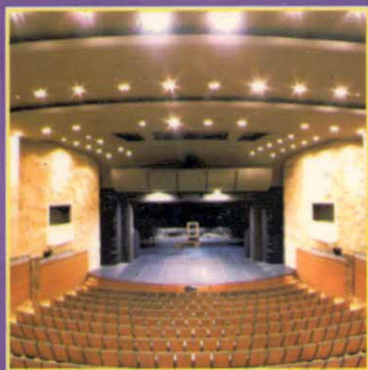


DEVELOPMENTS

IN THE THEORY & PRACTICE OF

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA & THEATRE

A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF DAPO ADELUGBA

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Essays, Interviews, Tributes & DVD

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On the Art of Play Directing¹

Conversation with AbdulRasheed. A. Adeoye

You are regarded to be a renowned theatre scholar and theatre critic of high repute. Why did you take up play directing?

Thank you very much. I have been directing for as long as I have been writing criticism. So it is not a question of going from criticism to directing but doing both sides simultaneously since they are part of one's background. By the way, one can go back to one's directorial process, directorial autobiography and so on. I did directing even as a member, and later the president of the Government College, Ibadan Dramatic Society (GCIDS) before moving to the University College. I was very lucky as I said in earlier exposures and interviews on my works. We had a drama tutor, someone in -charge of the Dramatic Society – Mr P.B. Porter who also had a wife who was on the staff of Government College Ibadan. Mrs Porter was very interested in costuming and make-up....

No doubt, starting earlier is essential to your development. Can you expatiate on your humble beginning in theatre arts?

Between Mr and Mrs Porter we had what can be called a rounded approach to the whole business of staging plays. So we did not approach staging plays as many schools did just from the point of view of having lines spoken by people on the stage but from the rounded position of someone working in the theatre medium. So that was our initial advantage, those of us who went to Government College, Ibadan during that period of 1950s.

It is noteworthy that, instead of the more common courses like law, medicine and accounting, you became a theatre artist...

...I did not go into theatre arts. Theatre arts was just part of the dramatic activity of our Dramatic Society both at GCI and later at the University College, as I will explain later. Indeed, my study was in English because there was no Theatre Arts. The theatre arts school set up at Ibadan came later. Let me

¹ This conversation took place in Room 100A, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan on 15 July and 8 August 2000.

continue with the Government College, Ibadan. I don't think there was any deliberate attempt to go into directing or anything, just that we had the privilege of coming under the tutelage of those who knew about theatre. Even Mr and Mrs P. B. Porter were not theatre artists in the professional sense of it but were educated and they had a lot of devotion to the dramatic and theatrical arts. So, during their own tenure as the supervisors of our school's Dramatic Society, we did some very important dramatic productions, one of which was Brandon Thomas' *Charley's Aunt*, which we did around the time the Porters had as visitor one T. B. Child. Mr T. B. Child was a professional actor from London, family friends of the Porters, and he gave me my first rare lessons in comedy. T. B. Child taught us the details about comic acting. My role was that of Lord Fancourt Babberley and during the late 19th and early 20th century at Oxbridge you could not have female visitors unless there was an older woman acting as chaperon. Having an expert like T. B. Child to work with the Porters in training me in the part of Charley's aunt was a marvellous opportunity which may never repeat itself in my own history. So that was *Charley's Aunt* but apart from *Charley's Aunt*, we did many other plays and we had other supervisors at the Dramatic Society. We also have Mr Evans who supervised the production of G. B. Shaw's play... I think it must be *Arms and the Man*. We also did *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith, which was supervised by the Nigerian literature teacher, Miss Vivian Tine who later became Mrs Vivian Ogundipe. In fact, I think she had become Mrs Ogundipe before she directed or supervised Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. We had the advantage of a very good stage at the Government College, Ibadan. To answer the earlier question of why going into theatre arts when there was no theatre arts, or when others were going into medicine or such, I took on a very enjoyable hobby as part of one's growth during one's student's days and when I moved in 1958 to the University College, Ibadan, as it was then called, because it was an arm of the University of London, I had the opportunity of working in the Arts Theatre. The Arts Theatre had only been build a few years before and it looked like another lucky accident. Although I was on English Honours programme, I and other theatre enthusiasts had the guidance of some good theatre lecturers who were doing theatre arts not as their job but as their hobby. Some of them later made theatre their job. I am talking in specific term now of people like Martin Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy. Axworthy was to become the first Arts Director of the first Nigeria School of Drama at the University College, Ibadan. Both Axworthy and Banham were good advisors to the then U.C.I. Dramatic Society of which I was a member in 1958 to 1959 and of which I was a Senior member and later President in my final year, in 1961 to 1962.

The U.C.I. did many productions during that period but one major development was Geoffrey Axworthy's encouragement of the growth of the then new modern African theatre in English and in 1958, Wole Soyinka sent to Axworthy two of his new plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*. Axworthy was so excited by the sheer genius of these two plays and wrote to Soyinka asking if he could be allowed to direct them which the playwright obliged him. Axworthy thereafter directed *The Swamp Dwellers* and got Ken Post, his colleague in political science, to direct *The Lion and the Jewel*. Among those who took part in that production were Abiola Irele who was Lakunle, Bridget Aguada who was Saditu, the old wife of Baroka, and one Mr. Adah who was later to vie for the president of the Student Union Government, played the part of Baroka. In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Professor Olusanya played Adiyé and one Bernard Martins, who later became politician, played the part of Ekwesu. I played the part of Makuri and Christian Clinton, Professor of English, played the part of Alu. We had a really marvellous cast of young enthusiasts at the time and some of the great participants in the productions were not in the arts at all. We had people like Fola Aboaba in Agriculture who was to become Professor of Technology. We had people like Clifford Odu, also in Agriculture Economics, and Dapo Onabolu who was in Physics.

At the University College, Ibadan Dramatic Society where I cut my teeth in theatre arts – directing, acting, stage management, everything was going on. UCIDS was not a school of drama outfit; it was a pure group of drama amateurs. We went into it for the joy of what we were to get from it. One can indeed say that although they were amateur outfit (the Government College, Ibadan Dramatic Society and the University College, Ibadan Dramatic Society), these two places gave me the beginning in the various arts of the theatre including directing. For the UCIDS, I co-directed with Axworthy and Christian Momah the play re-titled 'That Scoundrel Suberu' which was an adaption of Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* – the fooleries or trickeries of Scapin. That adaptation was done by me, with the cooperation of my colleagues Alfred Opubor, now a retired professor of Communication, Granson Dede who was on the professional line and Ayo Amu.

This is quite interesting. As an enlightened theatre director, what are your ideas on the theatre?

I believe that theatre should first and foremost be a kind of reflection of life and I think that the more we recognise that theatre in the realistic or non-realistic mode is trying to reflect or comment on life, the more we recognise the potentials of a theatre director in his ability to put up a play on the stage. Putting up a play on the stage just for the fun of doing so to sheer fantasy and so on does not seem to me a worthy exercise. Any play, no matter what mode it is – whether comedy, tragedy, farce, satire or burlesque – has something to say to human being because theatre is a human medium first and foremost. Therefore, I believe that theatre should comment on life, reflect life. Theatre should help human beings to understand life better so that at the point of seeing a show, one can appreciate the theatrical experiences of the frailties and failures of the characters in the drama.

How would you assess your directorial concepts and techniques?

You brought two major areas together. You brought together directorial concepts and directorial techniques. Maybe we should start with directorial techniques. There are certain techniques which cut across genres whether tragedy, comedy, satire, melodrama, burlesque, tragic-comedy, etcetera. Those techniques have to do with the architectural arrangement of the stage and the auditorium and the first thing to recognise is that in most theatres you are working in a special dimension different from the special dimension of real life even if you are talking to someone very close to you. You want your voice to reach out to everybody in the theatre. There is a kind of magnification of life in the theatre and those who act in plays and those who participate in it, such as stage managers, stage hands, costumiers and other members of other departments of the theatre must recognise that techniques are quintessential to the arts of the theatre not just the art of directing. Therefore, a good director would ensure the full mastery of the directorial techniques; of course directorial techniques also grow with experience. They grow with time. For instance, Peter Brook said to a group of people who interviewed him that when he was a younger director he used to follow meticulously the moves he had worked out in his director's preliminary notebook but as time went on and of course, he would throw this away when it came to the actual business of directing his team. There is a lot of common sense in that because no matter what the director is planning in his study, when he meets with a rare group of actors and production staff and crew he has to relate to the concrete reality of the body, the mind, the attitude and the new chemistry of the group that is going to emerge. So, directorial techniques are in many forms. They have to do with the actor's

voice, the actor's body, the actor's movements, the actor's interactions with other actors and the actor's vision of that role as well as the vision of the various collaborators with the director, the designers, the stage managers, the production assistants and so on. All these people must first be taken into consideration in the evolution of an overall directorial technique or a set of directorial techniques in a particular production.

Let us now go on to directorial concepts. Directorial concepts are the ideas of the director. Here again, they should not be non-negotiable with the director. The director must have concepts, views. The initial directorial concepts should be discussed especially with the production staff. I as a person do not have any rigid directorial concept. My directorial concept for each production will depend on such variables as the political environment, the social consciousness of the would-be audience, the prevailing circumstances in terms of the sheer hopes and aspirations of the community where I am staging the work. These are the things that tend to guide my directorial concepts. As I say, they do not remain rigid and inflexible; they keep changing.

Can you relate your play selection process to the Nigerian stage?

Well, I am not imprisoned to any kind of ethnic ideology. I choose play from a variety of Nigerian and African culture in the first instance and I also choose play from the international market. When I mean international, I don't just mean African-American plays, I also mean European and Australian plays. So my play selection process is guided by such matters as aesthetic, topicality, relevance to the particular needs of the group that I am working with, suitability to the environment that the work is to be staged, etc. I am not imprisoned to any kind of narrow ideology.

How do you normally organise your auditions?

Sometimes on the basis of an open audition. But sometimes, in an open audition, like the play I am currently working on (J.P. Clark's *All for Oil*), you may find that some of the people whom you ideally have in mind when you are dreaming may not turn up for the audition. Which means one has to re-advertise and re-audition. And the other thing is that I look for persons whom I am familiar with in terms of their credit in previous productions. If they are free then I persuade them to join me. I don't rely totally on those that come for

audition. I also scout around for actors to fill roles I was unable to cast during auditions.

You sometimes double cast roles. Is there a particular reason why you adopt that option?

I not only use the double casting method, I triple cast or quadruple cast roles. I particularly became fascinated by the growth and the kind of multiplier effect of trying to work in repertory because it means, in addition to achieving your own goals of a director of a play, you are able to train a larger number of people if one adopts the multiple casting method. For the energy you put in which is obviously going to be a little more than rehearsing one person, you harvest in triple of four-fold. There are other advantages that lend themselves to the travelling theatre concept. For instance, the play I am working on now (*All for Oil*) is going to tour the country and with multiple casts, you guard against the process of any actor breaking down or a group becoming over-worked. This is because in the Nigerian context, you don't have pure professionals. Your actors also do many other things and therefore, they don't have the stamina of the kind of professional actor who does nothing else. If you are quite anxious as I am to level up the theatrical culture of the country, then you have to seek ways of making sure that you realise your goal. So the triple casting process is going to have particular advantages when we start touring. It means that nobody, no particular actor, is going to be unduly overburdened, otherwise the entire tour could collapse. The other advantage of multiple casting is that any actor cannot give or be ashamed of a role written by a playwright. Actors would learn fast and be able to deliver certain aspects of the characters written by the dramatists excellently. As for those who come to see the performance, they too will get different interpretations. In working with triple cast and so on, I did not expect them to mimic one another, each should be clear in their role, blockings and idea suitable to individual personality, based on individual temperament and talent. So, I am not stuck with one kind of rigid interpretation of role; I allow the actor's talent to guide me in creating the character as related to the attributes or the actor of actress who is playing the role.

Still on double casting, there is this issue of unhealthy competition when we consider the psychology of the actor, which is very crucial to the interpretation of the theatre director. In a situation of an unhealthy rivalry what will be the outcome...

...I do not use the understudy system outside the classroom context. I use the understudy in the totally educational context knowing that they are all getting the experience of training as young professionals. I do not allow them to become competitive. I make it clear from the word 'go' that every cast in a role is going to have a night of performance. That way, I try to avoid unhealthy competition. But there is always competition as part of human life. For instance, there was no doubt in my mind that Ayo Mogaji had the benefit of professional experience which the young actors, even though they are final year students, did not have. I think that instead of seeing it as unhealthy, you can work that competition into the structure of your production and let everybody struggle to the maximum degree of his or her ability and talent.

What are the major activities that you normally do during rehearsals?

There are varieties of activities. It is not all actors' training. It is also the business of blocking. Prior to that, I do try to hold production meetings with those I am going to work with at the level of set, décor, costume, scenery and even management. My work as a director is to integrate all the aspects of the production, to work with a unified ideology among the production staff. I also expect my actors and actresses to operate like a unified group. That, as I say, is the major challenge of the production process.

How do you maintain interpersonal and directorial relationships with your performers during rehearsals?

Well, sometimes I am my own designer. I envisage a production for instance even if I do have designers. I discuss with my designers but basically I allow the designers to come forth with some concept. I try to work in consonance with that concept. If there are times I wanted to modify the original design, for practical or aesthetic purposes, I get close to the designer or designers and I discuss my works with them. Again, this is why production conferences are always useful.

During performances, I am of the opinion that the work of the director is still on, what do you normally do especially after the first night?

I sit at the back of the auditorium and take notes. I leave the running of the play to the stage manager. I disassociate myself from any crisis that may arise unless the stage manager specifically sent to me. But I don't like some famous

directors who will travel out and leave everything in the stage manager's hand. I stay in the background just in case I am needed and I take notes to help the actors with possible improvement on the performances on future nights. I believed that a play is a growing entity until the very final night.

Are you fulfilled by an overwhelming acceptance of your play by the audience? Have you ever been drenched in emotion?

I am always fulfilled. Very fulfilled until I receive that applause from the audience or satisfaction on the part of the audience, I feel that I have not totally succeeded; if the audience does not seem to like what I am doing. I go back to the workshop and think my way through especially on what I am doing wrong. I do not believe forcing my audience and saying 'well that is their headache if you don't understand, you don't understand'. If the work does not reach the audience that it attracts then something is wrong. So I keep working for the acceptance of my work by the audience.

During the post-production period, what do you normally do in anticipation for another play you intend to direct?

What I do is to observe life closely, and I read plays because I believe that life is constantly growing. I have always loved reading and watching other people's productions because it is quite exciting to do that. Even the errors of other directors during the course of putting up performances helped me to re-think my own errors in previous productions and they will guide me towards a better and hopefully more artistically satisfying future.

Are you planning to form a theatre outfit in the future?

I have always worked with theatre outfits; obviously, I worked with the Langbodo outfit of FESTAC 77. The Langbodo outfit that I worked with in 1984 is different from that of 1985. I have worked with departmental and non-departmental outfits. I have worked with a mixture of professional and amateur outfits and I keep trying all kinds of combinations. And to your question that am I going to form my own private theatre outfit? Yes, when I retire I may do that but as of now, I do not think that it will be right to go on teaching and engaging in private theatre outfit. For now as a theatre director, critic and scholar I enjoy exchanging ideas with people.

What do you enjoy best in play directing?

The harmony that comes from several weeks of work. The harmonious blend that comes in the opening night gives me immense pleasure. If the opening night is quite successful, I am always happy and even feel like drinking as many bottles of Coca-Cola as I can.

Which Nigerian stage theatre director that you have worked with do you most admire?

Well, I don't know. The people that I have worked with and most admired are people that I came across during my student days and they are not Nigerians.

There is this allegation against you that you give too much freedom to actors and that you lay much emphasis on speech rather than creating pictures, as some of them would want you to do. I want you to respond to these allegations.

But I do create pictures. I think they are likely not to be aware that I am creating pictures because I don't make a kind of fetish out of it. But I am just as interested in the visual aspect of the directorial art as well as the verbal aspect. The reason I lay emphasis not so much on speech but on audibility is that I go to the theatre very often and the audience complain that 'what are they saying?'; and I think that for anybody to enjoy the play, he has to understand what is been said. It is only then that he can start to enjoy the play.

*You also rehearse actors for long periods of time. For instance, **Kongi's Harvest** (1998) was rehearsed for six months and this often makes some performers disinterested. Is this a particular style?*

Well, let's put it this way. I think it is a learning process. Once you are in the educational theatre, you have certain aims and goals. Let me tell you that I do not have any compulsion to staging plays, because I do some other things but if I find potentially good people that I have not actualised their talents, I think that it will be irresponsible of me to put them prematurely on stage. That very often we were not actualizing our goals was partly because there were lots of things interfering with the rehearsals' process. There were strikes, closures and so on. That was why *Kongi's Harvest* dragged on. If the semesters were normal, it could have lasted between six to eight weeks, which are mostly the time for my

rehearsals. I think that I was just unfortunate that the school calendar became truncated.

On a final note, what advice will you give to up-coming theatre directors?

I think that a theatre director should always observe life and I found out that young theatre directors do not observe life adequately enough. That, I think, is a major kind of problem that I have of the current theatre directors. There should be greater observation of life whether on life stage or on anywhere else. There should be no hurry as well in getting rounded education. I do not think that the present younger theatre directors read widely enough or give themselves enough time to watch productions of good works done not only in Nigeria but also in countries outside Nigeria. That is part of the equipment of a theatre director.

Professor Adelugba, thank you for this conversation.

Thank you!

'Adelugba Is A Finer Teacher Than I Am'

Interview with Wole Soyinka by Kunle Ajibade and Jahman Anikulapo

What was your encounter with Dapo Adelugba or rather his encounter with you?

What I remembered early was when he was playing in Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*... which he adapted to *That Scoundrel Suberu* and the company travelled around, in this improvised theatre. He became identified with the part, so to speak, when I watched him several times; it was incredible. It was as if the part was tailored for him.

It is professional discipline that he actually studied and entered the part; and that is what I first noticed about him. His dedication, professionalism; no actor's preparation was too little, no detail too negligible... it had to be addressed. It has to involve his entire professional being. Immediately, I saw that this was a naturally gifted stage person and then our major interaction began. I wasn't involved in that production by the way, but I followed the travelling theatre quite a bit. I sort of joined them at different places.

The next point of interaction with him, of course, was when I was developing the 1960 Masks and the Orisun Theatre...the sketches. He was a natural in his roles, so adapted, almost chameleonic in his ability to move from one character to the other. He was not a formal member of Orisun Theatre as such, but he intersected with the arts community very much at the university at the time. But whenever he could, he played a role, if not on stage then back stage. And of course, when we were doing *Kongi's Harvest*, he played the role of Daodu, which he performed with absolute relish.

It is interesting because he came to the university late — he was a school teacher in a school, I think somewhere in Molete.

Ibadan Grammar School?