NEW PERSPECTIVES IN LINGUISTICS & LITERATURE

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New Perspectives in Linguistics & Literature

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Nigerian Theatre and the Video Industry: A Critical Survey

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It was Bernard Shaw who once said, “The idea must be discarded that it is the duty of the people to go to the theatre and replaced with the idea that it is the duty of the theatre to go to the people.”¹ He was then talking against the exploitative, acutely commercial theatre of America’s Broadway and the West End in London, in preference to the new regional, community theatres that were springing up in many parts of America and Europe. Examples of which are the Yale Repertory in America, the Nottingham Playhouse, the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, etc.² Nigerian theatre at that time had its own version of “theatre to the people” found in the travelling theatres of Ogunde, Moses Olaiya, Duro Ladipo, etc. They toured different towns and villages and took their productions to the people in the communities.

With the advent of television in the 50s, many of them took advantage of this medium and engaged in television drama which was apparently more convenient, relatively closer to the people (who had TV sets) and perhaps more lucrative. These groups, although were non-subsidized, like the regional theatre, they had resident groups of actors and a repertory of plays, and they also had to operate commercially especially for the purpose of sustainability.

Although television gave them a lure, they were still steadfast with their touring activities. The fact that television offered them more fame and more money did not deter them from continuing with their live shows, travelling from one community to the other.³ Drama on TV and drama on the live stage were therefore running pari-passu, one complementing the other. In fact, as Jide Kosoko puts it,

Television helped the stage in the early times because the audience wanted to see live on stage, the actors and actresses they’ve watched on television.⁴
It continued like this until television began to gain an upper hand. Drama on TV became more fascinating and theatregoers started to appreciate television more than stage perhaps because certain things could not be achieved on stage which could be achieved with effects on TV. The stage is live but appeared illusory while TV is not live but appeared real. This paradox is understandable because television will present us with a real sitting room, a real river, an actual market or street while the stage which purports to be live merely simulates these locations symbolically on the limited acting area in the auditorium.

This situation was made worse by the mid 70s when Indian, American and Chinese films were imported into the country. Many Nigerians became addicted to these foreign films obviously with better technologies, amazing tricks and wonderful cultures. Live shows by the indigenous Nigerian travelling theatres began to dwindle and many of these groups concentrated only on television drama series. It is pertinent to mention that at about this time, Nigerian theatre in English had started to emerge, found mainly in groups that were formed within University campuses and troupes founded by university authorities with the establishment of academic programmes in theatre arts studies. The activities of these groups and troupes were however restricted for many years within the confines of the university campuses. Biodun Jeyifo once noted this when he observed that:

For Literary drama to really become popular, it must literally move out of the universities in which it is largely confined.5

The academic or university campus theatre tradition continued that way for many years such that they couldn’t find an inroad to the public outside the campus. And occasionally, when they did, the plays seemed too idealistic and esoteric for the average audience who probably preferred something more interesting and entertaining to the didactic.

To worsen this situation, hundreds of theatre graduate students trained and certificated by the pioneers of the English Language Theatre came out to confront an empty market. No tradition had been created for them like the Yoruba travelling theatre example. And since they were not ready to take up the challenge of creating the tradition and an awareness many of them embarked on voyages into other industries such as Advertising, banking, finance and even the commercial buying and selling. That was why Gbenga Sonuga, onetime Director of Culture in Lagos State, infuriated and disgusted about the dangerous trend, complained bitterly during an interview in a weekly journal about the
kind of country we have where most of its creative artists have become contractors and traders. 6

One must but mention the activities of some groups which engaged in sporadic English theatre productions especially in the 80s and early 90s. Some of these include Kapo Productions, Ajo Productions which ruled the theatre scene in Lagos between 1984 and 1988, the Ayota Arts Centre led by the Late Segun Taiwo, the Pec Repertory Theatre by J. P. Clark, the Odu Theme Meridian in Ibadan, the Chuk Mike-led Collective Artists, and later Centr Stage Productions, Fezi Productions, Tempo Productions, to mention a few. Some of these groups put up shows annually while others made sporadic attempts to organize productions. However discouraged by:

(a) Low audience turnout
(b) Problem of funding
(c) Lack of adequate performing centres
(d) Non profitability
(e) Lack of support from the private sector
(f) Lack of adequate media coverage
(g) Lack of support from professional colleagues
(h) Lack of competent professional union to serve the interest of practitioners
(i) Lack of Government support.

many of these groups gradually bowed out from active theatre productions, while some of them veered into other promotion activities such as television and film productions.

On the television and film scene, the Yoruba travelling theatre groups had started to experiment with various forms of reach out programmes. First, following the dwindling rate of live theatre and the reduction of audiences, some theatre groups began experimenting on thirteen week episode TV serial such as Jimoh Aliu’s Arelu which featured and starred Fadeyi Oloro and Orisabumi, Agbeleku, Yonponyonrin and so on.

Secondly, influenced and inspired by the proliferation of Indian and Chinese films in the country, some groups ventured into the production of celluloid films. The Late Ade-Love Theatre came out with Kadara and Ija Orogun. Some others are Death of a Black President, The Rise and Fall of Oyenusi by Eddie Ugboa, Ajani Ogun and Money Power by Ola Balogun, Ogun Ajaye, Omo Orukan by Ojo Ladipo Theatre, Orun Moor and Mosebolaton by Moses Olaiya Theatre (Baba Sala) Aiye, Jaiyesimi and Ayanmo by the Hubert Ogunde Theatre.
The Nigerian (celluloid) film which came basically between late 70s and early 80s was wholeheartedly accepted by the Nigerian people for they saw the emergent Nigerian film as a substitute of some sort, to the popular (but relegated) travelling live theatre of the 60s and 70s and also as a culturally relevant substitute to the imported Indian, Chinese and American films. Unfortunately the Nigerian social, political and economic problems of the mid-80s truncated the growth and continuity of the film. Angry with this situation, Ola Balogun in an essay, “Nigeria Deserves a Film Industry,” once said “In Nigeria, amidst so many disintegrations, the institution of cinemas has disintegrated both socially and technically.”

Film productions became unduly expensive, and no theatre troupe or individual film producer could dabble into it anymore. Some who took the risk, started film projects and could not complete them. An example is Francis Oladele’s The Eye of Life (1989). The harsh economic situation also brought with it, attendant problems of social insecurity. For instance, it was no longer safe for people to go out in the evenings and at nights. This obviously further compounded the situation of live theatre which had already been on siege and it also affected the development of (celluloid) film production and exhibition. Consequently, producers had to explore alternative means of practicing, hence the new home-video genre. According to Jide Kosoko, the new home video started at about 1989 with young Muyindeen Aromire, popularly known as Alade, who first transferred one of his reversal films Ekun into video.

Although Adebayo Salami (a.k.a. Bello) buttressed the pioneering role of Aromire, he claimed that the idea of packaging TV drama for home viewing started with some of Awada Kerikeri Organization’s (AKO) works, especially the one-hour or two-hour teledrama being illegally sold to some pirate video dealers by NTA Ilorin around 1985. By 1988 however, the idea of packaging TV drama specifically for home use had become popular. Some of the earliest home video producers include Nek Video Links, Alade Aromire Productions, Babkos Production, Awada Kerikeri Organization (AKO), Meshoye Productions, and later Mainframe Productions, Dudu Productions, Zeb Ejir Productions, etc. By 1992, it had become a vogue and between then and now the industry has witnessed an unchecked proliferation of video film productions. Apart from the general advantage of creating a compulsive awareness within the Nigerian people, the industry has been fraught with several problems ranging from mediocrity and egocentricity to absolute ignorance.

The first major problem is that many people are in the industry virtually in every capacity (even as Director) and who are not supposed to be in it until
they have been tutored. Unfortunately majority of these characters are those who parade themselves as champions of the industry. At a glance, one discovers that most of the home videos produced in Nigeria are lacking in good quality acting, plagued with poor scripting, inexperienced plot construction and monotonous exploration of themes, bad directing, shoddy technical quality where lights fail to convey mood and time, where pictures could not speak except actors who jabber unintelligibly, where sound rustles and rumbles, and so on. The live theatre has virtually gone to rest and the home video has occupied centrestage in drama entertainment. But for some strange reasons most of the thoroughbred theatre artists loathe the new home video movement. They maintain a distance claiming that the crop of home video film hijackers are art mercenaries. Whereas it is my belief that the wheat will somehow be separated from the chaff and soon too; whereas I believe that the performing arts needs people in its thousands, it however needs those who are first willing to be trained, those willing to learn the craft and technique of creative imagination before practising. When the current roadside practitioners are weeded out, perhaps a proper industry may emerge. The present status of the majority of practitioners has made it impossible for a formidable association that would effectively cater for the interests of its members to be established.

Also, apart from the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) established by government in 1993 to censor and keep records of film and video works, the government has not shown adequate interest in the Nigerian film industry as an economic resource potential.

Additionally, Nigerian video films are not properly marketed because most of the marketers are exploitative and selfish, interested only in their own investments. Jide Kosoko suggests that they should be more aggressive and take decisive actions against video club owners.

From available statistics, between 20 and 30 films are released in a month (censored and uncensored). This means that about 300 video films get into the market in a year. The consequences of this are:

a. Consumers are bombarded such that their loyalty to anyone film wanes quickly.

b. The average life-span of any one film is between a month and two, a situation which terribly affects sales.

c. Quality of film produced is low because they are virtually rushed through location and the studios.

The Executive director of NFVCB, Mr. Ademola James, admits that unless video film operators improve themselves, cooperate with one another
and seek government support, the supposed current boom being enjoyed by the industry could be a mirage.\textsuperscript{13}

Continuing, he warns...

\ldots{} If the mirage vanishes, instead of being turned into an expansive oasis (and subsequently an in-lake or sea) the seeming viability noticeable in the current development will simply collapse.\textsuperscript{14}

To avoid this situation, we recommend that concerted efforts should be made to make the live theatre service the film industry through its trained Actors and technicians. Most of the trained theatre Artists and film literate practitioners should break the barriers of lukewarmness on their part and occupy their place in the scheme of things.

Those already in the industry should practice with caution and desist from churning out films indiscriminately. No matter how hardworking a producer or director is, under normal, decent and sane condition, he could not work on about five films in a year, but we have in Nigeria, a situation where some individuals direct or produce up to ten films in a single year. This seems outrageous and unprofessional. Finally, it is recommended that enthusiasts and practicing — but untrained — individuals who are in the industry should seek to improve themselves through some form of education; then would the viability of the new video film industry be guaranteed and only then could the live theatre properly service the video film industry while also regaining its relevance in the culture sector. Indeed home video production is another way of taking theatre to the people but it should not rob live theatre of its place.