Fireworks for a Lighting Aesthetician

Essays and Tributes in Honour of Duro Oni @ 60

Edited by
Sunday Enessi Ododo
FIREWORKS FOR A LIGHTING AESTHETICIAN:
ESSAYS AND TRIBUTES IN HONOUR OF DURO ONI @ 60

Published by
Centre for Black and African
Arts and Civilization (CBAAC)
36/38 Broad Street, Lagos Island
P.M.B 12794, Lagos, Nigeria
e-mail: cbaac77@yahoo.com
website: http://www.cbaac.com
http://www.cbaac.gov.ng
Phone: 234 01-774 44 89; 470 56 67

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Editorial Services, Production and Printing
by Concept Publications Limited
77, Shipeolu Street, Palmgrove, Lagos
E-mail: conceptpublications@gmail.com
deleconcept@yahoo.co.uk
Website: www.conceptpublications.com
Phone: +234 802 309 4010 & 0805 259 4490
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Products and Corporate Events Design and Presentation in Nigeria: A Study of Duro Oni's Legacies

*Sola Fosudo, Ph.D.

Abstract

Corporate events design and products presentation is not particularly new in Nigeria, but in recent years it has enjoyed a rising profile of attraction and patronage within the advertising, marketing, entertainment and multimedia industries. Many organizations have come to realize that the development and execution of good creative concepts for their corporate events are integral and inseparable parts of the total package in their products and services marketing communications objectives. Good designs are products of professionalism and expertise and they are not only decorative but also functional in the achievement of the desired impact for successful corporate product presentations. This essay is an examination of the contributions of Professor Duro Oni, one of the pioneering and leading Professionals that Nigeria has produced in the area of Technical Design, both for the core theatre and other media of popular entertainment, including the corporate market. The paper concludes that, by all standards and measure, Duro Oni is a "giant" and an "icon" whose legacies in technical theatre and corporate events design and presentation in Nigeria will not only endure for generations to come but will also be a veritable source of reference.

Keywords: Events design, Products presentation, Duro Oni

Introduction

Apart from diligence and competence, style is a compelling quality that distinguishes a man in his professional endeavours from his colleagues and peers. One of the most striking features of Professor Duro Oni's personality and accomplishments is an uncompromising commitment to the ideals of excellence, coupled with the quality of "finesse" in everything he undertakes, especially in the creative and artistic terrains.

* Department of Theatre Arts and Music, Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria.
  (e-mail: solafosudo@yahoo.com)
For a man who has spent almost four decades of his life studying and working in the creative arts industry and has grown to become a University Professor; occupied several executive positions in the University and in government circles; carried out numerous technical design assignments not only for corporate organisations but also for the nation, locally and internationally, Duro Oni is without doubt an embodiment of knowledge and experience. Though he trained as a theatre artist, specialising in the arts of scenic design, his exploits in the area of products and corporate events Design is as a result of his innovative dexterity, passion for professional development and acumen in vocational and industrial enterprise.

At this juncture, an investigation of relevant terms and concepts will be necessary to place the content of this paper in proper perspectives. Terms such as Events, Design and Product Presentation shall now be examined.

Events: Meaning and Concept

Today, events are so central to our lives as human beings, perhaps, as never before. Individuals and groups organize events for celebrations and entertainment; Governments now support and promote events as part of their strategies for economic development, nation building and destination marketing; corporations and businesses also embrace events as key elements in their marketing strategies and image promotion. Glenn Bowdin et al define events as:

...Anything which happens; any incidence or occurrence especially a memorable one; an organized activity at a particular venue, such as a meeting, convention, exhibition, gala dinner, sales promotion, fundraising etc. (14)

An event is often composed of several different, yet related functions, and every event is unique, stemming from the blend of management, programming, setting and the people. Events do not take place in a vacuum. They touch almost every aspect of our lives, be it social, cultural, economic, environmental or political, and the benefits arising from such strategic connections are partly responsible for the current popularity of events as an industry. In other words, the recent explosion of events, along with the parallel increase in the involvement of governments and businesses, has led to an increasing attention and emphasis on the socio-economic analysis of event benefits.

Types of Events

There are many different ways of categorising events including by size, form and content. Glenn Bowdin et al (2008), Hall, C.M (1997) and Getz, D. (2005) all categorise events into four (4) main types. These are:
- Major events
- Mega events
- Hall mark events
- Community events

They also agree, however, that definitions and classifications are not exact, following extensive review of typologies as several types of classifications are also used, such as special events, cultural events, sporting events and business events, etc, even though these categories may still be captured within the four (4) broad types identified earlier.

➤ Major events are events that, by their scale and media interest, are capable of attracting significant visitor numbers, media coverage and economic benefits. Many top social, business and big sporting championships fit into this category.

➤ Mega events are those events that are so large that they affect whole economies and reverberate in the global media. These events are generally developed following competitive bidding. They include the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, etc.

➤ Hall mark events refer to those events that become so identified with the spirit of ethos of a town, city or region that they become synonymous with the name of the place and gain widespread recognition and awareness. Classic examples of hall mark events are the carnivals in Rio De Jenerio and the Notting Hill in United Kingdom.

➤ Community events. Most local communities produce a host of festivals and events that are targeted mainly at local audiences and staged primarily for their social, fun and entertainment value. These events often produce a range of benefits, including engendering pride in the community, strengthening a feeling of belonging and creating a sense of place. According to Janiskee:

These events can also help to expose people to new ideas and experiences, encourage participation in sports, arts and cultural activities, and encourage tolerance and diversity. (402)

The 21st Century has witnessed a remarkable being leap in major events production, with increasing recognition of the role that events can play beyond being merely entertainment, linking in to cultural, arts, regeneration, education, tourism and other strategies. Business people, for instance, were quick to discover the marketing and image-making power of events. Therefore events became established through the 1990's and into this decade as an important element of the corporate marketing
mix. Companies and corporations began to partner and to sponsor major events such as Microsoft and Adecco's involvement in the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games or Coca Cola's sponsorship of the FIFA under 21 Football Championship in Nigeria. There are also other major sponsored events in Nigeria, such as the Guilder Ultimate Search sponsored by Nigerian Breweries Plc and MTN Project Fame, sponsored by MTN.

Kotler and Armstrong in their book *Principles of Marketing* (2010), affirm that many corporate organizations today now promote their brands through event marketing or event sponsorship. In their words:

They (corporate organizations) can create their own brand-marketing events or serve as sole or participating sponsors of event created by others. The events might include anything from mobile brand tours to festivals, reunions, marathons, concerts, or other sponsored gatherings. (505)

According to them, Events marketing is huge and it may be the fastest growing area of business promotion today. Andrew Griffiths believes that one of the reasons why many business corporations sponsor events and competitions is because "they receive excellent exposure and publicity relative to the value of the sponsorship" (77). The growth of sponsorship can also be attributed to changes in marketing itself. New trends in Marketing Communication media give event sponsors the chance to interact directly with their markets to create a brand relationship. In addition, consumers are getting more and more cynical about traditional advertising. While consumers perceive event sponsorship as a commercial activity with some benefits to society, they view advertising as being more manipulative with far less social value.

**Product Presentation**

A product could be either a tangible good or a service that consists of certain activities, benefits or satisfaction offered to customers. Today as products and services become more and more commoditized, many companies are moving to a new level of creating value for the customers. In order to differentiate their offers beyond simply making products and delivering services, they are creating and managing customer experiences with their brands. Customers generally see products as complex bundles of benefits that satisfy their needs. When developing products, therefore, Kotler and Armstrong (249) propose, "Marketing must first identify the core customer value that consumers seek from the products, they must then design and present the actual product to provide augmented experience". In other words, developing a product or service involves defining the benefits that it will offer. And these benefits are communicated and delivered through product presentation and
product attributes such as quality, features, product style and design, branding, packaging, labelling and product support services.

The features can be clearly and most effectively communicated to the targeted audience during product launches and presentations, special promotions and sometimes through advertising campaigns and road shows, etc. Product presentations can be done either through the personal selling process or through corporate product launches and presentation. Our emphasis in this essay shall be on public product presentations.

In the product life-cycle strategy, Kotler and Armstrong inform us that the course of a product's life involves five distinct stages:

(i) Product development
(ii) Introduction
(iii) Growth
(iv) Maturity
(v) Decline (296)

However, not all products follow this life cycle. Some products are introduced and die quickly, others stay in the mature stage for a long time, while some enter the decline stage and are then cycled back into the growth stage through strong promotion and re-launch. Therefore, the idea of using the strategy of product launch and presentation in a public event as a tool of "positioning" a company's product, be it a new product or an existing one, is desirable and often beneficial. Kotler and Armstrong affirm that:

Companies can rescue products foundering in the maturity phase of their life cycle and return them to the growth phase. And they can catapult new products forward into the growth, leap-frogging obstacles that could slow consumers' acceptance. (298)

During a product presentation event, what is required is for the marketing team to deliver a clear, concise and consistent message to the audience. The presentation must tell the "value story" to the buyer, showing how the company's offer solves the customer's problems, as well as why the product is better than the existing competition. Product presentations today should take creativity, careful planning and the application of the hottest technologies available into cognizance. The message(s) must be delivered in an engaging and compelling way and this is where the concept of "staging" comes in, with an event design idea that is creative and theatrical.

Here, some of the elements that must be taken into consideration
include, but are not limited to, choice of venue, event theming, the physical stage, the performers, lights and sound, audio-visual and special effects (otherwise referred to as multimedia applications), the production crew, hospitality, etc. All these are covered within the ambit of the event's overall design.

**Design: A definitional Overview**

Design in the modern theatre and entertainment show business, is concerned with the total visual and aural effects of a production. This overall effect is the sum of all the elements that provide the audience with clues about the world of the play or the presentation. Scene design, which involves the physical environment, is often the strongest visual element that supports the show, although careful consideration must also be given to other design elements such as costumes, lighting and sound – all of which must relate to the nature of the production.

Design is generally concerned with the process of planning and drawing, specifically with planning an overall concept and drawing sketches, patterns and other visualizations. In a theatrical production, scenic design helps the audience understand and enjoy a play by providing a visual reinforcement of the production concept. According to Michael Gillette (71), "scenic design entered a period of development and experimentation in the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century, and the spirit of experimentation and stylistic growth fostered at that time is still very much alive today". The various design styles that evolved – naturalism, realism, symbolism, expressionism etc – are not ends in themselves; they are just convenient reference points on the continuum of design style that moves from *representational* on the one hand to *non-representational*, on the other.

Non-representational design, for instance, creates abstract environments out of the pictorial confines of realism in a variety of interesting forms. It encourages every member of the audience to create his or her own meaning for the abstraction. In practical terms, it is difficult to tell where one style stops and another begins. Many designers today often make use of two or more styles in combination to create a visual representation of the production concept. Regardless of the style that a designer chooses, the finished product, whether sets, costumes, lights or sound must be in tandem with the overall production concept.

Brocket and Ball inform us that "The elements and principles of design form the primary means that scene designers use to create meanings they hope the audience will perceive. According to them:

The visual elements of line, shape, space, colour, texture and
Ornamentation serve as basic building blocks from which designers construct various images and patterns. They may use these basic elements in very different ways, depending on the meaning they wish to communicate and the response to it they wish to elicit. (293)

Oren Parker et al state that "Design artistes bring two things to their work: emotion and intellect" (27). The emotional aspect of creating they say, is individual and introspective. It is hard to quantify and impossible to teach this relatively intangible quality, often referred to as "talent", whereas, "the intellectual side of design can be measured and defined in terms of Composition. During the process of designing therefore, two forces are at work - a personal vision or feeling for the design form and the practical realities that are tempered by thoughtful judgement and taste. Both are regulated by the needs of the presentation. In other words, emotion and feeling become the ideal, thought and intellect, the reality; the first being the goal and the second the realization. Oren Parker et al submit that, "The greater the skill and ability to realise the ideal, the more successful the designer" (27).

**Duro Oni: A Master Designer and a Man of Many Parts**

Professor Duro Oni started his career as a theatre technician in 1973, at a tender age of twenty-one (21) in the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. From there, he moved to the Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Lagos in 1976 as a Theatre Technical Manager. He rose through the ranks and became the Director of the Centre in 1992. He was later instrumental to the creation of the Department of Creative Arts in the University of Lagos in 1998. He served as Head of the department in 2000 and he was appointed a Professor of Theatre Arts in 2005.

Within these years, Duro Oni also played key roles in government circles, serving the nation in various capacities, as well as playing pioneering roles in the creative arts and entertainment industries, especially in the area of scenic designing and provision of multi-media equipment such as lights and sound for various events within the country and internationally.

In an interview granted this writer on Saturday January 7th 2012 in his residence at 15 Alvan Ikoku Road, University of Lagos, Professor Oni traced the influences on his career and training to Dexter Lyndersay at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University College, Ibadan. According to him:

> Dexter Lyndersay was a great inspiration, a gifted artist and a teacher par excellence. My association with Lyndersay helped me early in life to develop a focussed vocational career.

Professor Oni also acknowledges the impactful roles of masters such as late Sunbo Marinho, Segun Akinbola, Dapo Adelugba and Demas
Nwoko, etc, in the development of his career. Having received his higher education at the University of Ibadan and California Institute of the Arts, USA, obtaining the qualifications of Diploma, Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA), Master of Fine Arts (MFA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Theatre Arts, Professor Oni is more than well positioned to affect the cause of theatre scholarship and practice in Nigeria and beyond. He is a Fellow of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA); Member of Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT); Member, United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT). Professor Oni has received several Honours and Awards including the Abuja 2003 Gold Award for Outstanding Contribution to CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting) Technical Committee as Technical Director. He has participated in several national and international festivals, including the 2nd World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77); Horizonte Festival, Berlin Germany (1979); International Festival Cervantino, Mexico, (1982) etc. Professor Oni has also offered design and lighting consultancy services to many agencies and organisations such as the Oyo State Cultural Centre (1977 1979), Calabar Cultural Centre (1992), Grand Hotels, Asaba (1998), etc;

As an academic, Professor Oni has published several chapters in books, articles in reputable journals, as well as edited and co-edited a number of books such as Oni and Adeyemi's Developments in the Theory and Practice of Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre: A Festschrift in Honour of Dapo Adelugba (2011); Oni and Yerima, Trends in the Theory and Practice of Theatre in Nigeria (2008); Oni and Ododo, Technical Theatre Practice in Nigeria (2006); Duro Oni, Arts and the Man: Interpretive Essays on Bode Osanyin (2003) to mention but a few. He has served as External Examiner /Assessor to several universities in Nigeria as well as Ghana and the United Kingdom.

As a creative artist, Professor Oni has designed over one hundred and fifty productions in his professional career. A portfolio of some of his productive works reveal clearly that he is a man of great accomplishments whose creative designs run the gamut of core Theatre, Television and Film productions within and outside Nigeria. Below are selected examples:


Professor Oni can be described as “a man of many parts”, whose works, versatility and industry deserve great commendation and encomiums. He is not only successful as a scene designer for theatrical, cultural and entertainment events; he has also made a mark in the public service by occupying key positions in the University and through political appointments in the service of the nation. For instance, he was Special Assistant/Adviser to the Honourable Minister of Culture and Social Welfare between 1990 and 1991. He was also a Special Assistant/Adviser to the Honourable Minister of Youth and Sports between 1991 and 1992. He served as the Director/Chief Executive of the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization in the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism between 2000 and 2006, where he was responsible as the Administrative Head to the Honourable Minister and or the Board of the
Centre for the day-to-day administration and development of programmes and projects for the advancement of Black and African peoples all over the world. His other notable national and international public services assignment are as listed below:


6. Chairman, Organising Committee, International Workshop on Globalisation, Identity Politics and Social Conflict, April 2003, jointly organized by the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) and the Globalisation, Identity Politics and Social Conflict Project (GIPSC) of the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.


13. Member and Alternate Chairman, Inter-Ministerial Committee for
14. Chairman, Task Force on Projects Implementation for the Federal
15. Chairman, Task Force on Federal Ministry of Culture and Social
16. Member, Nigerian Delegation to the UNESCO Summit in Paris,
17. Member, Nigerian Delegation to Egyptian Sporting Facilities,
October 1991.
18. Representative of the Honourable Minister of Youth and Sports at
the Sheffield University Games, Italy, July 1991.
19. Member, Nigerian Delegation to the High Altitude Training Camps
20. Leader, Nigerian Delegation to the International Federation of
21. Member, Nigerian Delegation to the Democratic Peoples Republic of
22. Member, Nigerian Delegation to the United Kingdom Home Office
23. Member Nigerian delegation to the Meeting of Commonwealth
Ministers Responsible for Women Affairs - Ottawa, Canada, October
1990.

In the University of Lagos where he teaches, he has served as Chairman
to several Departmental, Faculty and Senate Committees of the
University. He has also been the Chairman, Auditorium Management
Board of the University, since 2002 till the time of writing this paper. He
was a member, University of Lagos Welfare Advisory Board (1997-
2000); member, University of Lagos Lagoon Front Tourist Board (1996-
2000). He served as member of the University Senate between 1988 and
1990 and has also been a since 2005 to the present.

His Foray into Events and Corporate Product Design
Apart from his accomplishments in theatrical design and in the public
service, Professor Duro Oni has also made remarkable contributions to
the development of Corporate events design and product presentation in
Nigeria. Recounting how he ventured into designing for corporate events
such as product launches and presentations, he reveals how in 1990 a
group of expatriates were imported from the United Kingdom at a huge
cost, for the purpose of designing and packaging the launch and product
presentation of “Xerox” in Nigeria.
Alarmed by the bill of the expatriate company, a certain Steve Obigbesan, a member of staff of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) who was to provide some technical support for the British crew, told the Xerox management that the entire product presentation event could be designed and packaged by Nigerians. That was how Professor Oni was contacted. In the interview quoted earlier, Professor Oni explained how he got into the picture:

They gave me the brief and asked me to do a demonstration, which we set up at the University of Lagos Arts Theatre. We simply mesmerised them and they gave us the contract of designing the Xerox product launch.

Prior to this time, Professor Oni had just set up a company called “DSV” Durolight, Sight and Vision, investing heavily in the purchase of lighting and sound equipment and other visual effects such as strobe and smoke machines. So, he was fully prepared to satisfy his clients who “wanted something theatrical, something different from the normal ribbon tape-cutting for launchings”. Describing his design concept for the presentation as “theatrical” with a blend of “realism”, he reflects:

I adopted a simple but theatrical idea of opening of flats placed on castors, thereby revealing the product on a beautiful platform to the full glare of the audience. This is accompanied with smoke effects, fireworks, strobe and other lighting and pyrotechnic effects. It turned out to be a great success.

(Interview)

Another major event in product presentation design which Professor Oni did and still feels nostalgic about is the “John Players Gold Leaf” launch which took place at Lagoon Restaurant in Victoria Island in 1993. He informed this writer that he built a giant Pack of Gold Leaf, about six (6) feet tall, on the deck of a ship, then used special visual and lighting effects to announce the arrival of the pack which was motorised and moved by revolving gradually to the centre stage. When it eventually settles down, the pack opened, then cigarettes were pushed up accompanied with pyrotechnic effects. Oni confesses: “The effect was enormous. It was usually greeted by an ecstatic applause by the audience” (Interview).

Other memorable product presentation designs handled by Professor Duro Oni include the “Legend Extra Stout” public launch by Nigeria Breweries (NB) Plc, held at the Main Bowl of the National Theatre in 1996; The Re-launch of “Guinness Extra Stout” by Guinness Nigeria Plc in 1997; A presentation of GM Motor brands in 1998; several musical concerts such as the “Harp Musical Show” held in Lagos and different parts of the country between 1999 and year 2000.

All this array of activities and productive works is a great testimony of Professor Oni’s creative ingenuity, iconoclastic experience and dynamism in theatrical designs and enterprise. When asked what
informs his design styles, he responds:

I am guided usually by the evocation of form and meaning in my designs with concepts that fit into the overall image of the production. Again, I seek a good degree of functionality, apart from the aesthetic values the designs convey (Interview).

For Professor Oni, the philosophy guiding his career as a designer, apart from hard work, is “accuracy and excellence”, coupled with currency in the knowledge of the use of modern tools and technologies available in the industry.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of the essay, events design and packaging are fast becoming an expanding industry, providing new and challenging opportunities for practitioners in the field. Success in the industry depends largely on individual skills, abilities, interests and experience. For Professor Duro Oni, whose career and works are being studied in this essay, it is probably safe to conclude that what he has going for him is profound knowledge in the theory and practice of theatrical scenic design. He combines this with natural creativity and competence, which has made him not only to achieve a cross-over between designing for core theatre, but also for corporate product presentations and other forms of popular entertainment. Over the years, Professor Oni has proved himself to be a man possessing great capacity for artistic proficiency. He has also shown great physical and mental power to function and perform creditably in a variety of positions. He is indeed “a man of many parts” whose contributions to the development of scenic design in the theatre and entertainment industry in Nigeria cannot be overlooked or forgotten in a hurry. It is only hoped that a “great master and icon” of such stature is already mentoring disciples to continue such tremendous legacies when he eventually bows out of the stage.

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