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The Thesis and Synthesis of Production Philosophy in the African Literary Theatre Directing

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Abstract

What type of production is this? Is the performance a tragedy or comedy? Is this performance a revival of the neo-classical theatre or a little to classicism? This production to me has no clear-cut directorial concept or am I wrong? The four questions above are the product of dramatic curiosity and theatrical dissatisfaction on the part of the critical theatre audience. The failure and lack of good production philosophy in play directing, an art humbly led by the play director is, therefore, partly responsible for bad and artistically unsatisfactory performances. Considering the dramatic and theatrical relevance of production philosophy in the theatre, this paper, through the deductive and analytical methods examines the thesis and synthesis of production philosophy in the African literary theatre directing. We observe that a performance will make meaning to members of the audience if it is critically articulated within a well – thought out philosophy other than the ‘fancy of

imagination' of the artistic director and that the thesis (theoretical idiosyncrasies) and synthesis (practical realities) of any production should be understood and merged together in the director's creative interpretation. We conclude by emphasizing the imperativeness of production philosophy in the making of the African literary theatre directing.

Introduction

A good and well formulated production philosophy will give theatre performance clear-cut artistic, intellectual, dramaturgical, theatrical and ideological directions. Production philosophy allows a performance to satisfy the feelings of the audience, conforms to the playwright's intention/thematic concerns and activates the theatre director's vision. However, if a production fails, the director has either fails to formulate a good production philosophy or refuses to carry out his formulated production philosophy to the letter during the process of production articulation. From the 'general' to the 'specifics', a failure in production often leads to endless questions from the theatre critics and critical members of the audience; questions such as:

- A. What type of production is this?
- B. Is the performance a tragedy or comedy?
- C. Is this performance a revival of the neo-classical theatre or a little to classicism?
- D. This production to me has no clear-cut directorial concept or am I wrong?

And many more only help to express the audience and the critics' dramatic curiosity and artistic dissatisfaction with play productions.

The theatrical culture of post-production review or viva voce on play productions is also dying in the African theatre. This has a negative impact on the formulation of production philosophy in play production. As a reminder, post-production review or viva voce is a time for intellectual dissection of the success or failure of any performance. It is a critical time for the exchange of saturated and opinionated ideas about the performance and the theatre generally. It is not a time for abuses and kicks but a rewarding time for reflections on how the performance can be improved upon the next time it will be handled by the same or other interested theatre cast and crew. Viva voce is also usually being carried out through the scripted or unscripted text and the performance text. Under production philosophy, all the mise-en-scene and the mise-en-actor of the previous productions of the same play that a prospective director has watched must also be critically reviewed. The successful aspects of the previous productions must never be repeated by him but improved upon. Also, the mistakes made by previous directors must never be made by him.

When a play director strives to put up a good performance, dramatic issues of the appropriateness or otherwise of the plot, conflict, genre, language, theme and sub-themes, and character types of the play must be considered within the precinct of the text. All these must be matched with physical properties (costumes, make-up, props, lighting, set design) and artistic qualities the performers (speech delivery, movements, tempo, rhythm, picturization, composition and so on). The overall aesthetics of the performance must also be considered while formulating production philosophy.

To arrive at a good production philosophy for a performance, there must be mutual interchangeability of ideas between the director and the crew members and between the director and the performers having considered the financial base of the production through the producer. Director's discussions with the performers or his experience while working with them will also help him to tap abundantly from, and discover his performers' God given theatrical potentials. This choice will assist the director during casting. The formulation of production philosophy though slightly higher on the director's side, it is not a time for him to claim stardom. It is a time for the entire theatre workers to plan ahead for the production at hand.

Who is, therefore, afraid of production philosophy? This could only be lazy or pseudo directors who do not want to be flogged intellectually or those who often indulged in ego-tripping. Those directors whose direct or indirect roles led to the killing of production philosophy in play directing are the ones who are not helping theatre practice in Africa to grow especially the literary theatre tradition.

The director or "producer must not deduce his business from the play's surface. He must make a leap to the inward meaning and use the play's surface as expression" (Knight, 1998, p. 43). This is because play production is inelastic. It is the recreation of the text which moves from the grand metaphoric expressions in the text to the physical reality of the theatre, a task that can only be performed through human and material resources. Knight (1998, p. 43) also cautions that while deciding on play production philosophy, the director must be ready to "uncover some central and unifying idea, giving it text a new structure in interpretation. Interpretation will always be a development in a new medium of some central idea forcing a vital re-creation".

With the numerous advantages of production philosophy to play production and with lack of it or bad formulation of it leading to a production without head or tail or that which cannot pass the rigour of theatrical drilling, this paper, through the deductive and analytical methods examines the metaphor of the play director in theatre, the thesis of production philosophy and the synthesis of production philosophy with particular reference to theatre directing in the African theatre.

The Metaphor of the Play Director in the Theatre

The play director is a metaphor in the theatre. As a leader in the play production process, he is also paradoxically a messenger, an intermediary, a mediator and a creator of the highest order. Agust Staub in his book; *Creating Theatre: The Art of Theatrical Direction* also sees the director as, “the master of all arts of the theatre. He is the core artist without his will, the kinetic, visual and auditory components of the theatre are incapable of proper union, and will for the most part remain juxtaposed rather than coalesced” (Staub, 1973, p. 16).

Theatre directors, authors and scholars such as Tyrone Cruthrie, Hugh Morrison, Francis Hodge, Susan Letzler Cole, Peter Brook, Kenneth M. Cameron and Path. P. Gillespie have documented the following negative and positive metaphors to capture, conceptualise, re-conceptualise and historify the person and character of the most wanted theatre artist, director in the theatre:

Negative Metaphors of the Director in the theatre	Positive Metaphors of the Director in the theatre
An imposter	An arbiter
Childlike	Excitable
Foreman of a factory, a technician	Superintendent of analytic laboratory
Old-time sergeant major	A good nurse
Insatiable, curious, a finger in every pie	Intelligent, deductive, rational, reflective
A silent partner	A talker, a communicator of the highest order
A cult leader, autocratic ship captain	Ideal parent, trustee of democratic spirit
Ego or superego, surrogate-audience	Lover, third eye, teacher, father-figure
Puppet-master, a lump, a victim	Mother, listener, author
Ghost, invisible presence	Visual artist, midwife

Interestingly, some performances demand of the play director to make use of some attributes of the negative metaphors although he should equally uphold the positive metaphors while the demands of some play-texts necessarily call on the play director to combine together, the negative and positive metaphors. Here lies the unpredictability of the functions and duties of the artistic director.

In the theatre, the play director functions at four different levels vis-à-vis, technical, artistic, managerial and fundamental. Each of these levels of responsibility also has in them, chains of responsibilities. For example, at the technical level “the director is the person who organises the production. This involves scheduling the work process and supervising and acting, designing, staging and technical operation of the play. This is the easiest part of the directorial function” (Cohen, 1988, p. 145). Whereas at the artistic level, the director concerns himself primarily with artistic responsibilities such as picturisation, composition, rhythm and tempo and he importantly “decides upon the interpretation to be given the script and the production concept that will shape the staging, casts and actors, works with the designers, rehearses the actors and integrates all the elements into a finished production” (Brocket, 1992, p. 308).

The director is a question solver. He must therefore be a walking and working encyclopaedia, a king and a priest, a master and a dignified messenger. His functions are legions in the play directing process and he is the *primus inter pares* among other theatre workers yet he may become an unfortunate member of the audience whose only time of recognition will be when his performance failed. The director is thus the most unrecognised senior artist who usually watches cynically as the audience shower praises on his performers during and after performances. These and many more are some of the metaphors of the play director in the theatre.

Prior to rehearsals, the director has many duties to perform in the preparatory stage. The most important, however, is that he must be a constant searcher and researcher apart from being a question solver. He must also ask critical and constant questions about the performance at hand:

Why? The idea

What? The artistic form it will take

Where? The place where it will be expressed

When? The time when it will be expressed

Who? The people who will express and manage it

Wherewithal? The cost (Langley, 1980, p. 3).

Production philosophy is usually formed during the preparatory stage. This can also take place after play selection which is another core function of the director for the director should never “take on a play he or she does not like; the demand are too great, the depth of involvement too extreme, the dislike would ruin the production” (Cameron and Gillespie, 1996, p. 151). The functions of the director during rehearsals and the performance itself are very important but their success or failure depends on

the decision or indecision of the play director during the preparatory stage and the formation of production philosophy.

The Play Director and Production Philosophy

In the theatre, the following concepts can be used interchangeably to describe production philosophy although there can be little difference in their metaphoric conceptions especially to proper theatre initiates. Some of these concepts even build on the others for theatrical clarity. There are:

- (a) Production Concept or Directorial Concept
- (b) Theoretical Framework or Production Theory
- (c) Production Spirit or Performance Interpretation
- (d) Performance Approach or Directorial Approach

THE THESIS & SYNTHESIS OF PRODUCTION PHILOSOPHY IN THEATRE DIRECTING

Building directors should, however, not be confused because some of these key concepts of production philosophy are often being twisted or re-arranged depending on the user's choice. Expressions such as; "the concept of the production, the concept of the director, theoretical foundation, theory of production, spirit of production, directorial interpretation, approach to performance, style of directing, approach to directing or style of production" should, therefore, not be surprising and confusing, no intentional fallacy but a clear leitmotif of language of theatre directing.

Basically, production philosophy is a creation of the director that radiates or permeates through a theatre performance. It determines the overall aesthetics of the final production. It also determines the director and the designers' choice of costumes, props, movement, acting style, type of set to use, manner of delivery/speech, characterisation and the general kinetic aesthetics of the production.

Nelms (1958, pp. 34-40) in his book, *Play Production* says that the "spirit in which the audience will take the performance is governed by the spirit of the production, which in turn, depends on the spirit of the script... The spirit of the production may, on rare occasions, differ from that of the script". It is the spirit of production that determines the final output of a production and a production spirit can be determined through; the script, the director's style or approach to the theatre, audience choice, staging area, finance, types of performers available and so on.

Production philosophy ultimately is giving theoretical base to the performance. The theoretical base is also a solid foundation with which the performance, 'the proof of the production' will be built. Directorial concept has also been defined as "a very strong, controlling, eclectic, revolving and engaging abstract

word that usually guides the artistic director's vision of the play" (Musa, 2004, p. 26) and that which Brockett (1992, p. 311) says must "give shape to the production". While directorial concept is usually one abstract or metaphoric word, directorial interpretation is a well coded and crafted parable for a production. For example, if the directorial concept of Wale Ogunyemi's *Ijaye* is "war" the directorial interpretation can be, "war as a weapon of mass destruction". An average of six or eight directorial images such as conflict, crisis, disagreement, tension, discontentment, disaffection, disunity and disdain can thus be created and allow to permeate acting, costume, movement, set, make-up, props and so on in the production. These directorial images as a matter of fact flow from "war", the definitive directorial concept for the production. Interestingly, both the directorial concept and directorial images should also take their root from the directorial interpretation. This lies the important of the triad of directorial interpretation, directorial concept and directorial images in the intellectual stimulation of a production. The stimulating triad should not be ignored or make to die in the production. Certainly, the death of the triad can be likened to the death of an old woman which signals the burning of library in Africa.

Importantly, the play director must understand the underlining currents behind production philosophy and as an interpreter; the director must be willing to "conceiving a personal vision of a play, which the actors can then be asked to realise in acted terms" (Morrison, 1984, p. 10).

The Thesis of Production Philosophy

The history of the theatre is replete with numerous theatrical performances and styles. This invariably presupposes that there are numerous production styles, production theories and directorial styles contesting for space. We, therefore, have numerous production philosophies which play directors can draw from. Production styles such as; cubism, biomechanics, realism, naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, theatricalism, constructivism, alienation effect, folkism, 'neo-alienation' (a directorial cum theatrical style created by the researcher) and 'facequerade' (a new theatrical aesthetics in the traditional African festival theatre that expands the masquerade idiom created by Sunday Enessi Ododo) among others.

Space is not enough for critical theorising of these styles. However, naturalism is a 'late-nineteenth-century form of extreme realism' championed by Emile Zola, it "was the first artistic movement to treat working class characters with the same seriousness accorded upper classes by earlier movements... naturalism is often used as a label for plays that seek to re-create details of everyday life" (Brockett, 1992, p. 437). Realism is also "meant to designate a current mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature". Through another intellectual gaze, Abrams and Harpham (2012, pp. 334-335) also expanded the base of naturalism after their conception of realism above as "sometimes claimed

to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism...that human being exists entirely in order of nature and does not have a soul nor any access to a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world”.

The interconnection between one play-text to another, therefore, finds theoretical solace in intertextuality. In fact, intertextuality is

used to signify the multiple ways in which only one literary text is in fact made up of other text, by means of its open or covert citations and illusions...any text is in fact an “intertextuality” – the site of an intersection of numberless of other texts and existing only through its relations to other texts (Abrams and Harpham, 2012, p. 401).

In the ‘sociology of the text’, the director should note the potency and the relevance of the ideological leaning of the playwright as he comes to term with the reality of the problems of the society treated in his chosen play. The issue of ideology also makes Yerima (2007, pp. 11-12) to conclude that “ideology gives the play form...writing a play that would have an impact on the society, requires a level of commitment on the part of the playwright”. Also, symbolists (through) symbolism “argued that truth can only be expressed indirectly through symbols” (Brockert, 1992, p. 441).

Theatricalism, with its “avalanche of experimentation”, and in the reasoning of Nwabueze (2011, pp. 62-63), “old forms and conventions are questioned, undermined, and rejected in favour of freer and more relevant theatrical forms; as obtains in other art forms. This rebellion takes many forms and covers all aspects of the theatre”. Nwabueze (2011, p. 63) also says that Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s The Living Theatre, Chaikin’s Open Theatre, Richard Schechner’s Environmental Theatre, Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and most of Peter Brooks productions identified as, the deadly theatre, the holy theatre, the immediate theatre and the rough theatre fall under the expanse of theatricalism. On the other hand, Bertolt Brecht alienation effect calls for audience disbeliefability and disassociation through “transposition into the third person, transposition into the past and speaking the stage directions out loud” (Willet, 1964, p. 138). Most of these production philosophies also have representative published play-texts; play directors must thus read and understand them. Directors should also see them as theatrical movements and performance modes that are developed through ages and created through individuals’ theatrical experiments.

The point is that, the thesis-popular and near-popular production theories/styles, directorial styles/concepts/interpretations/approaches and general approaches to performances must be thoroughly digested by prospective and experience directors. This will help play directors to sharpen their theoretical skills as they formulate good production philosophies for their future productions. No director

should be tired of reading or seeking to understand production theories or styles and when a director watches a play directed by another director, he should be able to tell categorically, the production style employed.

The Synthesis of Production Philosophy

Working out a production philosophy is a dynamic and speculative directorial exercise that can never be static in the theatre. This is because directors' creative, interpretative and imaginative powers are different. Directors do not see a play the same way. A play director may interpret Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* from Yoruba's metaphysical world, another may read the concept of rites of passage into it while some may approach the play from "clash of Western and African cultures" irrespective of the playwright's strong objection to that interpretation.

Apart from this, while some plays have clearly defined themes others do not. In fact, "a few plays permit more than one interpretation, any change in interpretation will affect the style" (Nelms, 1958, p. 39). Combination of production styles are also allowed in the theatre and are even being done in the play directing process. For instance, a director can combine realism with symbolism as styles of production for his chosen play. The researcher has in the past made a statements such as, "what we may not totally realise in the play can be symbolised for theatrical effect" and "obviously, we will strive at realism in acting and symbolism in scenery" and many more can thus be used to defend director's combination of production styles.

Production thesis must thus be synthesized within the reality of practical theatre. The choice or taste of the audience must also be considered as we draw out a good production philosophy. If the audience prefers the total theatre idiom, the theatre director should make a meaning out of the saturated idioms of total theatre by avoiding repetitions and by creating new modes and methods of the total theatre.

Production philosophy should be well formulated at the preparatory stage and if rehearsal starts properly, the play director should be humble enough to change his production philosophy if the first one is not working. This can be done by reworking a new production philosophy which will carry out the intention of the playwright, projects the director's creative vision, and develops the potentials of the performers, and that which will satisfy the artistic curiosity of the audience.

The Conclusion

Play directing is a painstaking theatre business. It is an art of the theatre which cannot be done in haste and hurry. It is, therefore, important for the budding and experience play directors to equip themselves theoretically with the thesis and synthesis of production philosophy with the hope of having good theatrical direction

in the theatre. Directing is not an art of the theatre that can be jumped at. It has its own basic tenets, rules and metaphors which play directors, must strive to understand.

For the audience's dramatic curiosity and theatrical expectations to be met, play directors, must not be onlookers in their fruitful search to construct and deconstruct plays for dramatic and theatrical presentations. The avalanche of theoretical options has simplified the work of the artistic directors. They should, therefore, note that there is power, grace and growth if "the principle of multiple options" (Aiyeyina, 2010, p. 10) is embraced as they appropriate the thesis and synthesis of production philosophy for effective, efficient and enduring theatrical direction in the African literary theatre.

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