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SEARCHING FOR THE MEANING: THE PURPOSE OF PLAY ANALYSIS FOR PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the centrality of interpretation or play analysis in the production scheme. It stresses that play analysis/interpretation occupies an important position for the director, cast and crew of a production since it enhances their comprehension of the play at hand. The study contends that a play well interpreted would be successful if the director follows the interpretation and communicates such interpretation to his associates properly. Hence, theatre directors must devote time and attention to this significant aspect of preparation for a production.

Keywords: Searching, Meaning, Interpretation, Dramatic Action, Production Scheme.

Introduction

In the conception of a production, the director of such a production must choose a play, which he must study closely before calling his first production meeting. Many reasons influence the choice of a play for production. For instance, Wycliffe Bennett, play director of the Jamaican School of Drama, states that

... in spite of other considerations, usually there is an episode, an event or a scene in the play which you like very much and because of which you want to direct the play ... (cited in Ejeke 10).

Furthermore, a play could be selected for production due to its linguistic embellishment. For instance, a play like *Muntu* by Joe de Graft or *Ozidi* by J.P. Clark could be chosen for such a reason beside others. The poetic language of the plays coupled with the grandeur of the accompanying dramatic action is quite exciting to a modern audience. The language is full of local, foreign, and elemental imagery.

Moreover, the structure of a play could also make a director to want to physicalize such a play. The nature of the dramatic action could also make a director choose a play for production. A production of Joe de Graft's *Muntu* directed by this writer in 1988 was thus influenced.

Still, a director's choice of a play for production could be guided by the need to vary the diet of plays that have been produced in an institution or community in recent times. The type of plays produced in a particular environment needs some variation from time to time to satisfy the audience's appetite for art and to reflect contemporary events. Hence, if tragedies have been produced in one season, the next season of plays should include some comedies or farces or a combination of all types. If plays with large casts have been in vogue in one theatre season, there is the need to include plays with few characters in the subsequent season or such plays should be chosen in combination in each season. In addition, directors in institutions of learning especially could choose plays for production because of "instructional purposes in style, convention, historical perspective, theatrical value, and aesthetics" (Sofola 110). Such a philosophy guided my choice of *The Island* devised by Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona, and John Kani in 1996 for the Calabar University Theatre.

There are other reasons for choosing a play for production such as the type of theatre, the available fund for the production, the purpose of production, and even the type of audience for whom the production is targeted and so on but that is not the core of this study. This study, essentially, deals with the purposes and some approaches of play analysis for production.

Play Analysis: Approaches, Purposes, and Significance

To understand the chosen play through study the director has to formally analyse the play to bring to the surface its production or theatrical potentials. For play analysis is the dismantling of the whole play into its constituent parts for careful examination of the other parts in order to have better understanding of the play in question. The play is knocked down completely for each part to be analyzed. The play is then re-assembled after a thorough analysis of its different parts. A process helps in the exposition of the meaning of the play to the director. Such a procedure is of paramount significance to the director since he must communicate the essential meaning of the play to the cast and crew of the production with utmost clarity. This would facilitate the

comprehension of the play by the crucial associates of the director. It would also help them to grasp with relative ease, the director's concept of the production.

Arguably, analysis, as some aesthetic theorists suppose, "interferes with the immediate and full response to a work of art. But analysis is preparation for a fuller, deeper response to the gestalt of the work" (Gross 1164), especially for the director.

Play analysis is subjective. The subjective element in play interpretation "is what makes directing creative and the theatre varied and fascinating" as David Sievers notes, pointing out that the final phase of the director's interpretative study is the preparation of the text for production. Hence, Sievers' summation that

the director's interpretative study of a play, involving scholarly, critical, and creative aspects, is the period in which the director becomes deeply absorbed with his play, and from which he evolves the ultimate unity of production. Interpretation involves the dualism of creative and technical aspects ... internal and external impression and expression... (Sievers 6)

Before the director can begin his work with the cast (or even choose a cast intelligently), he needs to evolve and crystallize in his mind an interpretation of the play. In *Directing for the Theatre*, David Sievers succinctly states that not anyone who does not find this phase of theatre art rewarding and stimulating should go any further in his directorial ambition (31). According to Sievers, the fundamental purposes of the director's interpretation are to determine the meaning of the play and to find a form in which to project this meaning to the audience.

In the same vein, H.D. Albright, W.P. Halstead and Lee Mitchell in *Principles of Theatre Art* postulate that the primary purpose of the director is to communicate to an audience as completely and perfectly as possible his interpretation – that is to say, his understanding – of the logical and emotional content of a play script (330), which is the understanding of the play script through study; expression, which is the preparation of the vocal and physical means by which to convey this understanding to an audience; and criticism, which is the evaluation of this expression in order to perfect it.

It is their contention that “directors vary as to the intensity and the method of their study of a script and its backgrounds and they vary in these from play to play and meaning ...” Briefly; the director’s major objective in play production is complete and perfect communication. The business of the directors at the interpretative stage revolves around the study and analysis or rearranging and adapting the script for production.

Due to the central position of interpretation or analysis in the production process, it is imperative that regardless of

the time available, the director must familiarize himself as thoroughly as he can with the play if he is to cast and rehearse the actors intelligently, and if he is to assist the designers and technicians in their interpretation of the script.
(Brockett 466)

Brockett maintains that a clear-cut concept is out of utmost significance in creating a sense that the director has outlined the essence of a play and has designed his production around that definition. He contends that

analysis or concepts may be thorough and brilliant, adequate but uninspired, or over-simplified and misguided. Ultimately, however, no analysis or concept is superior to the person behind it. The importance of sensitivity, perceptiveness, and intelligence to a director cannot be over-estimated. Furthermore, of all theatre artists, the director needs most to be broadly educated, for unless he perceives and understands the manifold subtleties and implications of scripts from diverse periods and cultures he is apt to be inadequate in areas crucial to the success of the productions in which he should be the principal catalyst and guide (471).

In *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication and Style*, Francis Hodge suggests seven criteria for analyzing a play production, viz: the given circumstances, dialogue, dramatic action, characters, ideas, tempos and moods (21-59). According to him, the given circumstances define the place and time or period of the play, its economic, political, social, and religious environment. These provide the deeply rooted foundation of the play- the special world or universe in which the dramatic events take place. He goes on to state that the dialogue is the facade of the

playscript. "Dialogue," he notes, "is the vehicle of dramatic action, the lifeblood of the play." The primary function of dramatic dialogue is to be heard and not read. For plays are created fundamentally for performance. Hodge also defines dramatic action as the "clash of forces in a play – the continuous conflict between characters." The character, he explains is made up of all the dramatic actions an individual takes in the course of the play. Thus, character is a summary of all the dramatic actions. He also asserts dramatic action and characters are the hard – core of the script while given circumstances and dialogue constitute the foundation and facade of the play script.

Hodge carefully group ideas, tempos, and moods and defines them collectively as the derivatives of dramatic action in a play script. He states that the "idea of a play is the core meaning of what it has to say" stressing that the idea is both derives from an assessment of characters in action and is a summary statement of such action". Hence, it is the sum total of the play script (Hodge 48). Tempos, he states, "are the changing rates or beats of the dramatic action in a play". He points out that when a "sequential arrangement of tempos are combined", we strongly feel "the varying beats of several consecutive units" leading to the real pulsations of a play known as rhythm. He defines moods as "the feelings or emotions generated from the clash of forces in the dramatic action," noting that the cumulative effect of these moods defines the tone of a play. Aptly put, moods are "the tonal feelings of a play."

Hodge concludes that the director's play analysis is the basis of his communication with the cast and crew and the audience, his understanding of the play. He warns that this analysis could be lengthy and must be written to ensure that all the relevant aspects (points) of the play have been covered. This analytical approach will help to "judge what combination of qualities makes the play effective ... to enrich the texture of the play and clarify the meaning" (Morrison 13).

In *The Theatrical Image*, Clay and Krempel define play analysis or interpretation "as being to a great extent the reconstruction of the creative process through which the playwright has gone" (49). Artistic meaning, according to them is metaphorical. Consequently, a successful interpretation geared towards the production, the physicalization or the stage realization of the play, must include what the play is like. Since the medium in which the playwright forms this metaphorical image contains the liberal content and its significance to the audience, such

interpretation must state what the play is about. For interpretation is the director's responsibility for script enhancement. Furthermore, since the medium in which the playwright forms his metaphor reflects his ideas of the theatre, the director's interpretation of it must also embody the play's theatrical context (Clay Krempel 50). They remark that at its best metaphorical thinking creates new dimensions, feeling, and understanding. It is a way of thinking which enables us to transfer appropriate and vivid emotional associations to a subject, which we might not otherwise sense so keenly.

According to Clay and Krempel, the deeper meaning of a play which is often exclusive "can be approached by realizing that a play creates its meaning for the audience" in a dream-like manner. They note that it is the overall pattern of the dream that is meaningful just as the play's overall pattern. Clay and Krempel contend that the pattern of a dream is the essence of the dreamer's reaction to a complex of experiences. "This pattern is an idea", they note.

Similarly, "the form of a dramatic action is an idea, and this pattern is the essence of the playwright's reaction to a complex of experiences." Hence, the meaning of a play is a "metaphorical image" and that "no matter how philosophical, logical, or real most plays seem, their reality, logic or philosophy are parts of a larger meaning – a meaning which orders and patterns all these and may therefore be called a commanding image". This, they argue, is "the essence of a playwright's communication, a realization, a concept, a felt significance – expressed through the impact of the total form."

Clay and Krempel also assert that the play's fundamental meaning – the thing, which makes its pattern of human action art and not history, philosophy or psychology – is a metaphorical communication of experience, an "idea" of feelings, and a meaningful form. They maintain that the playwright shapes this raw material from concrete reality such as his concept of acting, the actors he knows, the theatre he works in and his sense of his audience – a whole complex of manners, mores, tastes, and attitudes that includes such things as history, philosophy, and psychology. They contend that the impact of all these factors considerably affects the form in which the playwright is able to conceive a dramatic idea. These, they argue, are all part of the playwright's medium and so must be studied to fully comprehend the author's intended meaning

and must be dealt with in a creating production to express it. Hence, the structure and form plays take.

Their discourse leads to the assertion that the fundamental aim of interpretation is to grasp the commanding image, and to sense the play's total form as the author felt it. Thus, the interpretation of a play is a problem like the playwright's – discovering the pattern or form of action that embodies the intended meaning. In their definition, they outline the commanding image as consisting of emotional reactions to concrete things, stressing that such reactions cannot occur in the interpreter unless the literal contents are fully understood. The director, according to them,

must understand the facts and events as the author's audience understood them, or the image will not emerge. ... The interpreter must understand what the play is about and its relation to playwright's world – its culture, society, and current events (Clay & Krempel 53).

They make the important point that the tasks of the interpreter (director in this instance) is to expose the commanding image to the audience. This is achieved by “contributing his sense of his own audience to the medium in which the idea is conveyed.” They submit that the good interpreter (director) studies the playwright's sense of his audience, “he has his own sense of his audience; and he expresses one in terms of the other”, justifying their assertion that “all play production is a problem in translation”.

They conclude that the commanding image of a play “must be sought through associational techniques” because metaphor manifests through association. Through this process, the director grasps, in Gordon Craig's parlance, “the entire colour, tone, movement, and rhythm that the work must assume.” In fact, the director's interpretation brings to the surface the latent aesthetic decorum in a dramatic script. It is pertinent to stress here that “every detail, no matter how literal and minute, can be evaluated in terms of its contribution” to the commanding image and the director should be conscious of this fact in his interpretation process.

In *Understanding Playscripts: Theory and Method*, Roger Gross argues that a director's interpretation of a script for production is the product of the study of the play, “the whole

recallable experience of the script and all the inferences which may be drawn from that experience of the script plus the mass of subliminal alterations caused by the experience which will affect subsequent encounters with the script or its embodiment on the stage” (27). The director’s goal is a complete understanding of the play at hand. Hence, his definition of interpretation as a

lengthy, careful study of the script, employing every available means to bring the reader to a closer understanding of the hypothetical play, an understanding which, is operative at all levels of consciousness and which cannot be fully formulated (29).

Gross explains that most of the interpreter’s work (the director in this instance) has nothing to do with “appreciation” of the art, pointing out that while the audience has a love affair with the work, the interpreter works more like the ideal general medical practitioner who has a close personal, intuitive relationship with the patient but it is based on and corrected by precise anatomical and chemical knowledge. He asserts that the function of interpretation is not to substitute it for the aesthetic experience but to prepare the reader for and to monitor the full aesthetic response to the hypothetical play. Accordingly, interpretation performs the double function of helping the director to note, “What he otherwise might miss and to keep him from seeing in the script what is not implied.”

Roger Gross contends that the director’s interpretation (analysis) seeks to place the play on its correct perspective. Interpretation is quite a subjective analysis of a play script. The director puts his own vision on the play. All members of the cast and crew are expected to work towards the realization of this directorial vision in the performance of the play. For, the need to project unity of effects necessitated the emergence of the theatre director in the late 19th century. Thus, a director’s interpretation of a play is analogous to a hypothesis, which is only in the actual performance of the play based on that interpretation. This is because as a craftsman in the theatre, the artistic function of the director is largely interpretative since his primary concern is about the play script and how best to project its meaning on stage via the actors and his other production associated for the audience. Hence, Gross’s assertion that the success of the director’s work as an interpreter depends on “his fund of relevant information (i.e. his ability to solve

problems" (30)).

It is imperative that the "director *must* read a script as the composer reads a song lyric for which he is to write the music; he *must* learn to read it in terms of its implicit or potential physicality" (Gross 34, emphasis mine). Gross also makes the point that skill in interpretation requires not only a knowledge of the common language but also "an ability to sense the uniqueness of the personal language of the author", noting that play script "interpretation is the quest for apt response to the symbols which constitute the play script and to the signals implied by those symbols". Gross also argues that due to the pervasive irony of drama, signals are studied in the same way as symbols, as functions within a situation, and that the "aptness of responses is determined by, and discovered through the study of the whole situation, the immediate and the 'historical' or the 'internal' and the 'external'" (40).

Therefore, the chief artistic duty of the director as an interpreter is to reconstruct the creative imagination of the playwright as it appears in the script. It is thus the reconstructed world of the play that he communicates to his associates – who collectively pass it on to the audience. A director fails in his duties if, in his interpretation of the script, he cannot reconstruct the given circumstances of the play from which the performance emanates. For the meaning of non-verbal behaviour or para-linguistic indices is as contextual as the meaning of words in a play. This is why Gross suggests that the description, which accounts for the work most thoroughly, is the apt interpretation of the given circumstances of the play. In his analytical work on the script, the director responds to the content of the script and his knowledge of theatre practice. This confirms Leonard C. Pronko's submission that a study of "theatre requires familiarity with the theatre in presentation" (*Theatre East and West* xvii). This minimizes ambiguity in theatrical communication. A director whose analysis/interpretation of the play is precise helps associates in projecting the message of the play.

In his conclusive statements, Gross declares that careful interpretation involves a second, reversed stage, a process of qualification, of recognition in terms of the differences between this experience and others, which were first seen as similar. This, according to him, is the "process of understanding; it is open-ended, never complete." He postulates that in the interpretation of the virtual life of drama, the question is one of aptness; not whether the reader sees, what "is there"

but whether his conceptualization corresponds sufficiently to the conceptualization of the maker of the virtual life (i.e., the conceptualization implicitly intended by the maker (Gross 49).

The director must perform the play in his imagination; that enables him to see if his interpretation is practically workable in the theatre. Granville-Barker succinctly expresses it in this vein.

He must, so to speak, perform the whole play in his imagination; as he reads, each effect must come home to him; the succession and contrast of scenes, the harmony and clash of the music of the dialogue, the action implied, the mere physical opposition of the characters, or the silent figure standing aloof – for that also can be eloquent. (Cited by Styan 4).

Styan makes the important point that meaning is created in the theatre by putting two or more stage ingredients on stage for a spectator to observe. The theatre director arranges these ingredients on stage for us to watch and savour. He is closely guided in this arrangement by his interpretation/analysis of the play in question.

From the foregoing, we can deduce that the meaning a director makes out of a play script is the product of his interpretation of the play, as he understands it. In the interpretative stage, the theatre director's

obligation is to approach the playscript with open mind, with no commitment to an aesthetic doctrine which prescribes the sort of experience it must provide. The interpreter studies the playscript to reveal what its peculiar experience potential is. The more open, the more responsive he is, the more likely he is to find the best available complex of meanings embedded in the script. (Gross 87-88)

Through his interpretation, the director establishes what the effect of the play in performance will be at each moment. For theatrical production "forces constant contextualization" especially since performance is ephemeral.

Nature of the Director's Analysis/Interpretation of a Play

Essentially, the director's interpretation of the play is action-centred. The interpretation of the play helps the director to physicalize the dramatic action of the play in the best possible way

on stage for the audience. He is always preoccupied with the play as an action. Even Aristotle, the father of all dramatic theory and criticism, defines tragedy as the initiation of an action. Little wonder then that theatre practitioners do not regard a play as having an action, rather, they see it as being an action. It is only in this way that a director can give practical or performance oriented interpretation/analysis for a performance.

Therefore, the theatre director invents or authors the dramatic action or spectacle of a performance. He contextualizes each bit of the dramatic action in his interpretation and the subsequent patterning and orchestration of the production. Hence, Gross's contention that the "interpreters best knowledge of the Action is at Schematic level, it is a subtle, intricate, detailed disposition to respond to the play script in a functionally integrated way" (*Understanding Playscripts.... 111*). Gross also submits that the golden rule for the director in his interpretation of playscripts is to "free himself from pre-conceived notions of what meaning – forms play/scripts may or must have and to sensitize himself to meaningful structures in whatever form they take" (119). Play interpretation reduces ambiguity and clarifies all area of obscurity. In fact, by its nature, interpretation is an active, subjective, and hypothetical act. As Roger Gross aptly puts it, if

the director is to perform such subtle analysis clearly his expertise must extend beyond the dramatic, the aesthetic, and the linguistic; he must be thoroughly familiar with audience psychology, and not merely the psychology of the author's time, but not simply with the academic psychology of the time as formulated in books on the subject but rather with the author's own sense of psychology as implied in his writings (124).

Emphatically, the director's objective is the "fullest familiarity with the script. To interpret a script for production is to move inward to know the script or to have carnal knowledge of it", as Gross surmises. According to him, play script interpretation is inevitably uncertain. The director interprets the play to integrate every moment or element of the play in performance. Hence, the assertion that in the

interpretation of any system as complex as a playscript, it is unlikely that the hypothesis will ever be reduced to a form so simple as to be fully conscious. It is a sense of integrity of relations, predominantly pre-conscious, but which

can be rendered conscious moment by moment through the process of conscious reconciliation. The whole of the hypothetical synthesis is never 'seen', but enough expressions of it must be seen to allow faith in the basic scheme. Articulated 'Actions' and 'Themes' are common expressions of the hypothesis. The more ways the interpreter can find to express his sense of integrity of the system, the more likely he is to discover lapses, which invalidate his tentative conclusions. (Gross 162).

Hence, directorial play analysis/interpretation clarifies all arrears of obscurity in the play script and production.

Conclusion

Essentially, without careful, thorough preliminary interpretation, apprehensive understanding in rehearsal would be unreliable, incomplete, and impressionistic. The interpretative function of rehearsal is no more than corrective; it can never be sufficient in itself, contends Roger Gross. For play analysis/interpretation is the director's map on his journey towards the physicalisation and stage realization of the play at hand. It is a sharply focused scheme of how the director intends to deal with the play. In other words, it is the director's design, statement, or objective describing his understanding, intention, and determination on how to stage the play. For, every director works towards the realization of his dream or interpretation of a play. It is in this regard that we view play analysis as a fundamental step every director must take to effectively realize a production, be it for the stage, screen, or the radio.

In fact, a play well interpreted will be heading for success if the director follows the interpretation and communicates such interpretation to his associates properly. For theatrical communication is greatly enhanced with a sharply focused and purpose-driven interpretation. Therefore, theatre directors must allocate adequate time and attention to this important aspect of production preparation to achieve success in a production.

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