AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF OLA ROTIMI’S THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

The study examines Ola Rotimi’s Theatre from both the literary and theatrical perspectives. The study contends that Ola Rotimi created/developed simplicity of style both in his playwriting and in theatre practice. The study also notes that Rotimi has created the drama and theatre of lasting quality through his knowledge of the culture and tradition of his people and his copious deployment of Para-linguistic aesthetics in his plays. Rotimi anchors all these on his knowledge of world theatre in his practice, thus creating the phenomenon of total theatre. The study concludes that the laws of the theatre are provisional and subject to change, derived from creativity and not from theory.

KEYWORDS: Ola Rotimi, Aesthetic Dimensions, African Theatre, Playwriting, Para-linguistic aesthetics, Theatre Practice.

INTRODUCTION

This is a brief study of Ola Rotimi’s theatre from both the literary and theatrical perspectives. It is a truism, as this paper contends that Ola Rotimi created/developed simplicity of style and profound subtlety of content in his play construction and anchored his theatre practice on a very firm foundation, all of which are worth emulating by theatre practitioners for sustaining the development of theatre practice in Nigeria. How did he achieve this?

Ola Rotimi’s Drama and Theatre

Ola Rotimi created his plays practically for the stage. He wrote with the axiom that plays are created for performance. Consequently, his plays are very stage able. A director confronted with an Ola Rotimi’s play does not necessarily need to be a genius or an expert in costume, mime, dance, or properties before he could create something from the given circumstances of the play. His language is quite accessible and the dramatic events or situations or desired effects are usually not difficult to delineate. In fact, Rotimi does not leave production problems in the practical theatre for the directors alone to resolve, rather, he lends a hand in finding solutions to such problems. Examples of some of his plays where a director gets such a feeling are The Gods are not to Blame, Hopes of the Living Dead, If..., Our Husband has Gone Mad Again, Kurunmi, and so on.

For instance, Rotimi demonstrates how he helps the producer/director in solving production problems in If... A Tragedy of the Ruled when he writes “A Note on the Dynamics of this Production” thus:
From the viewpoint of directing, this, purposefully, is a drama of juxtaposed, variegated actions: a further exploration of theatrical ‘naturalness’ in the evocation of African atmosphere and rhythms through time, space, sound and matter.

Technically here, no action need stop so that another can begin. Sometimes, the actions of one moment crash upon another; other times they follow one after the other with innate civility, yet ‘trippingly’ – driven in their ‘natural’ modes by tensions of threatened wills.

Overall, a convoluting concourse of happenings is the particular stage picture to be evoked. (Rotimi, 1983, p. viii)

With the above note, the director has been adequately informed of what to expect in the play and consequently knows what to do to realise the dramatic action of the play. Later in the play, Rotimi guides the director/producer further when he states:

Producer’s note:
All the following Three Scenes are to run concurrently – overlapping, underlying, dovetailing but never clashing, never jarring with one another. (Rotimi, 1983, p. 31)

In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Rotimi also provides such explanations and stage directions to assist the director. A directorial study of his plays shows that these two plays are quite complex and would appear more difficult to handle directorially but for the suggestions he has given in the prefatory notes and stage directions.

As a self-conscious aesthete who worked and helped in the creation of modern or contemporary African Theatre, Rotimi has earlier stated in an interview with Effiok B. Uwatt that

I normally state in the text those essential data that could help both the director and the actors visualise what the histrionic possibilities are. That is all. Just the essentials... it is up to the director and actors to pad up, beef up this framework from the resources of his own particular insight and artistic sensitivity. I know some playwrights take delight in copious stage
directions in the tradition of Bernard Shaw. Essays on what one thinks about the play, about the characters, their lives; drama. Rather confining and superfluous. (Uwatt, 1990, p. 183-184)

This shows that in Rotimi’s theatre stage directions have a functional value that dictates the tone and mood of the stage spectacle. Hence in “Happenings I” of Hopes of the Living Dead, for instance, the stage directions tell us at once:

Darkness

Choral singing:
CHEB EMO O, NNA
(Protect me, Lord)

The song – harmoniously balanced, rich – swells forth from the stage and wraps up the entire audience in full-bodied suffusion. (Rotimi, 1988, p. 1)

In all his plays, this is the pattern of stage directions – brief and direct to the point. Throughout Hopes... and the other plays, Rotimi gives such helpful stage directions whenever he deems it necessary. He does not, like George Bernard Shaw, set his “scenes in the utmost details” giving his actors and directors “an embarrassment of help by describing both the outward appearance and personality of his characters” (Churchill, 1972, p. 223).

Furthermore, Rotimi “puts much attention to the dramatic forms and the styles of performance suitable for the social vision...” (Jeyifo, 1995, p. 187) expressed in these plays. He realised this through the direction of all his major plays. A trained theatre director and playwright, he took delight in directing the world premieres of most of his plays (Ejeke, 1998, p. 229).

Let it be stated here that Rotimi’s theatre experiment is anchored on the philosophy of breaking the traditional barrier between elitism and popularism. Both in his playwriting and in theatre practice, he aimed at creating a rapport between the actors and the audience. He created both a language of drama and that of the theatre.

Rotimi’s language of drama is very interesting. At his best, the language is simple. In all his dramatic texts, he creates a kind of language that is easily accessible to his audience. He demonstrates a special skill in devising a workable, common-sense type of language. He makes use of symbols, simple words, varied sentence structures, and images, which facilitate easy comprehension of the plays. He uses it, among other things, to create mood, atmosphere, and spectacle; his language interpenetrates the culture of the people for whom he writes. Rotimi’s verbal disposition in his plays complements his stagecraft, which demonstrates a good mastery
of his chosen medium of expression— the theatre. The language of his drama is frank, somewhat shocking even. In fact, Rotimi’s language strikes “a balance between making concessions to the educational inadequacies of his audience and remaining true to his creative impulse” (Nasiru, 1979, p. 28).

In *The Gods are not to Blame*, for example, proverbs such as “A toad likes water but not when it’s boiling”, “I am the butterfly who calls himself a bird”, “Can a cockroach be innocent in a gathering of fowls?” and “We are close friends like he-goats and coco yams” are used in the right places by the right characters at the “correct” moment of time in the drama (Kennedy, 1973, p. 186). These proverbs and other local imagery used throughout the play give the dramatic events portrayed local flavour and originality. They also help to define the characters and establish a kind of relationship between the potential (Nigerian) audience and the phenomenon in the play. In other words, Rotimi’s use of local imagery reinforces the drama and aids comprehension. A study of the other plays reveals such dexterity linguistically and in the deployment of local imagery. Metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and so on are used generously in his plays to create effects. Rotimi admits that his language in the plays is designed consciously to cut across the Nigerian populace—the semi-literate and the highly educated. His linguistic resources advocate interplay between (learning), creativity, and life.

Rotimi also employs the language of the theatre as a skilful playwright with an abiding sense of the stage in mind in his dramatic composition. A sense of the stage in a playwright means his power to judge whether his meaning and intention can be effective with a contemporary audience, and whether the ends of his play can be served in terms of his chosen medium, the theatre, with its actors and physical equipment and circumstances. It implies an ability to be alert in several directions at once, and especially towards actor and spectator... A sense of the stage implies that a playwright is doing many things at the same time... (Styan, 1971, pp. 1-2).

Let me make the point that in scripting, the contemporary Nigerian playwright is highly influenced by technological development in the theatre. In the conception, construction and physical/stage realisation of his major plays such as *Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaiyi, If...* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, for instance, it is of paramount aesthetic significance to note that Rotimi’s concept of theatre includes the cinematic flow of events from one scene to another made possible by modern stage lighting control. This is due to his knowledge of the physical theatre. This influence is incorporated into the play scripts as is evident in the stage directions of Rotimi’s plays.

Rotimi creates his plays spelling out even details of movements, outlining clearly the stage geography and lighting as we can see in many of the plays. The opening stage directions
of The Gods are not to Blame, If... and Hopes of the Living Dead supremely illustrate this phenomenon in his dramatic composition. For, he effectively combines “a knowledge of world theatre practice with a sound knowledge of Nigerian traditional and modern drama and theatre” (Adelugba, 1978, p. 202). It is from this solid base, Adelugba contends, that Rotimi has established a new form of theatrical expression.

Aesthetics of Ola Rotimi’s Drama and Theatre

From the foregoing, two important inferences can be drawn: firstly, that Rotimi creates aesthetics/beauty out of language; secondly, that he has adapted, domesticated or indigenised the English Language to “achieve authenticity as well as to accomplish his sociological and theatrical objectives” as Olu Obafemi notes about Femi Osofisan’s theatre (Obafemi, 1995, p. 13).

Another aesthetic feature of Rotimi’s drama and theatre is the use of music, dance, songs, and incantations. Rotimi’s theatre tremendously exploits the vigour of both traditional and modern African drama and theatre. He uses music and dance in his theatre consistently in respect to the mood and the tone of his plays. His generous use of the richness of African culture adds new dimensions in respect to meaning and character portrayal (Kennedy, 1973, p. 186). Rotimi makes copious use of traditional indices in his plays and theatre practice. For the nourishing source of Rotimi’s theatre is his rich Yoruba cultural background. They have numerous festivals during the celebration of which theatrical elements such as songs, chants, incantations, dances and proverbs are lavishly deployed to add aesthetic coloration to these events.

Rotimi’s knowledge of the Yoruba culture is adequately reflected in the traditional contents of nearly all his dramatic texts, his productions and his essays and academic discourses. Consequently, the language of his plays contains almost everything in this culture – smells, sounds, colours – as a study of The Gods are not to Blame, Kurunmi, Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi reveals.

Let it be stated clearly here that in Rotimi’s theatre, drama, music, dance, mime, chants and incantations are structurally unified in the “ideational and artistic presentation.” The use of these elements is quite functional and not ornamental. This is because music, song, and dance are used in the plays to express what Awodiya refers to as the characters’ “humanity and society: the people’s philosophy, folk tales, rituals, ceremonies, rhetorics, proverbs, myth, and history...” (Awodiya, 1995, p. 181).

Music is an important auditory stimulus used in Ola Rotimi’s theatre. Its functional value cannot be overstressed in play production (Ejeke, 1994, p. 51). Music arouses the imagination and gives aesthetic pleasure. Its application in the plays and productions of Rotimi provides a heightened expression of the mood and emotional aesthetics of the plays and productions as he carefully blends it with the dialogue and dramatic action. In a nutshell, music has been used by Rotimi as background material and between scenes just as is very obvious in If..., Hopes of the Living Dead and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. In these plays, The Gods are not to Blame and even Kurunmi, Rotimi employs chants, incantations, songs and music not only to reinforce the moods and themes of the plays but also to aesthetically complement the dramatic action.
It has been observed that “Ola Rotimi shuns theories”. This is because he does not write lengthy forwards, prefatory notes and author’s introductory remarks as background information on his plays (Iji, 1996, p. 5). In the plays where he writes some form of introductory remarks – Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, If... and Hopes of the Living Dead – such remarks are very slim, justifying the earlier supposition that he abhors such theoretical interjections.

Let it be quickly added that The Gods are not to Blame, Kurunmi and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi have dramatic affinity with classical Greek and Elizabethan tragic modes in structure and form in their composition. The dramatic events in these plays revolve around heroes who are noblemen and aristocrats in their respective societies.

In If... Rotimi used the existentialist mode to cast and depict the characters and dramatic events. Rotimi postulates through this play that man is free but this freedom can only be what he makes out of it, and that man is the architect of his condition. In fact, the main thesis and theme of this play is change. If... advocates a change in our society for the better. In the dramatization of the events in the play, we can sense a feeling of despair, decision and indecision, dread and even self-deception in the experience and dramatic actions of the characters such as Garuba Kazaure (who has been “thingified” by circumstances beyond his control), Akpan Ntuk Akpan, of alias “Ten Trouble, one God” fame whose obsession for excessive alcohol consumption is a direct consequence of the condition of existence and Betty Oviamwen and the thugs whose actions are conditioned by the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Due to the disunity among the characters in If... the change of the status quo for a better society which this play advocates is not realised. Such a change is attained in Hopes of the Living Dead which is a drama of collective struggle for social, political and economic emancipation. Rotimi resorts to the Marxist materialist aesthetics in the realisation of his goal in this play. This is the only play in which Rotimi successfully dramatizes a revolution for a change of the prevailing oppressive system for a better society. Similarly, in Holding Talks, Rotimi uses the absurdist aesthetics to satirize or parody the situation in Nigeria whereby people and even the government prefer dialogues and discourses without taking immediate positive action to correct or save a situation from getting out of hand.

Another aesthetic aspect that must be considered in this paper is Rotimi’s concept of the theatre. His form of theatre revolves around the principles of theatre-in-the-round. Rotimi’s theatrical experiment right from when he established the Ori-Olokun theatre at Ife and the Crab Theatre at Port Harcourt has been deeply rooted in this form of presentation. It is evident that all his major plays are conceived with the open staging theatre structure in mind. For example, The Gods are not to Blame, Ovonramwen Nogboaisi, Kurunmi, and Hopes of the Living Dead. According to Uwatt (1990, p.180), Rotimi’s “adoption of this mode of performance is due to his (Rotimi’s) awareness that this structure is the only formation that approximates aboriginal theatre arrangement, at least in Africa, South of the Sahara.” Theatre-in-the-round is the natural form of African dramatic playing space. African festival theatre thrives on the open stage.

Rotimi attests to his dislike for the proscenium theatre arrangement when he declares in an interview:
Even where circumstances do compel my theatre to a proscenium stage, we deliberately set out to affront the conventions of the proscenium style of production, which interfere with our desire to feel the audience as being one with us. Our entrances and exits find access through the wings on stage as well as through aisles in the auditorium. Even escape emergency doors are no exception. Our crowd scenes further defy the proscenium laws, overflowing as such scenes often do, the ‘apron’ of the stage and sluicing over when necessary right into the orchestra pit. On occasions, rather than send left over spectators away after a full house, we arrange chairs on stage and accommodate them. The more circumscribed by spectators my actors are the more inspired their acting I have discovered, and the keener their concentration. (Lindfors, 1974, p. 60-61)

In another interview with Uwatt, Rotimi outlines the advantages of his form of staging in these words:

I hardly use the proscenium. In fact, I detest the proscenium, which I consider to be a colonial heritage and see it as alienating the people. Between the proscenium and the audience, you have a space... what we call the “Orchestra Pit”. Or you have, in a picture-frame kind of stage, tormentors, teasers: all those structural paraphernalia of the picture-frame stage you have what I’ve come to call a ‘technical apartheid’. A separation of performers from spectators, which is alien to our traditional mode of theatre display. In traditional African theatre, the performers are close to spectators; spectators themselves feel other spectators; performers engulf them in the suffusion of communal experience... (Uwatt, 1990, p. 181).

The proscenium stage convention alienates the audience from the total impact of the dramatic action. This is widely in vogue in a large proportion of plays produced in Nigeria today. However, “Rotimi’s adoption of theatre-in-the-round is born out of the need to involve
his audience positively in his dramatic experience and establish close intimacy between actors and audience” (Uwatt, 1990, p. 80). There is a strong communal feeling among Africans, which naturally suggests the use of arena theatre space such as is advocated and practiced by Rotimi. In fact, the traditional contents of most Nigerian plays can only be fully orchestrated in such an arrangement – theatre-in-the-round – which is original to African dramatic performances. In his staging technique, Rotimi seems to echo Antonin Artaud who proclaims: “We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind” (Artaud, 1970, p. 96)

In the directorial sphere, Rotimi is adequately informed on directorial principles and techniques. He successfully established that multi-scenic staging is the most suitable production method on the contemporary Nigerian stage, when space must require copious deployment of crowd. We can see that his major plays parade many characters. In Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, for instance, the “Opening scene – a political rally... immediately reveals Rotimi’s penchant for the expertly coordinated crowd scene – suggests that the central vision of the play is like that of Achebe’s A Man of the People” (Dunton 8).

Rotimi’s primary emphasis is on the aesthetics and the effective deployment of the crowd scenes, which intimates in a total theatrical (spectacular) formation both on stage and in the script. The practical justification of his crowd scenes in the productions of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, Hopes of the Living Dead, Kurunmi, and The Gods are not to Blame rests on the pictorial motion-effect they create, just like those of the productions of George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. His directorial art is akin to the Duke’s in many respects. Thus, in the composition and prosecution of his plays, Rotimi exhibits a “stage economy that corresponds to dramatic economy, a performing style engendered by a literary style” (Chinoy, 1963, p. 48).

CONCLUSION

On the whole, as a playwright, Rotimi is quite interesting and as a director he could reach great heights. His special flair for creating dramatic spectacle complements his directorial competence. He has an eye for dramatic detail and an intimate knowledge of his chosen medium – the theatre. Consequently, he creates his plays with practical aesthetic finesse. When he directs, he recreates the given circumstances of the play under direction graphically and dramatically. In directorial procedure, Rotimi exemplifies his authentic aesthetic approach, thus creating an eclectic directorial iconoclasm that depicts the African communal milieu realistically. Hence, the assertion that Ola Rotimi is an adept in theatre directing and stagecraft and that his practice inculcates in us that “the ‘laws’ of the theatre are provisional and subject to change, derived from the creative act and not from theory”.

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