

A DIRECTOR'S DEATH IN PLAY PRODUCTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF *THE LEOPARD OF KALAMA***Rudolph Kansese****ABSTRACT**

Directing is an art where the individual involved or director takes charge of the process of play production in a theatre, with the view of achieving success during the performance or performances. The intention of the paper is to examine the harrowing experience of a director during play production which incidentally interfere with his vision; upsetting his directorial approach or concept. The research is based on a personal directing experience of the play, "The Leopard of Kalama" written by Akpos Adesi. Materials gathered from literature are used to validate the discontentment of the director during his sad experience. In the production of "The Leopard of Kalama", the director went through a number of incidents with personnel in charge of the different arts of the theatre including the producer. Such incidents unfortunately undermined his artistic competence and marred the production. In the same way, directors with similar episodes suffer terminal setback and deflation of self-esteem. This invariably creates an ambience of death in their craft.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF DIRECTING AND DIRECTORS

There are several definitions of directing, however, what seems to cut across them all is the organisational strength of the personality, who is acquainted with the modus operandi of directing plays for the living stage. Nwadiuwe (2007:2) defines directing as:

...the art of communicating a play's message and essence to an audience through a meticulous (re)ordering, control, management and manipulation of available materials and human resources

The task of producing a play is a very challenging one where all practitioners in charge of the necessary arts of the theatre are carefully supervised by the director in order to achieve the optimum in performance. His artistic acumen makes him to be described by Jouvett as "...the doctor of sensation, the midwife of the inarticulate, the cobbler of situation, crook of speeches, steward of souls..." (Jouvett 1973:228).

A director is expected to have a sound background in "literature and drama" (Ellis 2003: par 1) since both areas directly reflect human development in the society. This is in addition to studying the techniques of directors in general and other relevant theatre parishioners in order to broaden his horizon in the field of practice. For Oyewo (2007:34) a director "must go beyond his own domain to understand aesthetics from both historical and theoretical perspectives"

The director has been performing his artistic role, though under different nomenclature from the classical Greek age. It is called "Choregus" in ancient Greek theatre or "didaskalos" which Brocket (1999:24) refers to as teacher who instruct the performers during play production and audience with the finished work. In the Medieval age directors were called "conducteurs de secrets"; these were originally stage managers doubling as directors.

Before the art of directing became an independent art, playwrights devoted time in directing their plays. This was the case from the classical period down to the Elizabethan age. Dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, William Shakespeare and Moliere all directed their plays. It was not until from 1750 to 1850, that the actor/manager/director or manager/director practice came to limelight. An independent personality to specifically take charge of directing plays became highly necessary due to the changes of dramatic appreciation during the period. Bruch (1990) notes that the public became more interested in antiquarianism, development of scenery, scene shifting and the need to emphasis the process and aesthetics of play production over the play script. The indisputable role and import of a director is expressed this way by Cole and Chinoy (1952:1):

As production more and more usurped the power once held by the play itself, they perfected the implements with which the director would work...the rehearsal, the coordinated acting group and the external paraphernalia of archaeological sets and

authentic costumes and props. Their activities revealed the creative contribution to be made by a single autocrat in charge of production.

May 1, 1874, as observed by Oga (1999:102) marks the dawn of professional directing with the specialised art of Goerge II, Duke of Saxe Meiningen (1926 – 1924). Cole and Chinoy (1963) noting the proficiency of the Duke in his directorial approach which accommodates “intensive rehearsals, disciplined integrated acting and historically accurate sets and costumes”. These became the ingredients of realistic acting which directors from then on conduct their art.

THE DIRECTOR'S VISION

There is almost no human endeavour that does not begin with a vision on which the foundation of a work plan is firmly laid; this marks the beginning of concrete realisation of the project itself .So the vision remains a fantasy until concrete identities begin to embody the phantom idea. In the process of play production, the influential role of the director cannot be viewed with levity in spite of the fact that earlier theatre tradition did not introduce the art of the director until the course of the nineteen century. (Stephanie Arnold 2001:372) states that:

In earlier times the playwright or a leading actor was responsible for coordinating the production and placing the actors on the stage. In the Greek, Medieval, Elizabethan and Chinese theatres, traditions and conventions were firmly established, and therefore questions of stylistic interpretation were not an issue. Productions did not strive for historical authenticity in representing earlier periods, nor was there an array of acting approaches to choose from.

Arnold's view seems to underscore the lukewarm attitude of some contemporary theatre practitioners who hurriedly jump at play production without seriously considering the demands of a professional or artistic director. It is common to observe the actors themselves calling the shots on blockings and play sequence. Directing here becomes a momentary art that lacks the appropriate tools of scientific conceptualisation the art actually demands.

Directing is indeed a specialised art which require careful and actual planning of the process of production and actual realisation on stage. A successful play production, no doubt, is hinged on logical research and series of analysis of the arts of the theatre in order to ensure plausible live performances. At the preliminary visionary stage, a play could take a long period to materialise. A director; David Glass (in Gabriella 1999:41) asserts in an interview to years of consistent research on a particular play before its final stage presentation. In a similar development as above Katie Mitchell (1999:95), also a director attests to this question of long period of scheming when she notes that:

I spend a lot of time researching the background of the text looking at its historical, social-political and cultural context. I also look at the auto-biographical details of the author's life. I then do a very thorough analysis of the text. If, for example, I am working on a very old text, I look at the etymological root of every single word in it.

A thorough appreciation of the work is necessary by reading other available, but, relevant materials from the playwright and other authors: you can never tell where you are likely going to discover the essential recipe which may surprisingly turn out to be the actual missing link towards an in-depth understanding and appreciation of the play text.

A true or reasonable director begins his art by first reading and closely studying the play. This is where his vision begins to take root. He observes images, or pictures are lucidly created in his "mind eye" which becomes the bedrock on which the production is firmly laid. Stephanie Arnold (2001:381) again is true to the point when she states that:

As a director approaches a play, he or she begins a process of discovering a metaphor, or image that will translate the ideas of the play into a stage language. The metaphor is a way of expressing the most compelling ideas of the play in a concentrated form that will become a guide for the work of all of the theatre artists involved in the production. A metaphor is an

analogy, or comparison, a symbolic way of expressing the action of the play.

Perhaps Jonathan Miller's (in Gabriella 1999:90) view aptly described the situation when she says:

Work begins with the imagination. The text suggests settings and tones of voice; these loom up and take possession of the mind, and I begin to hear the words spoken in the mouths of imagined people. Once actors are cast, those sounds and images begin to take on more detail than I could possibly have imagined.

In the light of the above, no serious director indulges in directing without having adequate knowledge of the play text, otherwise, a wrong approach or treatment of the delicate script would be spurious and negative to the personal creative will of the playwright and the overall interest of logical interpretation.

THE DEATH OF THE DIRECTOR

Death according to the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1903:58) is defined as "the total cessation of life processes that eventually occurs in all living organism." *The Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1993:581) gives a rather succinct definition: "the state of being no longer alive." A third and similar meaning coming from *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1957:52) views death as "...the ending of life".

From the foregoing, one could attempt to come to conclusion by deduction that the emergence of death signifies the actual termination of life in a being; that is when existence ceases and one is finally certified – dead. Bearing this in mind, a contradictory explanation can only hold water with a fair, but convincing treatment of the subject in question. However, whatever the contradiction, the import of the above definitions cannot be ignored because they tend to act as springboards from which the feature query is anchored.

Taking a clue from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, (Shakespeare Symmons: 1980: 629) "Cowards die many times before their death" obviously does not speak of physical death, but rather a re-occurring spectral of the fear of death itself before the actual death. Wole Soyinka has

a somewhat similar contribution in *The Man Died* (2002:13) in these few words: “The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny”.

In view of these, but, brief analysis, an attempt to theorise death from the psychological perspective becomes more glaring to the subject in focus. The apparent issue here is the death of the director, who is argued to suffer a psychological death in the event of failure of his art. However, whether a director suffers a psychological death or not, as long as there is an obvious case of failure in the live performance of a play, the man who has his signatory mark as the director suffers a clear case defeat; death directly or indirectly.

The director can be seen as an entrepreneur who adopts realistic technical and managerial skills to organise and coordinate a team of experts toward packaging a good product. As the risk bearer, the success or failure of his enterprise depends on his ability to perform. ABC Duruaku (1997:83) sums this up in a few words: “He must possess the organizing acumen of an administrator since he binds the other artists together”

Again, the director is like a football coach or technical adviser who assembles a crop of professional footballers with the objective of winning a tournament. The fact remains that the footballers cannot operate individually or in isolation of the coach because he has the script, the skill and the tactics to harness the various talents at his disposal in order to achieve victory. When he succeeds he is praised and when he fails he is booed.

The issue of a director’s death can be contextually analysed through his legitimate role right from the point of play selection to the technical intricacies of stage performance. His first significant preoccupation is choosing a script for production which marks the beginning of life or death for his effort. When a director chooses a play simply because it is challenging rather than having vested interest in the work itself is a deadly beginning. Edwin Wilson (2001:122) puts it this way:

Frequently, the director chooses the script to be produced. Generally, it is the play to which the director is attracted or for which he or she feels a special affinity. If the director does not actually choose the script but is asked to direct it by a playwright or a producer he or she must still understand and appreciate the

material. The director's attraction to the script and basic understanding of it, are important in launching a production.

Some upstart student directors in tertiary institutions are often so much in a hurry, excited and easily carried away by play titles, popularity or even authorship and forgetting that neither of these can afford them profound understanding of the play text. Even an appropriate choice of a play is not an end in itself as adequate research, apart from intensively reading the play text is expected to be logically conducted. It is in the interest of avoiding death or a deadly start that a director like David Glass (in Gabriella 1999:41) considers the pre-rehearsal stage of a production as very crucial when he candidly states that:

...the research can take years... always on things that I will have been thinking about for some time...I forge close relationships with designers and often work with artists like Ralph Steadman. I form very specific design concepts before I start work on rehearsals.

The next important stage is detected in the course of the research, and that is what Clurman (1974:22) termed the "spine" of the play. This has to do with the prevailing action which acts as fulcrum on which the full weight of the play rest. It is the main action or nucleus which determines the life or death of the play. At this stage, the director has no choice but to 'get it right' in order to avoid breeding death on the evolving nerve centre which propels the entire play (with its sub themes) as an organic entity Effiong Johnson (2003:) does not mince words in stating the helplessness of an unprepared director when he says:

But, where a director cannot say what the spine is in the play, yet plunges into directing it, he would run the risk of producing a formless wobbling, if not crippled performance. Biologically, a human being whose spine functions properly can walk straight. But, in the event of any damage to the backbone, the human being might be confined to the wheel chair. Therefore, a director whose choice is the spine has chosen early to make the play walk.

Every playwright adopts a particular style of writing in order to convey his intention. A good understanding of how “realistic” or “non-realistic” a style could be is important to the director. This will inspire his conception of an appropriate directorial approach to ensure suitable stage interpretation. Whatever the approach, whether “slavish”; “auteur’ or any other concept, the truth is that the uniqueness of handling by the individual director will always come to the fore. The method by which he designs his art will somehow reflect his personal desire; will; emotion; temperament; and, sometimes, identity.

However, over indulgence in self-opinionated principles simply to prove his domineering ego might be counterproductive and deadly to the success of the production. This kind of director is referred to as a ‘dictator’ who assertively controls, with dogmatism the entire process of rehearsals as well as dictating with absolute authority to his associates. On the other hand, a director who adopts a slavish approach by faithfully adhering to every directive instructed by the playwright is simply a ‘slave’ lacking in self illuminating insight.

Directing is a creative, but subjective art which largely depends on self discipline of the director in taking valuable decisions, and at the same time encouraging other imaginative expertise inputs. It also exists in time; this signifies the period of the practicing director vis-à-vis his collaborating artists (experts). These are indices which reasonably influence his choice of materials and keep him within the ambit of artistic creativity. With this, the director cannot afford to descend so low to be slavish or aspire too high to be autocratic.

The essence of embarking on a long stretch production research is to ensure that the chosen text is adequately interpreted by the director and his associates, among whom are the actors, costumier, make-up artist, set designer, light designer, property man and other specialised artists of the theatre. The state of professionalism of the director and his associates is highly necessary for the success of the production. Here, we will consider the challenges of the director, first with the actors and secondly with his associates.

Auditions are organised to test actors’ ability before casting them for roles. The director’s initiative here is mainly guided by the candidate’s physique and voice quality. However, the proficiency of great skill is not an end in itself without strict disciplinary disposition by actors. Engaging actors in productions without ascertaining their full and unflinching commitment may

spell doom to the stage realisation of the drama. Here, actors see themselves free to treat rehearsal with levity since they owe the director no professional or moral obligation to attend, learn their parts and contribute meaningfully to the production. Even where the director has a number of committed actors, the frivolity of others will ruin the process.

Coming to the director and his associates, it is clear that the practical achievement of his vision requires individual and expertise contributions from these artists who are in their own right qualified designers. In their independence of material selection and decision, they are expected to harmonise their concepts to the advantage of the director so that he can advance his creative dream. A dissenting concept by any of the designers or designers no matter how innovative would contradict the artistic vision the director. Effiong Johnson (2003:87) captures this deadly situation with these words:

Yet, at some austere times, the designer is at disparity with the director and refuses to buy his logic to the so-called concept.

This is the most danger-prone development

The work of a director is usually focused on two communicative modes: interpretation and creativity. The first is where he depends on every stage direction of the playwright and other valuable materials in order to interpret the play and the second is where he uses the script as a springboard for his own creation (invention). These are however, two extremes as hardly can a director isolate any of the communicative modes to realise his objectives. This means that a director is always, almost, interpreting the playwright's ideas as well as creating his own artistic values along the line. So the director can be rightly said to be both an interpretative as well as a creative artist.

But where the playwright obstinately craves after faithful interpretation of his script; he may not always be at ease with the directors' ingenuity at unrestricted creativity, especially where such innovation sharply contradicts with his (playwright's) passionately held views. Such antipathy sometimes turns confrontational. There is no gain saying that most playwrights are sentimentally attached to their works and would rather want the director's interpretation to be synonymous with their original intention. A playwright like this is usually uncompromising and becomes a stumbling block to the director's artistic skill and freedom. Conceptual disagreement

and even quarrel between the playwright and director may occasionally erupt. This would lead to a dangerous end for the production. Stephanie Arnold (2001:378) here writes on a particular disputation between a playwright and a director:

Declan Donnellan directed the London production of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*... Kushner participated in the rehearsal process, and his presence led to considerable tension between the director and the playwright. Declan Donnellan reports that he and Kushner “almost killed each other” in part over a disagreement about the role of the director.

Where the director’s liberty and independence cannot be fully guaranteed in his artistic collaboration with the playwright then a directorial derailment of ideas is bound to ensue. Here, he sees himself delivering a service without innate satisfaction. Since he cannot obliterate his name as the director of the play; (claiming responsibility for what is not entirely his) he feels a wave of discontentment and a sense of death.

A GLUM OF DEATH WITH *THE LEOPARD OF KALAMA*

My invitation by the Association of Nigerian Authors, Bayelsa State Chapter to direct “*The Leopard of Kalama*” written by Akpos Adesi for her Silver Jubilee was received with excitement. I saw the invitation as a great opportunity to market my directing skills in Bayelsa, so I was ready to put in my best. We had a short space of time of about a month to get the play ready for public consumption. This was rather too short to encourage an intensive qualitative research, which obviously fell short of the preliminary requirement for conducting a good production.

With this initial shortcoming, the presence of the playwright for periodic consultation became imperative. Unfortunately, his continual rehearsal attendance ended up jeopardizing my personal creative vision of the play as we had to disagree on a number of issues concerning my directorial approach.

The project started on a high note of professionalism as financing was fully guaranteed by the Authors. Unfortunately, the promise became partly illusory as money was not forthcoming in spite of the fact that we allowed our service to be grossly under priced in consideration of their

financial plight. The local organising committee of the Silver jubilee informed us that funding was still being expected from the Bayelsa State Government; her major sponsor. We were however urged to continue preparation as alternative funding arrangement was being worked out. But how long would the student-artists be able to endure rehearsals without funding?

ANA's financial inadequacy to meet up with the needs for an eventful production procedure was undoubtedly lethargic to a large scale. Lack of funds actually stifled my creative intentions which could have been realised in physical properties. We had to cut down drastically on our budget for props, costumes and make-up. Most of what we could not get we had to improvise. The greatest challenge I faced was on the conduct of the actors whose artistic dedication to the production eventually became lukewarm. Thus the production was already on a threshold of failure; a protracted death lingered in the air.

Due to the importance of the silver jubilee, the Authors maintained a strong note of interest in the production and promised to make funds available at the earliest possible date, before the opening night on the 2nd of November, 2006. Since we had already sacrificed so much of our time, energies and personal resources and since it was already close to performance night. We were however optimistic that funds would be made available before the dress and technical night. With this it became pertinent for us to continue with rehearsal which happened to be the only way we could get what was rightly owed us. The renewed spirit to continue with the production became the only available tonic for us. Unfortunately, not all the actors and crew were truly committed as previously indicated. Attendance became a worrisome issue as absenteeism was the order of the day. The crew could not function accordingly since there were no funds to get appropriate materials for the production.

Finally, there was a glimmer of hope for the eventual release of funds this however, surprisingly occurring at the eleventh hour of preparations was only partly realised for the strict financing of the performance only without caring for the actors' prolonged selfless sacrifice. This latest problem finally dashed all hopes as nothing else was left to psych the actors up to put up a good show. A clear note of indiscipline ran through the dress and technical rehearsals which apparently reflected in the performance. This, as a matter of regret ensured the final death of a vision; of artistry of a director.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, one can conclude from the foregoing that the director faces an uphill task in realising a dream of excellence during a production. He is seen as the point man, or, rather, the nucleus on which the life or death of the play rest. He is to ensure the employment of a team of disciplined and determined artists to positively achieve the project. Unfortunately, the menace of poverty on the director may become a stumbling block, especially where the producer, financially determines the course of the production at the detriment of the director's rehearsal schedule, which he reluctantly accepts where there may be no alternative.

Be that as it may, a director that has acquired the right training should not compromise the ethics for whatever reason. Excellence is the key word and cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of indiscipline, lack of dedication, lack of skill and lack of funds. A director that does not guard against these will endanger his art; leading it on a path of death.

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