NEW PERSPECTIVES in LINGUISTICS & LITERATURE

Edited by:
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Prospects of Repertory Theatre in Nigeria: The Ori-Olokun Example

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By definition, repertory theatre refers to a theatre company usually in residence, which has a repertory or store of plays ready for production on a regularly changing basis, each play being performed no more than one week, but brought back at intervals according to public demand. In this sense, the term implies a method of theatrical production and refers to those theatrical organizations which maintain, in each season, a programme of plays.

It has however been generally observed that besides the major advantage of this style of play production which is the provision of a wide variety of plays, it is rather expensive and difficult to maintain, hence most modern repertory companies use a modification of the system by presenting fewer and long-running plays, either alternately or successively. Operating a repertory system of play production requires a theatre building based in a region or community where the company can easily operate; a resident company of actors with which it can plan, prepare and have a store of plays ready for production in a given season; a professional management, and a community audience.

Although the resident repertory theatre is usually non-profit oriented, and by virtue of its status can seek donations and grants from private citizens, corporations and the state (a status which places upon it a responsibility to serve the public), there is now a general realization that the distinctions between commercial theatre and non-profit theatre have blurred as these categories are not mutually exclusive. This is so because in the real sense of the word, it is necessary to sell a play and deliver satisfaction in order to survive.

Repertory theatres were first noticed in Britain around 1890 in such cities as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, producing new plays every week or two. However, a more vigorous involvement in regional and repertory theatre activities occurred in America in the early 1900s through the American College theatre programmes, the most outstanding example of which is the Yale
Repertory Theatre of the Yale School of Drama, thereby becoming one of the earliest striking examples of a repertory company established within a university community. It should be stressed that the resident repertory theatre started in the United States as a revolution against the Broadway euphoria and was a reaction against the quality of the flagging commercial theatre.

Also in Nigeria, several repertory experiments have been made in theatre in English Language since the establishment of the University of Ibadan in 1948. However, apart from the fact that most of them were short-lived, they were amateur groups whose efforts could be meritorially regarded as pioneering. These groups did not however come up as a revolution against the commercial (indigenous) travelling theatres, but as part of the efforts at starting an English Language-based theatre in the country.

These efforts came in two categories:

1. Groups that were formed and operated within the University campus.

2. Groups that were formed outside the university campus and that operated both within the University campus and outside.

In the first category, we have the Arts Theatre production group founded by Geoffery Axworthy in 1957 at Ibadan University School of Drama; University of Ibadan Acting Company founded by Wole Soyinka in 1967, and troupes founded by University Institutes of African or Cultural Studies such as the Awo Varsity theatre which metamorphosed from Ori-Olokun Company. In the second category we have groups such as Wole Soyinka’s The 1960 Masks, later renamed the Orisun theatre; The Mbari Theatre, The Theatre Express, and the Nigerian Armchair Theatre. Most of the groups in the second category operated without permanent resident playhouses, hence they resorted to using the campus theatres and as such had to direct their plays to meet the tastes and needs of the elitist academic campus audience.

THE ORI-LOKUN EXAMPLE

Following the examples of the Arts Theatre production group and the School of Drama, University of Ibadan Acting Company, the University of Ife Theatre (now Awo Varsity Theatre) was established in 1968 under the artistic direction of Ola Rotimi. When the Awo Varsity theatre was first established, it was known as the Ori-Olokun Company. It rented an old building formerly used as a hotel belonging to a certain Chief Pedro in Arubidi, Ife town. The building was renamed Ori-Olokun centre and it was here that the company premiered and re-produced most of the plays in its repertory in the early years.

Though the Ori-Olokun company was subsidized by the University, it
had the advantage of having its operational base outside the campus. This enabled it to cultivate a mass regular audience within the community where it was located, an audience which cut across educational, religious or social barriers. To help the situation, Ola Rotimi’s plays were written or had to be written to meet the socio-linguistic needs of his target audience. Hence, the Awo Varsity theatre in its Ori-Olokon days became easily the most acclaimed repertory theatre company in the country. It developed and pursed a virile programme of theatrical activity, one which cannot be easily forgotten in the history of theatre development in Nigeria. Some of the plays in its repertoire include Ola Rotimi’s *Cast the First Stone* (1967) and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968); Peggy Harpers *City City* (a dance drama, 1968); Rotimi’s *Holding Talks* (1969) and *Kurunmi* (1969); Wale Ogundayomi’s *Obaluaye* (1969); Aime Cesaire’s *Roi Christophe* (1970); Oladejo Okediji’s *Rere Run* (1971); Comish Ekiye’s *The Family* (1972); Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1974), amongst others.

Apart from performing in its base at Ori-Olokon, the company also went on tour of neighbouring cities and towns. Biodun Jeyifo observes that “...Rotimi’s Ife days saw the creation of the only true institution-based repertory company to date.” Had this tradition continued, perhaps other Universities could have taken a cue from the kind of audience-oriented community-based Ori-Olokon project and perhaps a greater awareness of the theatre in English Language could have been more extensively created. But, as a result of structural development and administrative changes, the Company was moved from Ori-Olokon into the campus in 1974, and finally when a Dramatic Arts Department was created in 1975, it was recommended that the theatre be made an adjunct of the Department and made to function within that context as a laboratory for the students in the Department. The consequential implications of this development are:

1. The Department’s programmes (both academic and practical) took priority over those of the company.
2. The Department became the immediate parent of the theatre company.
3. The theatre company could no longer plan any production on its own without considering the production’s suitability within the academic schedules of the Department.
4. The company’s activities decreased tremendously especially as a “performance ensemble” and a “travelling theatre.”
5. Most of all, the development affected the company’s established methods of production.
Although the Company remained in residence, its management and organization began to witness unsteady growth, and its activities as a repertory company and a travelling theatre became sporadic. Unfortunately, this same model of establishing resident performing troupes was imitated by the University of Calabar theatre company, Ahmadu Bello University Cultural Institute, and Unibadan performing company. However, it has been generally observed, and sadly so, that the activities of these University theatre troupes are usually confined within the campuses, thereby lack a mass popular audience within the communities.

Also, the direction of the University theatres attached either to Dramatic Departments or Cultural Institutes is often entrusted to the academics and not to theatre men, chosen in most cases for scholarly rather than theatrical distinction. Since the operation of a repertory theatre requires professional administration among other factors to formulate policies, define objectives, plan a season of play productions and run it without friction or distraction of any sort. One is impelled to think that University theatre companies if they must be created should be established within separate physical and administrative structures (though they could still enjoy subsidy from the universities), because, according to Peter Thompson and Gamini Salgado, "it remains difficult to foresee a future for the professional theatre without subsidy." But it could do without operating as a unit of a drama department or cultural institute. Going by the Ori-Olokun experience, it is safe to assert that repertory theatres are best established within the communities outside the universities. This way, they would be made to function as social service and a cultural and entertainment resource. In any national provision or national policy for the Arts, three main separate but closely related objectives have been proposed by the French:

1. Creation, this is the business of encouraging and helping artists.
2. Excellence, this is the goal of raising and maintaining standards of excellence and
3. Accessibility, the problem of diffusion or dissemination of the Arts to the public.

In the analysis of the French's policy objectives, Alexander Dunbar in his book *Fostering the Arts by Disestablishment*, proposes that we must see and think of the Arts in its broadcast sense. He believes that the decentralization of the Arts will ensure relevant and viable cultural alternatives and that arts must be seen not only from the point of view of the artist, but also from the point of view of the consumer, not only in terms of institutions, but in terms of the people.
Also arguing in favour of regional community theatres, Shaw advocates that the theatre must brace itself up, go to the people and dwell within them and not wait for the people to come to it. Biodun Jeyifo has equally advocated for our drama to move out of the universities in which it is largely confined in order to become really popular.

Taking a cue from the decentralised American theatre and perhaps inspired by the Ori-Olokun model, we have in Nigeria today exciting examples of private community-based regional theatres organized on repertory principles and exploring the theatre’s potency as an artistic and entertainment medium. In the Western part of the country, we have the Pec Repertory Theatre Onikan, Lagos, founded by J.P. Clark (1982) now utilized by Collective Artistes and Performance Studio workshop led by Chuk Mike. There is also Odu Themes Meridian, Ibadan, founded by Bode Sowande (1978); Ayota Arts Centre, Ajegunle, Lagos, founded by the late Segun Taiwo (1986); Artistes Resort, Sango Otta, founded by Bode Osanyin (1986), and lately, Satellite Town Theatre Abule-Ado, founded by this writer (1997).

Although, most if not all of these artistic institutions operate without a resident company of actors, they take on freelance artistes and performing groups for their productions. However, some of them have performing troupes made of volunteer workers and theatre enthusiasts who are not particularly placed on monthly wages.

One must also mention the effort of some state’s cultural councils that maintain cultural cum performing troupes with resident artistes such as the Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture, Oyo State Arts Council, Ibadan, and Rivers State Council for Arts and Culture, etc. Although the primary function of these government agencies is to provide cultural entertainment at government functions, preserve and promote their respective state’s cultures through festivals and cultural exchange programmes, some of them have been able to produce in their own small ways community-based theatrical activities within their immediate regions.

However, they would need to step up responsiveness towards artistic promotion. Since most of them are not running orchestras or running theatres per se, they should increase their patronage of the arts by giving grants to other organizations to do this. The repertory theatre organizations in conjunction with these government institutions should devise a forum for dialogue and engage in plans to establish an enduring method of theatrical practice with the Arts Councils coordinating and providing grants for these artistic activities. According to Dunbar, providing factories and more jobs, better homes and schools and hospitals and roads is essential, but make sense only if a small
fraction of public expenditure is also devoted to improving the quality of life in the arts and entertainment, recreation, leisure and socio-cultural mobilization.  

For continued awareness and greater effect, one would like to see more and more community-based regional repertory theatres throughout the country where regular and seasonal programme of play productions can be established into a flourishing tradition. One is aware of the existence of several production groups operating without private playhouses within the areas where they are resident and plan a seasonal programme of play productions on a rotatory basis. For instance about ten production groups can register with Ayota Centre in Apapa/Ajegunle region, ten with the Lagos State Glover Memorial hall in Tinubu/Idumota region, another ten with Pec theatre in Obalende/Ikoyi region, ten with New Cultures Studio in Mokola, Ibadan, ten with Odu Themes Meridian in Agbowo, Ibadan, ten with Satellite Town Theatre in Satellite/Festac region, and a seasonal programme of plays can be planned in each of these regions for the cultivation of community and regionally based audiences and the creation of massive theatrical awareness in every single part of the respective states. This model could apply to other states in the federation. There can also be inter-regional and inter-state programme exchanges. This way, the Nigerian live theatre currently under siege can be woken up from its slumber and kept alive.

The government has most certainly not done very well in its efforts at promoting and encouraging the arts generally. Apart from the National Arts Theatre in Lagos, there are no government-owned regionally-based community theatres where production groups operating without private playhouses can perform on a regular seasonal basis and so cultivate mass community audiences across the country. Perhaps the Nigerian government could learn from the British experience in theatre production as enunciated by Jan Ryan. According to her, though there are private theatres, there are also several public theatres funded and run by the local councils within the regions where they are located and provide opportunities for theatre production companies. She identifies three types of “deals” open to production companies collaborating with public theatres or productions on repertory basis. These are

1. **PAID FEES:** The theatre provides the funds for the production company based on the proposal brought by the company and the entire gate takings go to the theatre.

2. **FIRST CALL:** The production company funds the production, submits the cost and takes the exact amount from the takings.
3. BOX OFFICE SPLIT: The theatre funds the production based on the proposal by the production company. From the gate takings, the theatre removes the total funding sum and the remaining income is shared in the following percentages: 60 to the production company and 40 to the theatre.

In all of these, the production company does not have to pay anything to use the theatres. According to Ryan, productions occur regularly, the theatres are busy, the audiences are there already cultivated and nurtured and so the question of not breaking even does not arise unless the production is "really bad."

Indeed, everywhere in the world, including Nigeria, if the theatre ever hopes to be of meaningful service to the community and serve as a vehicle for projecting the theatre profession as a serious and viable endeavour, it should be made to dwell within the community and aim at cultivating regional grassroot audiences.

NOTES

4. Rowell and Jackson, op. cit., p. 34.
5. In an interview with Segun Akinbola (now Oba), one-time production services manager of Unife Theatre, Friday Sept. 10, 1994.
9. Ibid., p. 56.
17 18. Dunbar, op. cit.
18 19. In a workshop organized by Collective Artistes and 5th Amendment at Pec Repertory Theatre, Onikan, on April 15, 1999.
19 20. Ibid.
20 21. Ibid.