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## THE COMPLIMENTING ROLE OF SCENOGRAPHY AS AN ACTOR IN THE REDEFINITION OF SCENOGRAPHIC AESTHETICS IN THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the shifting role of scenography in theatrical productions. This is done with the aim of identifying modern trends of scenic design beyond mere theorizing and visual representation. The paper hinges its discussion on the new role of scenic design as an actor alongside the human actor in integrating the dramatic essence in theatrical production to redefine the role of the scenographer as collaborator with the artistic director in a theatre ensemble. Scenography in this regard, plays the motivating role in creating a new movement that will herald a theatre of “images” rather than a theatre of “words”. In this lies the refined role of scenographic aesthetics. This is to be preferred as a performance style of theatre in the future, which will form a new platform for play presentation or staging that will lead to a redefinition of roles in theatrical production.

**Keywords:** Scenography, Actor, Aesthetics, Theatre, Stage, Scene Design.

### Introduction

Jean Jullien cited in Bentley in *The Playwright as Thinker* in Osuya, exposes that “A play is a slice of life artistically put on the boards” (Osuya 1). If the play then is a “slice” of life, therefore, there are other slices that complete the life or makes the life whole. It is the search for the other slice that informs this research piece. Osuya in “Scenic interpretation in selected plays of Femi Osofisan”, proffers “That Osofisan as a playwright puts this slice as a cook and prepares to make a dish with other ingredients that may be handy” (Osuya 1). This reasoning as the thesis hold lies in the functional nature of scenic elements as representation which produces spectacle.

Technology is in a constant flux, a constant state of evolution. Radical attitudes towards the use of technology in the theatre have characterised modern approaches to the theatre activi-

ty. Our concept of theatre activity stems from archetypal images embedded in our subconsciousness, which tend to reinforce universal connotations that are propelled by our perception of things. Archetypal held notions of things sometimes heavily taint the solutions we proffer to problems. What is needed for the theatre technologist of today is not to design but to invent, since design reinforces those archetypal held images. Anthony Barlow aptly described the situation when he states that

Theatre activity is currently regarded as one of the least predictable, quantifiable or determinable of human activities. Yet it is certainly not without precedence and the form of building or places designed to cater for the theatre activities often results from blind obedience to an archetypal image formed at a time when such activities were considered more predictable. (Barlow 135)

The popular assumption that a theatre performance generally involves a darkened auditorium and a well-lit stage becomes the ideal that designers strive to reinforce. Designers today need to look beyond these archetypes.

To the designer who seeks to use technology in a revolutionary manner, the text becomes “raw material” to be used and reconstructed making use of a visual language that suits the purpose of the performance. Thus, scenography is moved to the same pedestal as the actor- in fact, as a second actor- the costumes, lights, sound, set, make-up and all other effects are all expected to act out their parts in a unifying visual scheme with the human actor at the centre, to lift and leap the actions in the text onto the living stage.

Antonin Artaud envisioned a hieroglyphic theatre in which sound, light, gesture, movement and scenic elements will replace the written text. “As new instruments and methods become available to the theatre, certain traditional values are called to question” (Schechner 314). Scenography does not just interpret scripts; it pictures and sublimates human experiences.

### **Actor as Scenography: An Overview of the Art and Craft of Scenography and its Place in the Theatre**

The simple idea that theatre is predicated upon the realisation of dramatic literature led scenographers like Gordon Craig to break ranks with conventional theatre forms and seek to use

the elements of scenography in the creation of spectacle as protagonist in the theatre. They locate the ephemeral and live act of the theatre as the primary ontology and make it the principal area of enquiry. And since scenography exist in that ephemeral and live state; it takes into account the contextual phenomenon that lives no permanent material evidence.

Ian Watson attempts to build a body of performance theories based on his political projects generated at the University of Chester in the United Kingdom. In his paper he used key words to describe his concept, these are: "Integrated Scenography" and "Visuality". Stressing the place of scenography in devised theatre productions he opined that:

The visuality of devised theatre is inescapable and to ignore the visual aspect of devised performance is to make a performance that is partially considered. --- those who devise the performance should also be those to consider its visuality (Watson 1)

What Watson is suggesting in essence is that, both that which is heard and that which is seen is of great importance in the understanding of that which is presented before an audience in the theatre. To consider one without the other is to ignore the understanding of the very essence of the theatre itself. Watson speaks of five levels of visuality and he described what he called the first level of visuality as that in which "the performer/deviser conceptualises the 'sensate' problem in some way preferably other than a story." (1) This involves the performer visualizing a performable image tied to a visual perception of the human form in movement. He attempts to perform through action that which cannot be moulded into words. Trying to find a form that will hold the abstract idea that can be performed without too many technical problems. The second level of visuality is what he refers to as "a level at which the image can be diagrammatised or described and ascribed to a set of objects in the real world" (1) he called this a "level of equivalence". Finding an equivalent image of the abstract image and placing it in a form that could be presented within the context of the performance. It involves also experimenting with technologies to find the shape and structure of the performance event and to animate it.

The third he calls the "textual detail", this entails a search for details of the holding form, a

consideration of the demands of the performance space and how this image may re-define the performance space. The fourth level directly arises from the third, which he calls the “level of sensibility”, basically it is a re-examination of the essence of what the performer/deviser is trying to express. The fifth level he refers to as the critical level;

Because it is at that final level after all approximate solutions had been tried, that the final form appears as a solution to the original sensate problem to provide the audience with an aesthetic experience. (Watson 2).

What Watson is advocating is an understanding of a holistically devised scenographic design in which the performer and scenery are fused into a single entity.

It is worth noting that audience’s readings of images may be wide-ranging, but will still be based upon and dependent on the referent being viewed-they aren’t infinite (Watson 3).

Therefore what is presented is what informs the interpretation given to it by an audience. The audience interpretation is holistic. Auditory elements are not separated from the visual elements of the performance during the process of interpretation by an audience.

Pamela Howard calls for a scenographic design that will work from the actor outwards, using the actor as part of the scenery, living scenery, and integrating the actor with the scenic elements and scenic elements with the actors.

The human body may be considered as the primary plastic element for the scenographer to work with in creating the unity between space, object, light and performer that defines scenography-the writing of the stage space. For the visual theatre artist, it is the equivalent of brush to canvass or clay to a sculptor. If the scenographer studies and understands the human body, the space it occupies and displaces within the cubic capacity of the stage space, and the dramatic tension created spatially between bodies, there is a huge freedom of expression available. The study of fine art composition, in its many historical contexts, is a fertile starting point for inspiration. (Howard 1).

Howard perceives the scenographer as the “visual director” while the traditional role of artistic director she prefers to call “textual director”. She defines a scenographer as a visual artist who works at creating the stage picture from the actor outward animating the stage picture by using sections of living scenery, something she considers the textual director incapable of doing. She states further that:

The emphasis on working from the actor outwards, utilising the performer as living scenery, seem to be “anti-design”. It is certainly anti-personal domination of the scene, and probably won’t win Oscars. However, it does open the door to artistic, even economic freedoms that daringly may embrace a new concept of “low technology”. An actor as scenery challenges the artificial boundaries that set ‘text people’ against ‘body people’. There has been great and important development in physical theatre, and the training of actors. As these actors, conscious of the intelligence of the body, have passed from the marginalized fringe theatres to infiltrate the national companies, it becomes incumbent upon the scenographer to study the raw material and fully exploit its dramatic and visual potential.... (Howard 6).

In his article, “Arrivals and departures: How Technology Redefines Site Related Performances,” Kathleen Irwin conceives of the stage space as a form of cyberspace destroying the traditional vertical conception of the proscenium stage and arguing for a new concept which is horizontal as much as vertical, a space which defies gravity. Irwin states of this concept that:

“... It addresses some of the issues surrounding interactive technology and its use in integrating public art/performance in public places, reaching new audiences and shaking up long cemented perceptions. It exemplifies, as well, the blurring of disciplines and the fading lines that differentiate theatre from site-specific installation and interactive installation practice and question the merit of aligning such events with specific discipline” (Irwin 1).

Technology can be used subversively to facilitate interventions into new stages or found spaces for theatrical production. If we are to redefine the role and work of the artist, it is to technology that we will look in order to find answers to future directions. The challenge before the theatre

technologist is to understand and use technology to support and break down traditional boundaries between disciplines, roles and duties in the theatre as well as traditional modes of audience perception of the theatre event in order to make it available to under accessed population.

Technology is pervasive, ubiquitous (hence largely invisible) and can facilitate presenting art in places normally considered purely functional, single use and too “local” for broader cultural consideration (Irwin 8).

Speaking on the impact of new technology in the theatre; Richard Sheckner state that new technology can be used in the theatre in two ways, which are:

- (1) To enhance the production of plays in the traditional way. Hence the research in electronics, plastics, scenery construction, audio system, and so on, can be put to effective use by the director and his staff. The new technology can help the director to realise his intentions more completely.
- (2) The new technology itself is an environment, and one which is radically different from previous environment that it may call into being an entirely new form of theatre. The technical elements in this new form of theatre would not simply “support” an interpretation: they would themselves become the central source of the audience’s experience, the organic subject matter of the theatre (Sheckner 314-314).

The trend now seems to flow towards the later rather than the former of Sheckner’s propositions. In the face of current researches and development in the field of computer science and digital technology, the computer especially affords new in-road into creating an entirely new environment for the audience’s theatre experience. With the current developments in multimedia and digital productions, duplicating nature is no longer the interest in scene design, construction elements are now handled in such a way that the manipulation of space transformation and movement becomes important in harmonising theatrically lights, costumes, bodies-in-motion and the words of the actor. The field of computer science holds innumerable opportunities for the designer in the theatre, which can help to blur and bridge the gap between

the arts and sciences. Technology provides the support for this interaction. The conversion of the so-called “empty space” into art space is a role technology is playing and has played effectively in the theatre.

Theatre is fundamentally a collaborative art and the interdisciplinary mix of contributing artist and technicians brings depth to the work and, through this creative network connects it to diverse communities and audiences, Collaborating with multiple artists and communities, both in the process of development and its reception, broadens a work inter-textual scope (Irwin 5).

It is obvious from the foregoing that the theatre of the future will be predicated upon the realisation of a visual scheme rather than the realisation of dramatic literature. Stephen Di Benedetto of the University of Houston expressed the opinion that

Artistically shaped space is a visual mode of expression meant to be understood through a visual mode of perception... Visual thinking takes place before linguistic cognition and so should be considered first before breaking down the event (Benedetto 1).

Contemporary trends in scenography favour the perception or treatment of scenic investiture as performative in essence. Light, sound, three-dimensional scenic pieces are moulded in special relationship that creates a ballet of visual forms regardless of textual narrative. It therefore means that, in today’s theatre, visual mechanics have come or are coming gradually and are encroaching on the area held traditionally by the actor and the actor in turn is being considered as part of scenographic elements. If this trend is explored, its true revolutionary potentials for the theatre of the future will become fully apparent. Perhaps such explorations will take acting closer to an acting style that is mechanical and we may begin to get closer to the *uber marionette*. The difference in the new approach however is in the integration of the actor into the scenery not as the lord of the scene or the storyteller, but as a scenic piece or a piece of scenery and part of the story. The essence of the play becomes the visual cognition presented to and perceived by the audience. This trend complements the minimalist attraction to visual abstraction. The component parts of abstract visual expression are:

The square, the triangle, the circle, the cube, the cone, the sphere, the straight line, the point, the concept of space, tension, and movement- are elements of drama (Benedetto 2).

The designer in the theatre creates 3-dimensional images using line, weight, colour, movement, and sound. "Theatre doesn't live in words... it lives in space... Lights let you see the architecture of the space... Without lights there is no space. With lights you create different kinds of space. A different space is a different reality (Bernedette 2). The creation of different kinds of realty is the domain of theatre. Therefore all the visible elements of theatre are expression of an event, which conveys perceptible impressions that are highlighted in the components of the design framework to the audience that redefines the theatrical space. Stephen Benedetto in the words of Robert Store describes spatial organisation in the theatre when he states:

Space is not just the context in which art takes place - the void that is filled by objects and images - but is, instead, among arts basic raw materials - something to be taken hold of, studied, and shaped. Thus, the architect frames emptiness to consolidate volumes, while the draftsmen or painters divide within the confines of the white pages or the blank canvas and the sculptor anchors the environment around him with physical mass or embraces the atmosphere with armatures (3).

Thus, the stage space is an integral component of the theatre experience just as the text, which the actors speak. In redefining space, the designer redefines the aesthetic experience of the drama. Human forms are manipulated using costumes, masks and make-up to redefine mass and change the direction of line or mass of figure. In this kind of space redefinition, human figures become an essential part of the shape of the stage space, which augments liveliness. The stage space becomes a "biological symbiosis between actor and object" or what Kantor refers to as "bio-object" (209).

Light is one of the most essential mechanism of defining space and the shape of images on the contemporary stage. Light reveals form, without light all is void. Light holds the possibilities for interpreting images as character; it organizes space by breaking it into units and changing the

emotional climate of the entire stage environment. Light does not serve only to illuminate the stage space, but also to be a guide, manipulated to guide the spectator to the worlds at which they are supposed to look. Theatre as defined by Stephen Berkoff is

Such a performance style, forming a complete interaction with all theatrical components... It should engage the senses on all levels totally, as the senses are engaged in life; but with each discipline supporting the other- total theatre, total life, sound, movement, light, text, music (Berkoff 72).

Already, the combination of film, theatre, art, and computer to create a mega spectacle of visual theatre is fast gaining grounds in Europe and America. Visual theatre is that theatre which uses spectacle rather than words as a primary form of expression. The possibilities of a combination of the independent developments in the visual and aural arts is what will make the theatre of the future an exciting experience that will break down the hold of archetypal images of theatre that will create a new form of theatre of the future. As Benedetto puts it: "For as we enter a more and more visual literate culture, the nature and form of the theatre will shift to even more diverse structural patterns" (Benedetto 6). Depending on the application of light, the direction or viewpoint is changed. What scenography does is to basically substitute images for words. A distinction between physical theatre and visual theatre has become apparent from these developments.

Again finding a discipline under which to evaluate developments in scenography have pose concern on the nature of the existence of scenography itself. For as Ellie Parker opines

We are bedeviled by the 'bastard art form of scenography, for it is neither fine art, sculpture, architecture, illustration of written text, nor fashion show, but is something of all that. Finding a discipline within the morass is problematic, so an analysis as sure-footed and authoritative as classical rhetoric is initially seductive and ultimately apposite (Parker 4).

Parker in his paper attempts to define the language of scenography and make case linking scenographic practices of the modern stage to classical or archetypal rhetoric. He surmised that

just as the concept of literature by western culture has evolved over the centuries from a genuine theory of language into the study of works, authors and schools, the art of scenography has gradually evolved into codified system of perception. Parker basically called for the application of classical rhetoric in the systemisation appropriate for reading scenography. He sees hyperbole in exaggerated set and performance styles, antithesis in repeated patterns in costume design and set, synociosis in aesthetic unity of form, hypallage in distorted reality, etc. Thus he sought to define the nature of the theatrical sign in order to aid effective design interpretation.

### **Redefining Scenographic Aesthetics.**

There seem to be a general mistrust about the place of the visual in theatrical performances which stems from Aristotle's debunking of spectacle as the least element of drama; Again we find this archetypal Aristotelian notions and images impinging on the consciousness of the modern theorist, performer and designer, which gives credence to the theory that, the literary in the theatre is afraid of letting the delightful visual experience overshadow the performance of the text, since the visual can be self-contained and separate from the theatre text.

The spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected with the art of poetry. For the power of tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet (Aristotle 37).

What Aristotle did not see is the poetry of the visual design of productions of his age that depended on crude machines manually or mechanically manipulated by machinists to create effects. If Aristotle had lived in contemporary times and witnessed the poetic use of lights, costumes and set in a visual poetic language, perhaps like he said earlier in his Poetics, "every play has spectacular elements" (36) he would lift spectacle from the sixth position to the first or second position since theatre is first and foremost an entertainment and *theatron* a seeing place which forecloses spectacle. Let us not also forget that Aristotle was speaking more of poetry (dramatic poetry) and less of the performance of the drama itself. Traces of the Aristotelian

attitude and interpretation of the visual in the performance seem to still linger in the way theatre design is presented on the modern stage and in scholarly discusses and performances.

In his book, "Looking at Shakespeare" Dennis Kennedy affirms the visual aspects of theatre when he states: "...the visual is an essential part of theatre, even when not particularly delightful, or luxurious; what an audience sees is at least as important as what it hears" (Kennedy 6). In his paper, "The Role of Theatre Design: Towards a Bibliographical and Practical Accommodation" Joslin McKinney of Bretton Hall College of the University of Leeds, espoused his argument for a definition and discussion of theatre design that is central rather than a peripheral aspect of theatrical performance. His paper attempts a holistic and integrative view of theatre practice and he identified conflicting trends in representing design, especially, the tension existing between the notions of "art" and "design" and discussed the implication of establishing a more widespread debate on the role of theatre design.

The advancement and use of technology in the theatre has resulted in some changes in the way theatre is practiced in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As technology continues to evolve, the amount of emphasis given to the director as primary creator of the theatre experience has become diminished with more technologies for the manipulation of the stage image becoming apparent. In her discussion of the changes and influences that have occurred in theatre technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christine White states:

Now more than at any other time the theatre director works as another member of the team not only because s/he lacks the knowledge but because the technology has allowed considerable flexibility and the director's vision can be translated into many forms, materials and theories. The contribution of scenography to these changes, changes in acting styles; and of what is expected within a performance space has transformed the way in which an actor uses that space. The importance which Brecht placed on Casper Nehei's designs for a cohesive performance structure, (based on his sketches of/for the rehearsal process) and the relation of the actor to light, (which Appia recognised as important) has resulted in stage technology and scenography emerging as a partner of the actor and thus a new

aesthetic (White 1).

Developments in technology has changed how we see theatre and in the theatre. Developments in lighting especially has affected and redefined the role and work of the theatre director and the placement of the actor on stage in relation to the audience. The work of the actor itself and all theatre workers has been affected by these developments. The performance styles in Western theatre have been greatly influenced by these developments in theatre technology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stage construction, the positioning of props and actors, and the entrances and exits of performers has led to a more intimate relationship. Our experience of the actor's work and the audience's perception and reception of the theatre message have been reconditioned by these developments. Lighting acts to control and direct audience's reception of the whole theatre event, thus redefining the role of the theatre director.

Again, another consequence of new technologies in the theatre can be seen in the importance of scenography in the presentation of the commercial product. The commercial product of scenography can be seen most visibly in the packaging of the theatre event. There is no doubt that good lighting helps to rate the production as a top quality production. The lighting designer has come to be known as the director of the visual images in the production. The ability to control what the audience see and how the audience see what it sees in the theatre has been the role and responsibility of the lighting designer. Both divided and simultaneous staging techniques are now possible due to stage lighting technologies.

## **Conclusion**

Basically, the theatre is a place to behold spectacle. Spectacle implies a lavish performance that involves seeing and hearing. These are fundamental to the scenographic process as they are intrinsic to the dramatization process. If as Aristotle contends, drama is primarily "imitation of an action", the question then is, doesn't the paraphernalia of the imitation process become imitative in essence?

The survival instinct demands for change, if you don't change, you become marginalized and marginalization leads to extinction. The theatre of today needs to break free of archetypal images of itself and respond to the infinite possibilities that modern technology affords through

scenography and the theatre of images for change in the multi-disciplinary possibilities of the future. Now is the time to replace the actor with image of the actor! A state where the actor becomes scenery that tells a story with other scenic elements. This will redefine the traditional role of the artistic director in the theatre to that of a textual director (director of the play text) and give room for the real artistic director to fully emerge. The only person that merits the title of artistic director is he who is called a technical director in the modern theatre. Only he can fuse into a unified whole the actor, speech, sound, movement, space and scenographic investiture into a total visual and aural unit for presentation to an audience (the true arts of the theatre). Only he truly understands in the modern theatre, the marriage of art and science that the art of the theatre has come to be.

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