A GAZELLE OF
THE SAVANNAH
SUNDAY ODODO AND THE FRAMING OF
TECHNO-CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

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Functionality and Visual Aesthetics in Theatrical Stage Designs: Positioning Sunday Ododo's Ideas and Concepts

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Abstract
The design of scenery in any theatrical production is first determined and dictated by its functionality. In other words, a stage set is basically meant to situate the story and the action of a play by creating an appropriate environment through a visual interpretation of the playwright’s aim. But beyond the strict functions that a stage set performs, scenic ideas may also possess manifestations of atmospheric aesthetics. This may be achieved through pure decoration, or evocation of mood through a stylization of the design components, such as set, costume, lights, props sound and other audio-visual effects. This chapter examines the design ideas and concepts of Sunday Ododo against the background of placing the action on a set that thoroughly performs its functional role on one hand, and a set that exhibits great visual pleasure through a subtle decorative appeal on the other. The chapter also attempts a review of some of Ododo's academic publications especially on design practice in the Nigerian theatre in order to position his design ideas and concepts. The essay concludes that Sunday Ododo is a worthy scholar, theatre designer and technologist, whose works should be documented and widely circulated for the purposes of research and for posterity, in view of the academic and professional influences they can generate.

Keywords: Visual aesthetics, Theatrical stage designs, Sunday Ododo

Introduction
Some of the distinctive features in the personality of Sunday Ododo which have endeared him to many across continents are his gentle mien, diligence and his humane and friendly disposition, virtually to everyone who comes in contact
with him. With a robust career spanning over two decades in the theatre and academia, Ododo has earned himself an enviable reputation as an accomplished designer and theatre practitioner and as a worthy scholar of note. It is therefore a privilege to make a contribution to a festschrift in honour of Sunday Ododo, a professor of performance aesthetics and theatre technology.

The first part of the chapter will make a brief survey of the elements of design and examine the functions of scene design in a theatrical production. The second part shall deal with reminiscences of a direct encounter and interaction with Sunday Ododo on a stage production entitled *Charley’s Aunt* written by Brandon Thomas, adapted and directed by this writer and designed by Sunday Ododo about twenty years ago. The third and last part of the essay will make a modest attempt at reviewing some of Ododo’s scholarly publications in order to place his design ideologies and convictions in perspective.

**Elements of Design**

It was Peter Brook who once referred to a stage set as the “geometry of the eventual play” (25), by reasoning that a wrong set makes many scenes impossible to play, and even destroys many possibilities for the actors. A good designer he says evolves step by step with the director and he also thinks of his designs as being all the time in motion, in action and in relation to what the actor brings to a scene as it unfolds.

Many things influence the form of a final design for the theatre— the text itself and the interpretation given by all the artistic personnel. To this extent, a scene designer may draw sketches, and make models, but designs do not reach a full state of expression until they are brought together with other design elements, presented on stage and inhabited by actors in front of an audience. This is why Edmond Jones declares that:

> A stage setting has no independent life of its own. Its emphasis is directed towards the performance. In the absence of the actor, it does not exist. (68)

Lending voice to this declaration, Charles Nwadigwe submits that “if scenery must be seen in a performance at all, its appearance should not be fortuitous. The application of scenery should be deliberate and controlled, to achieve optimal functionality” (33). Oren Parker et al., inform us that the elements of design are the raw materials ready to be brought together into some order or purpose (33). These elements are: Line, Scale, Movement, Light, Colour and
Texture. It is the organization of these design elements into a unified form that brings about Composition—which gives the design meaning. Of all the elements, they inform us that line and colour are often the most forceful; but any one of the six may be emphasized. In their words:

All the elements interact one influencing the other as the composition takes shape. Although, none stands alone, each has unique features that contribute to the overall effect sought by the designer (28).

They explain further that:

Line defines form. It can enclose space as outline and create shapes in two or three dimensional form.

Scale is the size or mass of form also referred to as "Proportion" and is concerned with the relationship of one shape to another.

Movement is the action of form, the kinetic energy of composition

Light reveals form and it has a dominant presence in all areas of stage design

Colour is a critical aspect of light because it is a powerful stimulus that can change the dimension of form, reverse the direction of line, and alter the intervals between forms and general optical motion. It has three variants—hue, value and chroma.

Texture is the tactile aspect of form. As a design feature, it adds interest by embellishing the surface and thereby giving character to the finished form. (28-38)

Principles of Composition in Design

The principles of composition are the various ways the designer can control and use the design elements to bring interest and meaning to the stage. Oren Parker et al. note that "A good composition brings into play two controls—harmony and contrast, and that the manipulation of these control (through variation, emphasis, gradation, etc) is how the designer creates interest in a stage setting" (38). According to them:

Harmony, in design can be described as the repeated use of linear forms to bring order to disorder and sort out unrelated relationship or continuity. Caution must be taken however, because, even though, repetition could be one of the easiest and quickest ways to bring harmonious control to a composition, it suffers the danger of being
monotonous. This can be relieved with contrast and variation.

- **Contrast**: Every designer depends on contrast to create form and interest, because form cannot be revealed without contrast. For instance, if an actress in a red gown sits on a red matching sofa, the outcome would be a fiasco.

- **Variation**: This refers to slight or major changes in the elements or principles of a form that prevent monotonity. Thus, when the repetition of one element produces monotonity, a variation of one or more of the other elements can add interest to the composition.

- **Emphasis**: This is a method of creating visual prominence or a centre of interest in a design, to guide or direct the audience's view to a specific area of the stage set, either by obvious or subtle means. For example, the use of levels or raised platforms, isolation or placement of one object away from the others can also be used to achieve this.

- **Gradation**: This refers to transitional steps in a sequence used to create emphasis and a feeling of movement in a design. Sharp contrasts can be reduced by the use of graduation, which by transitional steps softens contrasting elements, yet brings a feeling of movement into the stage picture. (38-40)

**Functions of Scene Design**

Describing design as 'expression', Ododo says to express a performance through design means reaching out to the soul of the performance and making manifest the layers of meaning inherent in the work (2). In his words:

The Designer in the theatre therefore functions to visually animate theatrical ideas through set design, delineates character in this world through props, costumes and make-up designs, orchestrates human activities through sound and sound effects and through lighting design, unifies all of the above, and reveals this world to a viewing audience. (2)

Oren Parker et al (2003) submit that the creation of environment to fulfil a function in scene design is linked to the dramatic form it serves. They insist however that whatever the form of design, the most important function of scenery is to serve the unfolding story line. The form of the play or show should enable the designer to understand the relationship of scenery to the action and the actors, and to the dominant mood and theme, etc.

In specific terms, scenery is essential in a theatrical production to achieve
the following:

**Placing the Action** – To create an appropriate set, the designer must first examine the action of the play and the kind of people involved in the action. Since every play presents a conflict, then out of the conflict comes the action of the play, the force that moves it forward and makes it a living form. Dramatic action is a combination of physical or bodily action, visual movement, dialogue and characterization. A careful analysis of the action and characters can help lead the designer to understand the playwright’s intent.

**Establishing Mood** – Another important function of scene design is the establishment of mood through the expression of the dominant atmosphere. When mood is properly established and transmitted, it creates a state of mind and emotional response in the audience. Mood can be expressed with such words as warm, tense, mystic, radiant, gloomy, sparkling etc. The term tragedy, comedy and farce refer to genre, but they also suggest as well, a broader idea of atmosphere. Arguably, a play can be described as the dramatization of a mood, theme and a story.

**Reinforcing the Theme** – Theme is defined as the main idea of a play or the main point that the playwright wants the audience to realize. The expression of theme in scenery is not always easily achieved, more often, the theme is treated with subtlety and it involves looking beyond the words of the play and examining the overall structure, language and ideas that are being expressed through the characters and the action.

**Staging the Story** – Story is the thread that holds together the elements in a completed dramatic form. Where the environment of a play is real, the design problem becomes one of selection of realistic details and forms that place the action and establish the mood. Every choice that the designer makes in the ground plan of the physical space both limits and provides opportunities for the director in terms of movement patterns and stage pictures. This is why the scene designer must collaborate with the director when working on ground plan and the scenic idea.

**Reflections on a Memorable Professional Interaction with Sunday Ododo**

Sunday Enessi Ododo is one designer in Nigeria who believes in, and carefully applies, all the principles discussed above in his works. One memorable artistic encounter between him and this writer shall be relieved in this essay to prove the
foregoing claims. It was a final year directing project at the University of Ibadan in the year 1988. Ododo was a technical theatre major in the Master of Arts (MA) programme in the Department of Theatre Arts, while I was in the final year of the first degree programme as a theatre directing major.

The play was my adaptation of *Charley’s Aunt*, a situation comedy originally written by Brandon Thomas. The first thing that I noticed about Ododo was his commitment and prompt attention to the assignment. Less than a week after collecting the script, he came up with the first draft of the set design. In our meeting, when he observed that I was surprised, though pleasantly, and in a bid to encourage me, he said:

Sola, this is my major technical theatre project and it is yours as well in directing. It deserves all the attention it can get. I have read the play more than three times already; besides this is just an initial sketch, look at it and make your input. When we agree on a concept, I’ll bring up the final design.

Unfortunately, I had not thought of any set design idea before then. But to me, what happened was a signal to the fact that this is a serious-minded, thoroughly professional theatre designer. And I must confess, the experience influenced my eventual attitude towards the entire project, which positively affected the production in more ways than I can recount here.

*Charley’s Aunt* deals with the themes of love, impersonation, deceit and mistaken identity. Jerry Okoli played by Kenneth Ezaga and Charles Adu (Dele Adagunodo), University Students, invite two girls, Kate (Betty Eriyo) and Aminat (Ronke Ajetunmobi) to their room in the hostel for lunch, so that the girls could meet Charley’s aunt, Madam Lucia (Oge Mbeledogu), a wealthy woman, who lives in Lagos and was billed to visit Charles his nephew, that afternoon. When the Aunt was delayed, they desperately persuade Babs Oni, (Vic Osaren Idaho) a colleague of theirs to impersonate the aunt, in a bid not to disappoint the girls. This follows the development of a restless situation and in between, Jerry’s father, Sir Francis Okoli (Olisa Emeriole) arrives and falls in love with the fake aunt. Mr Badmus (Joe Santos Anyanwu), the girl’s uncle, also falls in love with her. The real aunt eventually arrives and finds someone else taking her place.

The complicated plot is eventually untangled and resolved happily. In his desperate chase of Madam Lucia, Mr Badmus is tricked into giving a written permission, allowing Kate and Aminat to be married to Jerry-and Charles respectively. Jerry’s father discovers his old lover, the real Madam Lucia, and
they resolve to resume their affair. Babs Oni who had met Stella Ejirio (Tutu Aina) in Port-Harcourt also consummates his love with her, leaving Mr Badmus alone to bear the brunt of the tricks and the ridiculous situation.

Quite hilarious and entertaining, the story of the play was very much enhanced by the scenic environment created by Sunday Ododo’s stage setting. It was a multiple set, designed to accommodate Jerry Okoli’s hostel room, a garden, road path and Mr Badmus’ sitting room. Okoli’s room was placed between up stage and down centre covering about three quarters (3/4) of the stage-space to the right and this was achieved with basic flats. The remaining quarter (1/4) part of the stage to the left was used for the garden, adorned with flowers, trees and garden seats. The stage set was quite appropriate, very much in line with David Bellasco’s idea of “Creating Atmosphere” (125-137), in order to place the action properly and establish the mood for a satisfying expression of the theme and basic idea of the play.

Another interesting aspect of the production was the application of multimedia ideas in the achievement of sound and sound effects, with audio recording, played back on tape. Sounds such as telephone ring, door bell, voice over of Madam Lucia’s telegram, etc. In addition, Ododo did not just design and construct the set and sit back. Apart from the fact that he also handled the lighting for the production, which was expertly and effectively done, he made himself available for consultation and advice on all the other aspects of the project. He more or less functioned as the Technical Director and Supervisor of all the technical aspects of the production. He provided leadership for the entire technical crew in conjunction with the director and supported Mercy Odokhiran, the costumier, Funmi Obindo, the make-up designer, Stephen Inegbe, the sound man, Sola Adeyemi, the property man and so forth, with ideas and suggestions which gave the entire production the quality of harmony, unity and wholesomeness.

The Man, Sunday Enessi Ododo
Born fifty years ago in Maiduguri, Borno State of Nigeria, Sunday Ododo had his primary education at Nurul Islamic Primary School, Okene, and his secondary education at Fatima Community College, Ekan-Meje. He proceeded to the University of Ilorin for his Bachelor of Arts (BA), degree in Performing Arts. He obtained a Master of Arts (MA) degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Ibadan in 1988 and returned to Ilorin for his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) degree in Performing “Arts. Before joining the teaching staff of University of Ilorin as Assistant Lecturer in 1993, he had worked as lecturer at the Department of English, Federal College of Education, Yola and as Social
Mobilization Officer to Okene Local Government Area in Kogi State’s Directorate for Social Mobilisation between 1989 and 1992. He also had a stint as Principal Personnel Officer with Kogi State Government, Lokoja, between 1992 and 1993. At Ilorin, Ododo rose through the ranks in the University from an assistant lecturer to the position of a Senior Lecturer in year 2000. And in year 2008, he was appointed a Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Maiduguri.

Sunday Ododo has held several academic and administrative positions both in the Universities of Ilorin and Maiduguri. At Ilorin, he was Editor, The Performer: Ilorin Journal of Performing Arts (2001-2005) and Alore: Journal of Humanities in the Faculty of Arts; (2004-2006). He was also Seminar Coordinator in the department of Performing Arts (1998-2002), Acting Head of Performing Arts department (2001-2003), Member, University Ceremony Committee (2001-2003) to mention a few.

At Maiduguri, he was the Chairman, Curriculum Development Committee for the proposed Department of Performing Arts and he is member of the University Senate from (2008 to date) and currently heads the Department of Theatre Arts. He convened the Olu Obafemi International Conference on African Literature and Theatre (ObafConfab) at the University of Ilorin Auditorium (between 1st and 4th April 2010). Professor Ododo is also on the Editorial Advisory board of Performance, an on-line Journal of the Centre for Performance and Literature, Swansea Metropolitan University, Swansea.

Apart from being a seasoned technical designer and technologist, Sunday Ododo is also an actor, a writer and play director. His acting credits include Lawyer Braimoh in Ososian’s Morountodun, and Oba Bini in Ogunyemi’s Langbodo while his directing credits include Ososian’s Who’s Afraid of Solarin and Sowande’s The Night Before. Ododo wrote and directed The Return from the Void (1995, 2006), and his other creative writings include: Illusive Force 1984 (a play), Sweet Exposure, 1985 (a Play); Vanishing Vapour 2005 (dance theatre), Hard Choice 2008 (a play) etc.

Below are some of Sunday Ododo’s technical theatre involvements as listed in his Curriculum Vitae:


(iii) Technical Consultant, Nasarawa Stage Government of Nigeria on NAFEST 2010. Designed and constructed their Exhibition Pavilion that won first position.

(iv) Set Designer and construction, lighting and sound effects for Charley’s Aunt by Brandon Thomas, as adapted and directed by Sola Fosudo at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, 1988.


(vi) Set Designer, Construction and Lighting of The Sailors (an opera) by Sam Amusan, Unilorin Convocation Production, at the Africa Hall, University of Ilorin, May 1994.

(vii) Technical Director for the Production of The Trial of Brother Jeru, by Wole Soyinka in commemoration of Soyinka’s 60th Birthday Celebration, at the Africa Hall.


(ix) Technical Director, Jankariwo by Ben Tomololu, Who is Afraid of Solarin by Femi Ososian, Oba Koso by Duro Ladipo and Esu and the Vagabond minstrel by Femi Ososian for the Department’s First Season of Productions, at the Africa Hall, University of Ilorin, June – July 1997.

(x) Lighting Designer, Oba Koso by Duro Ladipo. Unilorin Convocation Production, at the Africa Hall, University of Ilorin, August, 1997.

(xi) Lighting Designer and Technical Director, Kurumni by Ola Rotimi, Unilorin Convocation Production, at the Africa Hall. University of Ilorin, December, 1998.

(xii) Technical Director and Lighting Designer for the Production of Rebirth by Felix Emoruwa, Unilorin Convocation/Anniversary Production, at the Africa Hall, University of Ilorin, January, 2002.

(xiii) Technical Director and Lighting Designer for the Production of The Mountain of Wealth by Ayo Akinwale for an International conference by Centre for Theological and National Science, Beckley University, at the Africa Hall. University of Ilorin, 2001.

(xiv) Technical Director and Lighting Designer for the Production of To Return from the Void by Sunday Ododo, for Unilorin Convocation Production, at the Africa Hall. University of Ilorin, July, 2002.

(xv) Designed and constructed locally sourced six channels Jimmer board and Colour wheel through Senate Research Grant. University of Ilorin, 1996 and 1997 respectively.
In the area of research and publications, Professor Ododo has proved himself to be a man of great academic erudition. He has over fifty (50) published works to his credit. They include articles in Peer Reviewed Journals, locally and internationally, edited books and Journals, chapters in books, monographs and creative writings. Professor Ododo has organised and attended numerous conferences in Nigeria and abroad. He is a member of several learned and professional societies such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR); American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN); International Federation for the Theatre Research (IFTR), London etc. In addition, Ododo was the National Vice President of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) from 2009 to 2011 and the current National Vice President of Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) from 2009 to date, to mention a few.

With the foregoing profile, Sunday Ododo can be described as a great scholar and an accomplished theatre designer and technologist, whose over twenty (20) years of academic and professional engagement has been very productive and characterized by tenacity, distinction and assiduity.

An Appraisal of Ododo’s Selected Published Works

As we draw nearer to the conclusion of this chapter, we would like to use this segment to examine some of Sunday Ododo’s published works in order to re-emphasise his views, beliefs and convictions in technical theatre practice in Nigeria.

In the essay entitled “The Challenges of the Young Designer in the Nigeria Theatre” published in Kaibara: Journal of Humanities, in the Faculty of Arts, University of Port Harcourt (2000: 93-102), Ododo lamented the less attractive and rather slow development of design practice in Nigeria when compared to other Arts of the Theatre like acting and directing. He attributed some of the problems to the economic and political instability in the country including lack of purpose-built theatrical infrastructure, insufficient modern facilities, tools and equipment and lack of proper design archival systems. He also decried the absence of Virtual Reality (VR) systems in Nigeria including copyright violations. He suggested acquisition of requisite knowledge and continuous training as one of the ways to contain and eventually overcome some of these challenges. Concluding, he informed of the new prospects of the emergent video film industry, evangelical dramas and corporate events–design and presentations in Nigeria and urged the young designer to explore and take advantage of these emergent sectors for a rewarding practice of his art.
In an interview he conducted with Sunbo Marinho (late) entitled “Talking with the Master”, with the_rider_ (scientific-and-artistic-coherence in play Performance), published in The Performers-Ilorin-Journal of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin (2002; 172-184). Ododo noted that Sunbo Marinho is a vital part of the historical development of design practice in Nigeria, being one of the early theatre technicians in the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan in the sixties, working with Demas Nwoko and George Jackson. Popularly referred to as the “Sango of the theatre”, because of his lighting wizardry, Marinho has worked with almost all the well established Playwright-Directors in the Nigerian theatre, including Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, etc. Ododo observed that Marinho’s versatility and experience manifested when he veered into design scholarship, with a doctorate degree to show for it. In the interview, Marinho enthused that some of what goes into a play production is science more than art and that when a man is able to take the science form and translate it into art form, he is now a combination of two personalities in one. Marinho explains further:

Light can become an art, if it is used to enhance play production. Scenery is science because, you have wood, planes, nails, hammer and all sorts of materials coming together to form one complete whole that the actor will relate to for the benefit of the production. (173)

Other issues discussed is the interview include: defining line of responsibility between designer and technician; the non-visibility of the theatre technician in a production; the attitude of theatre critics to the technical aspects of productions and also, Marinho’s working relationship with Femi Osofisan, which he (Marinho) described as cordial and rewarding.

In the chapter, “Technical Aids in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre Practice” published in Makurdi Journal of Arts and Culture (MAJAC) 1999, Vol. 2. (104-116), Ododo expressed displeasure over the gradual disappearance of some vital technical aids from the Nigerian theatres. He observed that several lighting equipment are lying dormant, crying for repairs and replacement. Also, there are lanterns without lamps, dimmer boards with several dead channels, dead fuses, etc, in most of our theatres in Nigeria. Ododo lamented that even the National theatre which ought to be the oyster of theatrical activities in the country is almost a shadow of its original self, in terms of technical aids. He therefore called for a stakeholders’ forum where these problems could be addressed and the attention of government and the business community could be drawn to finding solutions.
Several of Sunday Ododo's other papers such as "Scenic Design Concept and Performance Styles in the Nigerian Literary Theatre Practice" (2002); "Make-up Artist and the Nigerian Theatre" (2001); "The Technical Involvement of the Playwright, the Director and the Actor in the Play Production Process: Pedagogical Notes" (1999); "Experimentation and Theatre Traditions in Nigeria" (2008); "Theatrical Action of Ebirá-Ekuechi Facekuerade performance" (2010) and "Scenographic Semiotics in the Staging of Muntu", to mention a few, are representative of Ododo's strong views about a new orientation in scenographic aesthetics and professionalism in the Nigerian theatre design practice.

While advocating for increase in the number of theatre technicians and acquisition of relevant training, he insists on the principle of best practices with the application of modern tools and technology, as these would go a long way in restoring hope for the development of design practice in the Nigerian theatre.

**Conclusion**

Sunday Ododo has successfully traversed the two worlds of technical design and academia with due diligence. Having acquired the much needed training and experience in theory and practice, he has been using this asset to show practical examples in all the theatrical projects he has undertaken, he has also been mentoring younger ones, both as lecturer, theatre designer and technologist and he has had his views and visions for a better Nigerian theatre documented in several academic and creative writings. This festschrift in honour of Professor Sunday Ododo is another opportunity to engage in dialectical discourses on theatre design practice in Nigeria and an academic window to share from the experiences of the life and career of a man that can be described as a dynamic rallying point to professional colleagues, especially in the performing arts scholarship.

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