its leading function is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society. Modern democratic states in Africa can lay claim to being the bulwark of freedom and locus of expression of its citizens but when it comes to translating the concept of democracy in governance, the African experience and flies in the opposite direction. Most democratic nations in Africa are practicing undemocratic democracy. African governments pay lip service to the concept of democracy while in actuality the system they practice is dictatorship. African democracy is thus characterised by dictatorship, widespread corruption, state brutality and terrorism, economic mismanagement, ethnic cleansing and violence. These are disabilities that exists side by side African democratic institutions. To explain Africa's lack of democratic progress, scholars routinely point to factors such as widespread poverty, small middle classes, and a population that is disproportionately young and rural (where people-especially women-remain repressed by customary law, traditional authority, and patriarchy), all of which limit the size of the public with a stake in stable democratic rule (Mamdani 1996; Niemi and Barkan 1987). The point has been made that

The poor governance in Africa which is most glaringly manifested in the denial of fundamental human rights, lack of accountability, the absence of political pluralism or basic democratic institutions and above all, dehumanizing poverty which, have all combined to prompt the demand and clamour for democracy and better governance in Africa. (3)

Williams in *Man and his Government* defines democracy as a form of government in which all people have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. Ideally, this includes equal (and more or less direct) participation in the proposal, development and passage of legislation into law. It can also encompass social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination. Adegboye in *Consolidating Participatory Democracy in Africa* holds the view that the failure in the practice of ideal democracy in Africa can be attributed to many factors, both internal and external. There is the unquestionable evidence that the failure is as a result of bad political leadership. At the top of this failure of leadership is the scant respect that many African leaders have for constitution and constitutionalism. The ease with which extra terms of office are pursued by African leaders and the manner in which the illegal or unconstitutional objective is pursued has made the failing particularly objectionable and attributable to failed leadership (Adegboye 247). Democracy ideally ought to

be an institutionalisation of freedom but this is not so in most postcolonial African states. Having established a theoretical angle to the discourse on theatricalisation and the implications of democracy, the study will proceed to the analysis of the stage production of *If Not... A Play of the Gods* along the line of communication with stage lighting.

If Not...

If Not... was chosen for performance by the students as a departmental production in Niger Delta University on the 15th of March 2013. It was staged under the direction of Matthew Kroseide a final year student of the department to enable them experiment and participate fully in every aspect of theatre production, including acting, design, directing, stage management, and technical production. The choice of the play was informed by the topicality of its subject, which is democracy, its technical possibilities and its cross cultural configuration. It is one play that can conveniently be referred to as national drama in view of its thematic concern, its cultural setting and the national composition of the dramatic characters. *If Not...* is an allegorical drama of mythic the mode set thematically on the topography of democracy. It brings to the court of theatre, issues of authoritarianism; political charlatanism and violent erosion of democratic values and human rights abuse for judgement and appreciation and stylishly ridicules the practice of politics and democracy in postcolonial Africa. The play is a mythical reproduction of the perception of democracy in Africa especially, its aberrant form in Nigeria. Its universe is metaphysical as all the characters in the play are incorporeal entities representing different regions of Nigeria.

If Not... dramatises the world of the gods. The deities of Africa, precisely those of Nigeria, agreed to embrace modernity by sacrificing monarchy which has been their political system of government for democracy. They meet at the Village square of Ukolo to publicly transit from monarchy to the new found civilisation. The Ukolo of Ukolo, the supreme ruler of the land decorates and gives the staff of office to Democracy who is invited to come and rule over them. Democracy then sets the agenda of his reign. He forbids any of his subjects from looking at his face. He appropriates all farmlands, and has unquestionable right and control over every member of the society. He has right to declare anybody a slave, and any woman as his wife. He goes ahead to put this agenda to physical manifestation. This angers the gods who then disagree and plan a rebellion. Amadioha begins the protest while Sango, Atiri and Azeza protest against Democracy's reign of crude brutality and its erosion of the time honoured traditions and values system of the land and kingdom of Ukolo. The whole land of Ukolo is thrown into confusion and violence to the displeasure of Amina, Moremi, Agadagba, Amadioha and Ogun, principal

gods of the land. In the battle between Sango and Democracy a new democracy emerges to demand his rightful place in the land. It is revealed that the democracy on the throne is false democracy. He is asked to disclose his true identity. Upon pressure from the gods of Ukolo kingdom, he undresses himself proclaiming that he is Eshu the trickster. This amazes every one. The deprived democracy attests to the fact that he was held captive by Eshu and his cohorts. Eshu the impostor is forced out of the seat of power by Sango and Agadagba. He is banished from Ukolo through a democratic process as the people of Ukolo kingdom voted for his banishment and is replaced with the real democracy.

II. THEATRICALISING DEMOCRACY IN *IF NOT...*, THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT

If Not... lasted on the stage for virtually an hour. In every minutes of the play's performance, the element of light was appropriated in various ways not only for illumination but also as a "form revealing light" adding shape and significance to the performance by defining and shaping momentarily the acting space. But the most important thing to note about the use of the light in the production is the ingenuous attempt by the artistic director and the lighting designer to narrate and interpret the play with light and to create pictures that defined characterisation. The skilful manipulation of the cognitive variant of light emphasizes which aspect of the technical lay-out is best seen to advance the play's intent. *If Not...* is anatomically configured in such a way that it gives strong provision for the manipulation of light to reflect the various shades and aesthetic statements made about democracy. The lighting design for the production was able to locate the literal requirements of the play which is a bright morning. The light led and pointed the direction of the play to the audience. At the very beginning of the play when Ukolo community experienced political transformation from monarchy to democracy, the Village square hosted dancers, chiefs and people who came to embrace democracy, the new ruler. The lighting designer flooded the space of celebration with a bright and festive hue of light to capture the mood of the festival and report on the actions on stage. The flood light, a high density discharge lamp, an artificial light providing even illumination across a wide area, suggests a celebratory disposition of the Ukolo setting which synchronised with the special costumes in which the citizens are adorned. The brilliance of the stage light ruled the stage until Democracy came to be crowned as the new ruler of the land. After his swearing in as President of the Democratic Republic of Ukolo, His Excellency, the new Democratic Ruler, complained that the light shining on Ukolo is too bright for his liking. This was the critical point that light began to be deployed as a language in the stage production of the play. He therefore decreed



that the intensity and brightness of the lights be reduced. In his words at the second sequence of the play titled *Black Reign*, Democracy is sitting on the high throne of Ukolo at the mountain top is having a meeting with chiefs of Ukolo.

Democracy: This light is too bright.
It diminishes my authority,
makes me powerless,
And gives me discomfort.
Reduce its intensity.
[Brightness of the light is reduced].

Consequent upon the command of Democracy, the President of the Democratic Republic of Ukolo, the intensity of the light is reduced to near darkness. Three Ellipsoidal reflector spotlights focused on the acting area at 45° profile right, left and centre in a perfect Stanley McCandles style, while two Fresnel spotlight complimented the Ellipsoidals by providing a general wash that help kill shadows. Two Batten Floodlights served to provide a subdued wash and provided light for the set and the background action. These fixtures were fully manipulated by the lighting designer to suit the artistic interpretation of political demands of the concept of Democracy mirrored in the play. Thus the dimly lit environment of the stage served as a metaphor of darkness that heightened the fertile atmosphere which provided covering for the rulers with evil motives to operate and govern ruthlessly. The dimness of the light is symbolic. It represents a black reign, a reign of state terrorism masterminded and perfected by the ruler of the land. The dimming of the light further attest to the fact that in the reign of a tyrant, the subjects cannot see the real face of the ruler; This emphasizes the level of duality that exists between the “real” and “imagined” that fostered the conflict in the play. This parallel existence of the “real” and “imagined” created an imaginative puissance in the audience that further enhanced the tensions in the conflict situation in the play. Perhaps, the playwright had this impression of black reign in mind even with the operation of democratic governance in Africa. Hence in his note to the play he states that:

By virtue of the fact that the play dramatizes democracy at the metaphysical realm, it is the view of this playwright that both design of the locale, the costume, and the props, the songs and the dances should take after metaphysical coloration. Besides the written language of the play, another area which deserves special artistic attention is the lighting. The use of light in this compact drama is not just for illumination but for the astute and graphic portrayal of the two broad faces of the concepts of democracy it attempt to explore. These are true and false democracy. (Binebai 3)

Democracy is democracy. It is either you are practicing it or you are not. The stage narration of the

play was colourfully manoeuvred by the lighting designer with two principles of lighting in mind: These are dark adaptation and bright adaptation. What the production offered as the first encounter with democracy is depicted with the assistance of light as dark democracy which is not democracy anyway. It is a very strong evil rule masquerading as democracy. The putting off of the brightness on the Ukolo setting at the command of the ruler by the lighting director is a clear language of trouble and terrorism in the land. The Ukolo universe which embraced democracy is put into darkness on the orders of a hypocritical democracy. Lighting, a blend of artistic and technical creation visualises what will happen in the abstract world as dreams and wishes and the nuts and bolt phases of the process. This significant conspiracy between the aesthetic and technical creation of lighting to relay the significant visual messages of the performance was well handled by the lighting director.

As noted by Eni “Designing for a production entails a logical process imbued with a strong imaginative and creative instincts” (39). Imagination and creativity was brought to play in the creation of a wide range of moods raging from the murkiness in the general atmosphere of the setting during the reign of false Democracy, and for the people of Ukolo, excitement and exhilaration disappeared for sadness. From the moment the brightness was withdrawn from the stage, there was terrorism, rebellion, enslavement, violation of human right, adultery and authoritarianism. These are the emotional contents of the production. This dark adaptation of light is a dramatic effect which the lighting designer imaginatively employed with the darkening of the stage, an understandable but double speak conception of time was established. Stormy physical darkness, ideological darkness of time; these are no communications that can be understood with mere written and spoken words. There was weeping, wailing and loud lamentation as the Democracy in power became a maximum tyrant. Not even, the gods of the land found his ways interesting anymore. The values of the land were eroded with impunity by the self styled democracy. The lighting at this point elicits both the emotional and literal presentations of the performance which gave inflection to the words, music and movements. Lighting in *If Not...* both in the literary and performative forms is thus conceived as a structural and narrative design.

The dark reign of Democracy held sway in Ukolo under the political command of Eshu, false Democracy. This was gravely depicted with uneasy murkiness and dimness in the application of light. This dark adaption of light created a big and realistic picture of doom even when Amadioha and his warriors on one hand, Sango, Atiri and Azeza on the other hand came separately in a bellicose manner to fight against

Democracy that unleashed terror on the land of Ukolo. In the combat between Amadioha and Democracy, special sound synchronised to lighting effects depicting thunder was employed with precision by both the lighting designer and the sound technician to create a war situation. Thunder rumbled and lightening tore through the skies in affirmation of the supreme powers of Amadioha, the god of thunder. The flashing torrents of lightning emanating from flash bulbs hung on the proscenium bar combined to present a horrendous flashing of thunder which blended with the sound presented the warring gods as supreme beings. Adelowo Felix Adetunji notes that Sango is believed, by a legend, to be a powerful king in his life time. He was said to be the fourth Alafin of Oyo, who ruled his people with iron hands. He could bring fire out of his mouth, and display various magical arts. (11) This gift of fire was what he deploys in fighting Democracy in *If Not...* His symbol is a double-headed axe, which signifies swift and balanced justice. In Sango's combative encounter with false Democracy, the act of spitting fire was perfected. Fire was used as a weapon to fight against Democracy by Sango. The fire flames were manipulated by Sango and his acolytes and further supported with the adroit manoeuvring of the lighting sources by the lighting designer. Sango's invented fire flames were the only source of active light that graced the stage in the combat between him and Democracy while the floodlights were bargained to near zero modicum on the orders of Democracy. Thus the low burning beam of light emanating from the lighting instruments created a fire glow that aided Sango's act. The light at this pointed created silhouette and shadows that added to the ethereal and mythical quality of the scene. What aided the lighting design in this context is the fact that the lighting design for the production was conceived as a part of the architectural volumetric space in which the performers are "primarily oriented to the floor as primary symbols of special expression" (Feiner 25) which created dept, roundness and dimensionality as against the pictorial in which performers are usually conceived as plastered against the background in an illusionistic compressionist mode. In this way, the lighting was formulated as a gestalt of all the visual, auditory and aesthetic elements in creating a total stage picture.

The appearance of real Democracy, detained by Eshu, the duplicitous Democracy turned the tide of events in the play. Through accusations and strong insistence that the Democracy on the throne should disclose his true identity, Eshu, the impostor unveils himself and demands that he will continue to rule the land of Ukolo. The gods, Agadagba, Amadioha, Sango, Ogun, Atiri, Azeza and ancestral beings like Amina, Moremi fail to agree with him. Eshu attempts to fight against these pantheons to remain on the throne but Agadagba, the god of warfare, politics, fire, lightning, thunder and fertility danced his weapon to silence and

removed him from the throne. Together with Sango and the rest of the gods, the real Democracy is invited to take his rightful place on the throne as the new ruler of Ukolo. Democracy mounts the saddle of state and discovers that the land of Ukolo had been under a spell of darkness. Democracy looks round the environment, discovers that it is not properly illuminated. He orders that the fountains of life be fully illuminated. Through a democratic process Eshu is banished and escorted out of the land of Ukolo. Democracy then orders that "Let there be light"! Consequently, light floods the stage in such a way that has never been done before throughout the reign of Eshu as democracy. The gods are amazed and comment on the brightness of the kingdom.

AMINA: This is glorious.

AGADAGBA: It gives me joy.

OGUN: No Eshu can hide in this light.

AMADIOFIA: It is the light we truly deserve.

MOREMI: Truly this is the light of democracy!

The glorious light of a new dawn.

AGADAGBA: If not Democracy.

OGUN: Brightness would have eluded us.

(They sing pleasant songs and dance.

There is brightness on their faces)

Apart from the fact that by authorial design light was organically built into the script as an agency of narration, the lighting designer assisted greatly with the appropriation of light to narrate every visual action in the production. The banishment of Eshu and the flooding of the political and democratic space of Ukolo with great illumination have some significant implications. First the Ukolo citizens realise that democracy as a system of government does not thrive in a society where there is moral and ideological darkness. Secondly, bright light is synonymous with good democracy while dark adaptation is a signification of evil rule. The people of Ukolo appreciates Democracy as a giver of joy, glory, the light of a new dawn and concluded that if not for the bright light ushered in by the emergence of Democracy, glorious life would have eluded them. It is significant to note that the language of light assisted in a no feathery way to tell the story and interpret the deeper, psychological, political, cultural and allegorical meanings of the production.

III. CONCLUSION

The basic argument of this paper is that it is not only the actors, text and stage that tell the story of a theatrical production. It identifies stage lighting as a very strong and significant agency in the aesthetic of communication in a production. In the stage production of *If Not...*, the visual element of light is highly deployed both by the text and the lighting designer to narrate democracy in all its faces of manifestation in the production. Using the lighting aesthetic principle of adaptation, the lighting director deploys both dark adaptation and bright adaption of light to depict the

basic phases of manifestation of the concept of democracy in the production of *If Not...*. What this implies is that in the theatricalization of democracy on stage in Ben Binebai's drama, light was used as a major non-verbal linguistic resource. Beyond the physical illumination of the magic space of action, the creative manipulation of the idiom of lighting brings out the emotional, psychological and cultural iconology of the play dramatised.

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