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Volumes 3 & 4

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relevant to English studies

Adeleke A. Fakoya
Steve A. Ogunpitan
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CHAPTER

35

A BRIEF ON THE THEATRE

Bola ADEMESO

PREAMBLE

The idea of the theatre is a thing to be reconsidered in the scheme of things, especially since it has to do with the concept that deals with the study, practice and values of the society in relation to peoples, their cultures and perceptions. Theatre as a course has been seen, especially within the scope of scholarship, as another area of study under literature. But it could be a great mistake if we strictly subjected our study merely to its literary significance, without considering the phenomenon of performance and the audience.

If we all see theatre as a concept that deals with the issues relating to man and his society, using the various media of imagery, symbols, stylised movements and gestures, words that are picturesque, lightings that transport and reveal man’s imagination (especially his perception of certain things in life) and realities, in order for him to reassert, or reassess, appreciate and re-evaluate his existence, then we are being fair on the course.

The questions to be asked, however, are; does theatre deserve scholastic engagement? Does it deserve a place in the academic curriculum? The simple logic to the probable answers to these questions is, if Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Classics, English Language, Science and Technology, could be given places of academic consideration in the universities, then theatre deserves the same exercise, since it also deals with the society and its people.

Theatre, however it is conceived is a reflection of the society. It is the creation of the society by the society and for the society. The benefits derivable from the society override all the feelings (sentiments) that may be expressed by outsiders or the uninitiated in the profession.
WHAT IS THEATRE?

In our daily endeavour, we are faced with the complex but exciting theatre of life and the expressions to describe such experiences sometimes, unavoidably, elude us. We are, therefore, left to grope in our individual worlds, believing that we have obtained more from life (reality) than our fellow human beings.

The above premise gives credence to the fact that theatre, like any other area of study in the academics does not have just one definition. No single definition to the concept of theatre! The idea of the definition of theatre could be an acceptable one if such a definition satisfies the angle or approach adopted by the individual theatre scholar. Therefore, there are different views to the definition of theatre. To some people, theatre is a child's play. It is a concept designed for children and when adults engage in it, they are inevitably tagged ‘vagabonds’, ‘idiots’, ‘layabouts’, ‘drop outs’; the people who have failed in other areas of human endeavour! Yet, to some people, theatre is a Business. Therefore, both the practice (performance) and the structure for performance (Theatre) are business establishment for the business minded individual.

In the Arts Theatre (Building for theatrical performance) the business elite see the avenue to strike contracts worth millions of naira. It is a place where business contacts are made like in a cocktail party.

The universal view of theatre is that it is a reflection of the society. This view, though universal, is restricted to both the humanist and the educated elite who believe that theatre should serve a purpose, and that purpose must be for the good of the society. Theatre should ‘mirror’ the ills in the society so that the society could learn from its mistakes.

When people need to relax after a day's work, when they are in dire need to ease tension, the theatre is the next available spot! To such people theatre is a place for relaxation. Whereas the critic sees theatre as a profession that must be seen, and he perhaps, makes an input through his critique of the theatrical performance. The reason for this endeavour is to know whether the performance in the theatre is in tune with the basic principles and theories of production styles and techniques.

In the western world theatre is a phenomenon that encompasses the interplay between the experience of the world and humanity, apart from the entertainment value derivable from such interplay. It is in the theatre that man sees himself as a tool for educational projection. It is a place where informal education takes place, if what Aristotle considered to be the definition of drama has any thing to go by, that drama is an “imitation of human action”. This action is life but not life in itself. We may conclude that theatre is both a functional and entertainment concept. Aristotle further warns that the theatre (Drama) is more dangerous than life itself hence it should not be left in the hands of children. The most
recognisable effect of the theatre in modern society along this line, is the advent of gangsterism and violent crimes recorded after children must have watched different movies and dangerous theatre (drama).

Theatre has been defined in various ways by various scholars. Apart from the philosophico-functional definitions that exist, however, theatre could be seen from two broad perspectives: (1) The performance or event that takes place and (2) The building in which the event or performance takes place. If we are to go by the Greek definition of theatre – theatron means a place to see – this assertion may be right because there cannot be audience without a performance. And a performance without audience is incomplete. Of course there must definitely be a meeting point for the two-performance and audience – which is a stage for the performance to take place.

ELEMENTS OF THE THEATRE

What we need to understand in the study of theatre are the four-pronged issues that constitute the concept of communication and reception. These issues are THE IDEA, ACTOR, STAGE AND AUDIENCE. It means, therefore, that the communicative channel or mode of theatre is incomplete if one of these issues is missing. I refer to the elements of theatre as issues in order for the uninitiated to understand them within a broader spectrum. The elements of the theatre (both primary and secondary) communicate, and also, aid the perception and reception of what is being communicated, and simultaneously, send back response.

There are varieties of stage. If Shakespeare's view of the stage (metaphorical) be upheld, it means therefore that everywhere or anywhere we find ourselves is a stage. Life itself is a re-enactment of reality (the past, present and perhaps, the future). The office, classroom, political rostrum (soap box), altar, bedroom, kitchen, sitting room, etc. in our day to day existence could be referred to as stages, when the purpose of the theatre is to be served.

In reality, there are three conventional stages in the theatre:

a. Proscenium stage
b. Theatre-in-the-round or Arena theatre
c. Thrust stage

Of the three basic or primary elements of the three, namely, Actor, Stage and Audience, the third element (the Audience) is perhaps the most important without which the theatre is incomplete. Audience constitutes the last straw and the most vital element in the field of communication in theatre. This is because theatre must be seen by people for it to be theatre, thereby remaining faithful to its origin - Theatron, a seeing male.

The elements of theatre mentioned above are the vital tools for the communication mode or channel that scholars must explore.
FUNCTIONS OF THE THEATRE

a. Theatre, with all its symbols, mirrors the society – its good and its bad. It exposes the individual and collective fooleries and stupidity, and the general attitudes to life.

b. Theatre is a form of entertainment. It is used as a means of easing tension, and for relaxation purposes.

c. Theatre is a tool for education and a channel of information.

d. It is used for the preservation of the cultural heritage(s) of a society.

e. Theatre is a bond, and a cord of identity. It makes us to identify with our society.

f. Theatre is a profession. It is a means of livelihood to different professionals – playwrights, musicians, singers, designers, costumes and make up artists, critics, etc.

THEATRE PRACTICE

The practice of the theatre varies, depending on the purpose and the philosophy behind the establishment of a theatre organisation. The ideological leaning of the leadership of the theatre organisation, in terms of creative depth and force of the theatre emanating from the group provides an impulse for the type of theatre that the organisation will focus on. The audience and the place of performance are other factors that determine the type of theatre of a group.

HISTORY OF THE THEATRE

The exact origin of the theatre may forever elude us. However, three likely theories exist as origins of theatre. We must know that no one can actually say how, when and where theatre began. These theories are; ritual origin theory, story-telling origin theory and play-instinct origin theory. These theories are discussed below:

RITUAL ORIGIN THEORY

This theory believes that theatre evolved from the rituals of dance, mask, song, costumes and make up that were put together to appease the supersensible Being. The fear of the unknown is believed to be the reason behind man’s creation of god (God), and in order for him to relate with this Being and perhaps also to capture his environment, man evolved these rituals. These rituals have the various elements of the theatre – songs, music, costumes, dialogue (monologue in most cases), dance, movement and gestures that are purely imitations of reality. If religion is as old as man (evolution) then theatre could be seen as having the same age with religion in the life of humanity.
STORY-TELLING ORIGIN THEORY

This is one of the theories that are most common among all the theories of the origin of theatre. It is common because every society has a story to tell and the form it takes is the only difference. Our adventures, tales of war, deeds and misdeeds, etc and the attempts to give graphic picture of these to our fellow human beings, lead us into employing the various elements of theatre – impersonation, dialogue, action, and role playing (of different characters in the story), and a deliberate imitation of the environment gives credence to the fact that theatre evolved from story telling.

PLAY INSTINCT ORIGIN THEORY

This theory is of the view that, theatre evolved from the ability of man to imitate life. Man can, and has the ability to create a “world” that looks like his world. The reality in this is that man has perfected the art of creating illusions out of reality. Therefore, he can use his body expressions to pass a message across. This creative instinct was what Aristotle considered when he said drama was “an imitation of human action”. In learning, to Aristotle there must be element of imitation just as children imitate older one before they carry on with life.

EUROPEAN ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF THE THEATRE

The European theatre developed from the festivals of Dionysus (the son of Zeus and Semele), the god of fertility and wine. It all began in Athens, a small town near Greece. The festivals of Dionysus were organised to usher in the New Year and to send packing, the old year. Like in the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so was Dionysus killed, and he resurrected. The myths about Dionysus represent the changes in the seasons.

Dionysus represented several forces that man could be associated with – sex orgies and drunkenness. All these were accepted as parts of the religious activities that provided inducement for fertility and high productivity. The birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth of spring, summer, fall and winter contributed to a chain of seasonal change in Athens. Athens was a very religious state despite what the modern society may say about them e.g. that they were obscene in their way of life.

However, through conquest, Greece took over the entire Athens, including their religious worship and practices. Around the 13th century B.C, the festival and worship of Dionysus was introduced in Greece through Asia Minor. The most important features of the festival in honour of Dionysus were choral dances and songs (ecstatic hymns called dithyrambs). To Aristotle, it was from the improvisation of the leaders of these songs and dances that drama developed.
THE ORIGINS OF THEATRE IN AFRICA

The development of theatre in Africa should not be seen within the ambit of the European tradition. Africa has a great variety of cultural and religious activities that are embedded with all the various elements of the theatre. The festivals of supplication and appeasement, New Yam festivals, the festival of cleansing, naming ceremonies, birth rites, burial rites (or rites of passage), harvests etc give an indication that Africans generally are religious.

The religious syndrome has long been in the sensibility of man right from creation, as the fear of the unknown made man to create his own god, hence, religious worship. Moreover, in an attempt to manipulate his environment, man has devised various means of relating with the unseen forces for more powers.

However, the origin of theatre in Africa cannot be traced to a particular tribe, culture, or race. Rather, every aspect of African life is imbued with theatre. It could be said that African theatre evolved from rituals.

In ritual performance there must be a priest, and he becomes the actor. His incantations, chants, and relationship (verbal expressions with the unseen forces) with the gods, become dialogue and monologue. His movements, dance, trance, body and facial expressions and gestures become acting (Action) that lead to the climax. At the point he does the final and the most important aspects of the ritual, since as the killing (or slaughtering) of a goat or dog, the high point of the ritual performance is achieved.

The shrine of the god becomes the stage, and the environment where the people at the shrine stand or sit becomes the audience/auditorium. In African theatre, the audience is a participating audience as in the Greek chorus. They sing to excite the spirit of the priests.

We all know that some of these priests use masks, costumes and props that are different from what they wear in their everyday life. The structure of the ritual in terms of the beginning, middle and the end is designed and constantly adhered to by each successive priest.

The African theatre in totality, is a functional theatre; it serves both spiritual and entertainment purposes. It is a theatre of utility, designed to perform a particular purpose in the life of Africans. The entertainment value of African theatre is a secondary motive for bringing people of different backgrounds, thoughts, families etc together in a communal conviviality.
FUNCTIONS OF AFRICAN THEATRE

Looking at the conditional development of theatre in Africa, we can safely divide the functions of African theatre into two categories – traditional and modern, but when we exclude the functionality of theatre in the area of religious worship the modern and traditional theatre are the same.

The functions of African theatre are:

ii. To cleanse the society of evils, to appease the gods and offer supplications through rituals and sacrifice. It is for a religious purpose, hence, to promote the continuity of life (existence). It is also therapeutic.

iii. To correct the ills in the society through Satire and other licentious activities.

iv. To preserve the cultural and traditional heritages, and to assert cultural identity and sense of belonging.

v. To promote the harmonious co-existence of the various groups in the society, especially the communities where the theatrical activities – festivals, ritual etc take place.

vi. To entertain the people.

DRAMA AND THEATRE: PRAXIS

Is the theatre superior to drama? The view has variously been promoted, that without theatre, drama cannot survive and its readership will be limited. It has also been argued that theatre survives because there is drama. But the general view is that both drama and theatre compliment each other. As drama can stand on its own, so can theatre. For a clearer understanding of the differences between theatre and drama, on the one hand and their inter-relatedness on the other, the table below:

For proper understanding, it would be wise to tabulate the concepts – Drama and Theatre according to their differences and similarities.

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<td>1 It uses words as its medium of communication</td>
<td>It uses actions, songs, music light, costumes, makeup, set, props etc to communicate</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 It is read</td>
<td>It is a performance. It is watched. Both verbal and non verbal</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 The interaction is within a reader</td>
<td>The interaction is between the people that constitute audience and the performers on stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 It is “cold” and lifeless</td>
<td>Full of life and rhythm, movement and speech</td>
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ARTS AND THE ARTISTS OF THE THEATRE

Theatre is a collaborative effort. The overall impulse of the theatre and performance is the collective creation of different artists who are specialists in the Arts of the theatre. Arts of the theatre are, therefore, the various art forms that are put together for the purposes of a performance.

PRODUCER: The concept of the producer has been over-stretched and perhaps constantly abused. The producer in the 5th century B.C. Greece is quite different from what we now have in the present age. In the 5th century B.C. Greek theatre Choregoi was appointed by the state to bear the financial burden of the play production. He did this because it was a mark of civic responsibility, and he was honoured for this. The modern day producer is a wealthy businessman who sponsors play production for financial gains (profit). He appoints the director after he must have commissioned a playwright to deliver him a script. Sometimes he dictates the themes and story of the play. Abuse of power by the producer in the theatre stretches to the choice of actors to be used with the creative inequity of the director affected.

PLAYWRITING AND THE PLAYWRIGHT

The idea of play writing was first conceived by the early Greek dramatists whose legacy the modern trend had emulated. They laid the foundation (Theory and criticism) for playwriting.

A playwright puts his thought and experience (obtained from his society) into writing. This thought is spelt out in dialogue and action with a conscious consideration for its theatricality. What is in the mind of a playwright is the
performance quality of the play. He must be skillful in simple and expressively symbolic language. He must understand his aim and objective. In other words he must have reasons for writing the play, and such reasons must be projected clearly in the play. He must have read a lot of plays perhaps to know how plays are written apart from his training and experience. He must not rely on his instinct and talents alone.

DIRECTING AND DIRECTOR
Most people believe that a director is more important in the theatre than any other Artist. The reason for this conclusion is derived from the fact that:

a. He brings all the other artists together, using their arts to project the overall impulse of the theatre.

b. He may create something out of nothing, that is, a story (play) may not have performance quality but a creative director can bring it to life!

c. He is the chief accounting officer in the theatre

d. He is a manager of both human and material resources.

e. He knows the scope and the limit of a stage as a medium of communication.

ACTING AND ACTOR
This is the basic tool of any dramatic performance. It is the medium through which both the verbal and non-verbal cues of the performance are obtained by the audience obtains both the verbal and non-verbal cues of the performance. Acting is purely an imitation of life. It must be convincing and entertaining. Acting skills and experience (and perhaps training) must not be compromised in performance. However, an actor must be creative, imaginative, observant, make concentration the hallmark of his artistic creation. He must also be able to appear in different roles and attitudes and must be versatile and productive.

DESIGNING AND DESIGNER
Design in the theatre is the projector of the nonverbal cues. It communicates the message that the actor cannot express to the audience. All the details of a production in terms of locale (setting), character identification, mood, time, rhythm, costumes, makeup, props etc are variously projected by design. However, in designing for a performance the most vital element to be considered is the colour, and this must be done with due consideration for the overall mood of the play (performance). The colour of every detail of the production (costume, makeup, scenic background) must compliment one another. Designers in the theatre are:

a. Costume Designer

b. Makeup Designer

c. Set (Scenic) Designer

d. Props Designer
CONCLUSION

From the above, we have seen what theatre is, as different from drama. Further, we have shown that drama and theatre can overlap and indeed do overlap more times. It is our belief, then, that the beginner who wishes to study the arts of the theatre must equip himself or herself with the information above. Only then can he/she venture into the exciting world of theatre.
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