

CHAPTER SEVEN

Directorial Style and Skill of Ayò Akínwálé in the "Mountains of Wealth"

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Introduction

That theatre is life cannot be over-emphasised. However, directing is the umbilical cord for that life. Hence, theatre and directing are intertwined phenomena that are inseparable. In this context, therefore, we examine theatre from the perspective of play production as opposed to describing it as a playhouse. (1990) Relishing the historical evolution of directing, Debra Brunch (1990) notes that it was in about "1874 when the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen who toured Europe with his troupe of actors showed theatre artists the value and the artistic opportunity a director could have."

Flowing from the above, this work examines directing as an art, who is a director and specifically the directorial style exhibited by Ayo Akinwale, when he directed "Mountains of Wealth". His display and mastery of artistic creative instinct, make us refer to him, as "Master of Theatre Secrets". However, it is to be noted that in the course of this work, some concepts that we consider apt will be conceptualised so as to illuminate them for closer understanding. Some of these concepts include 'Artistic Director', 'Theatre Director' or 'Director' and 'Directing'.

Literature Review

Long before 1900, little or no serious attention was paid to the artistic entity who is the principal executor of the art of directing; the artistic director. However, from 1900, serious attention was shifted to theatre director as an important entity in the theatre. In fact, during the medieval period, theatre directors assumed a more dignified status that they were addressed as: "Master of Secrets" or "Special effect experts". He is the person called 'Metteur en Scene' in French.

In fact, Musa (2002 and 2007) has made copious reference to Peter Brook who describes the director as "God". Hear Peter Brook himself:

He does not ask to be God and yet his role implies it. He wants to be fallible, and yet an instinctive conspiracy of the actors is to make him the arbiter, because an arbiter is so desperately wanted all the time. In a sense the director is always an impostor, a guide at night who does not know the territory and yet he has no choice-he must guide, learning the route as he goes (Brook, 1968, p. 38).

This is the leadership role that an artistic director must exhibit in play production at all time. His role becomes more tedious; especially when he

does not know the route (literally), he must still lead. Of course, it is the fact, the complexity of his role in the theatre entails that he must be at the apex of theatre productions. Little wonder why Musa (2001, p. 2) says: "the art of performance whether; social, cultural improvisational, scripted, commissioned or religious can only become reality through the creative endeavour of theatre director in his complex and tasking art of play directing."

We are constrained to agree with the fact that although artistic directors are invisible; truthfully, they are never seen on stage physically like actors and actresses but they the egg heads behind performances. Yet, they have many complexities to contend with. Donna (1994) quoting Gale Edwards says:

Being a director can be a very hard job for any man or woman: it's lonely, it's isolated, you are responsible if anything goes wrong, you are forgotten when everything goes right, you're attacked by the critics. If you are a good director, you should be faceless. if you want to know why I do it , it's because I still enjoy the task... You have to make a million (decisions). If any numbers of them are wrong you can mock up the whole thing...I find that very challenging (Donna, 1994, p. 1).

Here an artistic director must know the art of 'stitching'. He must be a technocrat in the art of knitting all the bits of the theatrical pieces together to make a flowing narrative presentation that would sustain the interest of the audience and provide the flavour that brought them to the theatre. As the role of the director in the theatre became celebrated, he begins to wear different appellations such as artistic director, theatre director and most recently, play director.

On the other hand, directing as an art in playmaking in the theatre began to gain prominence after 1900. At this point, Dean and Carra (1965, p. 65) define directing as "the presentation of a play on stage for an audience, interpreted in terms of dramatic action and dramatic sound and in term of emotional an intellectual concept of an author's scripts". Other scholars who elucidated on the concept include, Hodge (1994), Johnson (2001 and 2003), Musa (2003 and 2006), Akinwale (2010) and others definition of Dean and Carra when the duo defines directing as "the arts of putting the bits and pieces of theatre elements together and woven into an artistic finish-up". Again, directing is defined as "coordinating, organising and harnessing of all resources in the theatre for presentation to the audience' (Arinde, 2005, p. 152).

Brunch (1990, p. 1) also celebrates the importance of directing if plays must be presented to meet the yearning of the audience. She says that the theatre ultimately "needs three elements: actors, play and audience. But for theatre to actualize its potentials, a person needs to impose a point of view that would penetrate all aspects of the production". The position of Brunch with

reference to the above definition is a confirmation that theatre can only happen when the art of directing is put in place. It is the only art that is omnipotent in every theatre productions.

The above definitions orchestrate the importance of play directing as an important art in the theatre. In the edited works of Lange (1994), he also exemplify on the importance of play directing. He says directing requires "creativity, imagination, vision, and a clear concept to bring playwright work to life for a cast and crew, and ultimately, an audience".

The developments that theatre had witnessed over the years using various styles adopted in directing plays by artistic directors undoubtedly brought notable improvements to play presentations. Time was it when the only theatre style that was prevalent was *symbolism*, whereby enactment was representational, later we have *realism*, *naturalism*, *existentialism*, *modernism* and *post-modernism*. These various developmental changes witnessed by the theatre came because of changes in styles adopted by theatre directors. Notably were different kinds of directors and directorial styles. For instance, the *dictatorial directorship style* was one of such, whereby the director is a dominant figure in the process of creating his theatrical work. He gives little or no room at all for actors to use their initiatives. Directors who use this style are in most cases in the habit of pre-blocking their plays and they get mad at actor/actress who alters their blockings.

We have the *negotiator style*, which *Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia* describes as: "a style in which the director focuses on a more improvised and mediated form at rehearsal and creation, using the idea of the production team and actors to shape a theatrical work in quite a democratic style". There is also the director who sees himself as a "creative artist". His style is to get inputs from all production participants (crew and actors) the authors, designers. Although like other directors, he has the final say on what to incorporate into the production. Another directing school is the *confrontationalist director*. His style allows for argument, criticism, exchanges, at a time may be very heated, but the product would come out of it that would be beneficial to the production. The last in the series of these conventional directors is the director who employs the conglomeration of these various styles. Their reason was that human beings are social animals, who are dynamic, no one single style is capable of resolving all theatrical puzzles.

It has become clear that some concepts are frequently used in this work. Such as: "style", "skill" and "secrets of the theatre", illumination on them in this literature review will be a vista to understanding this work.

Style has been variously but specifically defined as a way of doing things, unique to that particular individual. It is the trade mark for which one is known and identified. Style could also be seen from standpoint of a

person's behaviour, dressing, eating habit, etc. It could be in the way one talks, writes or speaks. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, defines style as "a particular way of doing, designing, or producing something, especially one that is typical of a particular place period of time or group of people" (Quirk et al, 2005, p. 1653).

In this wise, style can be summarily described as a blend of content into form (form being the shape the director wants a production to take) with a view to effectively expressing the substance in the play. In the context of this work, we describe style as the director's visionary artistic response to the work of a playwright, in the case that the director is working on the play-script of another playwright. Simply put, therefore, style is one's uniqueness, an identification of one's way of doing things.

Skill is a wide range between having an idea on how to do something and doing it well. The art that one puts into his doing that makes him to be described as an expert is the skill. Quirk et al. (2005, p. 1547) define skill as "an ability to do something well, especially because you have learned and practiced it". Continuous practice over the years makes one to be skillful. Style and skill are therefore the major ingredients in achieving a perfect production.

Theatre as an art is made up of many components. Some of the components are tools in themselves, mystified and often refer to as 'secrets' of the theatre. From the moment that an actor mounts the stage to deliver his lines, like a suicide bomber he has been equipped by the director who we refer to as the 'Master of Secrets'. The 'secrets' we identified for the purpose of this work are in the areas of casting, technical paraphernalia, (stage construction, lighting, sound effect, and other technical effects which varies from production to production). Costumes, make-up, properties, that we shall call the visual components of the arts of play production (as in characterisation, body carriage, delivery, gesture, facial expression and stage business) are also part of these secrets.

We also identified some secrets in scenic composition, picturisation, movement, rhythm and tempo, which the director, the 'Master of Secrets', only knows their injection. How these secrets were put into artistic use are all that we shall examine in the Style of Ayo Akinwale in his direction of "Mountains of Wealth".

Synopsis of 'Mountains of Wealth'

The conflict of supremacy that had bedeviled the position of Arts and Science continued unabated until Akinwale in the play, "Mountain of Wealth" provided a panacea for settlement. The mineral resources deeply seated in the Hill in Oloke town for a very long time, dated back several generations, which remain untapped until some white-men who see the mineral resources plan to

tap them. This meets the stiff opposition of the village Chief Priest (Aboke), whose position is to protect the custom and tradition of Oloke village. The wisdom of the Oloke, who stamps his authority and give the go ahead to the team of Scientists that come to explore the mineral resources, is the path to the improvement that the town witnessed thereafter. The proceeds that come out of the exploration are later to improve and transform lives of the people of the village. It then becomes clear that Science and Arts are complimentary.

Akinwale's style in Directing "Mountains of Wealth"

Our understanding of the production of 'Mountains of Wealth' was that Akinwale employed the theory of *realism* as his production style in directing the play. Realism is a modern theatre theory, which Hornby (1999, p. 969) defines as "the representation of familiar things as they really are".

A critical look at the play and some of the properties used in the play, one would see realistic representation of materials. For instance, we see trees, mountain, yam, dog (used to sacrifice at the celebration scene), market wares displayed at the market scene and others. The only object that may not be real but was symbolically represented was the dog used for sacrifice during the yam festival. These representations, obviously tallies with the way George and Portia Kernodles (1985, p. 190) define a play realised employing the theory of realism. They see such plays as "play that tries to create illusion of a real place on stage".

Akinwale in directing the play, "Mountains of Wealth" created illusion of a real place on stage throughout the performance of the play such as, moving tree, sacrificial animal, tuber of yam and many others. The essence of this style is to bring the audience down to the level of reality. Proving that the issue involved in the play is resolving an age long crisis; crisis of status. An adage says if a young one cannot differentiate between two traditional objects, you put one on the right and the other on the left and you show the child. For the purpose of clarity, Akinwale employed the style of realism to exhume the details and the traditional components of Arts and Science. He concluded by placing the two entities on a pedestal of understanding. He then concluded that one is complimenting the other.

In examining the style, which Akinwale employed that made the play a unique and an aesthetically satisfying one, we observe the display of artistic style in the areas of casting, technical effects, and injection of some traditional aesthetics, stage composition and stage clearing, choice of costumes, choice of songs etc. We are encouraged not to loose the sight of one fact that irrespective of the other crew members' involvement in theatre production, the artistic director dictates the pace. He determines what he wants. It is the adage of 'no matter how long is the beard of a labourer the person that engages him is the master'. We will give details of his styles in the

enumerated areas.

Casting: All the actors and actresses in the play 'Mountains of Wealth', even though they were students as at the time of the performance, were carefully selected. They met the qualities of the role each and every one of them were cast for. For instance, the body carriage of the King (Oloke) and his voice quality was skillfully made use of. When "Mountains of Wealth" was commissioned and staged during the Conference of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions in Ilorin in 2001, the careful selection of the characters like; the Professors, and the other Scientists, whose look and dialectical intonation depict them as real academics and scientists and the narrator were made up of gifted performers.

Rehearsal plays prominent role in play production and play performance. There can be no perfect performance where rehearsal was handled haphazardly. The foundation of every play production process is rooted on rehearsals. Akinwale effectively coordinated and managed his rehearsals during the production of "Mountains of Wealth". There he did his scenic composition, picturisation, gave movements to his actors, dictated his tempo, rhythm and his stage business. His rehearsals were full of excitements. At every period of his rehearsals, there were new things to learn. His innovative aura brought a new addition that made the production of the play better. For instance, he came to the rehearsal one day to ask Aboke to learn the rolling of an *Ado* (a small traditional calabash that has feather inserted at its apex) this calabash at its rolling would sit. This epitomised the richness of traditional African culture.

The *blocking* technique the director skillfully used in the play was inner technique (Pre-blocking). He dictated his movements and insists that they were followed. This style has been used several times by Ayo Akinwale in his other productions.

The *costume* worn by individual actors were worn complying with the occasion. Director as the man on the apex of production dictated his costume requirements while the costumier only provide, produce or procure as the case may be in compliance with the dictate of the Director. This is also procedural and professional.

All the *properties* used in the play were masterfully and skillfully employed. The traditional staff of Chief Fadele depicted him, in an unmistakable term, as the Chief Priest. So also was the Aboke whose staff shows an object of religious authority. The introduction of the Masquerade was another skilful addition that took the audience to the cultural root of the arts of traditional African festivals.

The *tempo* of the play was sustained from the beginning to the end; actions were combatant. In essence, there was no dull moment throughout the performance.

The dialogues were smooth, crispy while the language of communication was simple and effective. This may not be far from the fact that where crisis must be resolved, there is need for understanding and this is better achieved when the language of expression is simple.

As part of the technical effects in the play, the command which Aboke directed at the trees when he conjured the trees to move around, to show the Professor and his colleagues, the supernatural powers inherent in the power of the Arts was a unique skill invented by the Director in the play performance.

Demystification of the invisible status of the artistic director was another rare skill that Akinwale employed in directing 'Mountain of Wealth'. He brought on stage using montage, to introduce the artistic director and his crew members.

Findings

Our findings in the course of this research work shows clearly that directing is a vital instrument in play production process. It is the art that made possible, the artistic knitting of all theatrical components into a production whole.

Obviously, the theatre industry is polluted. No doubt, our theatre industry is bedeviled by various grades of artistic misdemeanor. It is decaying, giving the kind of professional bastardisation that the profession has been subjected to. However, it is only when we have the right peg in the right hole that the theatre will just be right. This we concluded was as a result of the fact that non-professional and incompetent hands have found their ways into the industry. Awolaja (2009, p. 12) in his article titled; "On Nigeria's English Medium Movies" describes the bastardisation that has enveloped our theatre industry, using Igbo Films as paradigm. He says "these movies usually lack technical depth, they are also marred by an appallingly crude Eurocentrism an obsession with by-gone traditions and cultures and thematic misdirection".

Even though this work is looking at a directorial skill which Akinwale exhibited in a stage play that we have examined, we note that directing cuts across all aspects of the theatre, be it stage, film, and television. What has obliterated the glory of directing, which we have identified over the years is the bastardisation. We are proud, after examining Ayo Akinwale's directorial style. Our pride is that his artistic expertise is the right approach to reviving the lost glory of theatre practice in Nigeria.

Akinwale as one of the surviving trained and professionally qualified theatre directors has used his experiences over the years to skillfully package the production of the, the play that we examined. We note that he employed

both visible and sensory secrets of the theatre to come up with an aesthetically appreciated play productions.

We also see a masterfully and skillfully use of the right casts, costumes, properties, technical effects, music songs and dances in the production of the play under reference. The songs used in "Mountains of Wealth" were songs that took the audience to the ethnic and sociological root of the play, i.e. the Yoruba setting of the play. So also were the dances.

We also found a concerted effort to bring together town and gown in the style of Akinwale. This we noted in his invitation and casting of professionals (the masquerade uses in the "Mountain of Wealth") who are not in the academics. Apart from the fact that he promoted town and gown relationship, he brought aesthetics to the productions.

Conclusion

Giving the skills that Akinwale puts into the production of the play examined, no one would be left in doubt that directing is an art as an stimulant to achieving aesthetically satisfying play productions. We, in addition to above conclusion recommend as follows:

- i. that Directing must be used in all play production process. It is the only art that can dig deep into the aesthetic fiber of the historical and sociological content of any play;
- ii. that trained theatre Directors should be engaged to handle play productions, to rid the profession of unethical practices; and
- iii. that we should form a League of trained Theatre Directors, who will be responsible for the training and re-training of young and up-coming theatre directors.

In reaction to the above, the trained directors will be included as members of the Censor Board, censoring not only the contents of plays that are sent-out for public consumption but the quality of those directing such plays as a way of further ridding the profession of quarks who have brought theatre profession to disrepute.

Trained theatre directors are fewer in the theatre industry. Therefore, theatre scholars should be encouraged to choose directing as a profession while the few surviving theatre directors that are on ground involved in the training of younger directors as a way of celebrating them. Gone should be the era of eulogising a hero only after his death. This gives the reason why Akinwale is celebrated here.

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