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**Mono Drama: Categorization and Theoretical Scaffolds in the  
Universe of Africa**

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**Abstract**

Since the emergence of The Prime Minister's Son as a published Solo text, Nigerian playwrights have been making some efforts to write and publish solo texts. Apart from the fact that not many texts have been written and published, scholarship on Solo drama, solo performance or what we may call monologue drama has not been given adequate attention. This leaves a lot of epistemological gap on the scholarship and creation of Solo drama. It is against this background that this study attempts to investigate very vital issues concerning mono drama, which include: the concept of Solo drama in creative and performance contexts, taxonomy of solo/monodrama as well as the deployment of appropriate theories that should be applied by both solo drama writers and performers. The paper holds the view that for solo drama to be effectively created written and performed it must adhere to appropriate theories. Theories such as minimalism, Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre theory, and Stanislavsky's 'Method of Physical Actions as well as the total theatre concepts fit in appropriately.

**Key Words:** Categorization, Mono drama, solo performance, theoretical scaffold, monologue.

### Introduction

Solo drama is one theatre form that has a very rich variety of nomenclature. One man story telling drama, monodrama, and monologue drama or monologue theatre are names in the terrain of solo drama. But the art form is not new to Africa. It seems to have come into existence long ago both in Africa and in the western world. In Africa, apart from festival drama, the masquerade theatre, the most popular type of theatre that existed long before the incursion of modern drama was the story telling theatre tradition. It will not be a staggering option to equate story telling art in traditional Africa with solo theatre. A play like *Ozidi* by JP Clark emanated from the monodrama tradition. *Ozidi* started as a solo drama in the Ijaw cultural environment generations uncountable. Apart from Okabou Ojobolo, its most popular solo performer, there are a lot of solo actors of that play who have been forgotten by history and scholars of oral literature. Other stories like *Kemefiere-The Ogress* by Egbe Ifie, was also presented in Ijaw society as a monodrama. Historically speaking, Greg Mbajiorgu holds that modern solo drama was kick started by Wale Ogunyemi, a renowned Nigerian playwright, actor and director. He was the first Nigerian actor to perform a solo drama on the modern stage. Ogunyemi made his historic appearance in a one-actor mime play called, *Acts without Words*, on the nights of 24th and 25th November, 1966, at the School of Drama, University of Ibadan (Retrieved online 12/3/2014:93) Funsho Alabi, Phillips Okolo and Tunji Sotimirin are also strongly credited with the pioneering position of solo drama emergence in Nigeria.

Solo drama is written for performance by a solo performer. This implies it has dual state of existence, both as literature and as performance. The solo performance in some cases where it has to rely on a written text is a surplus mono drama. Surplus in the sense that it has to combine both text and elements of performance in the staging of the play. Like the conventional drama, solo drama can develop from improvisation to text. In Nigeria solo drama began from improvisation of the solo text in performance. Even Greg Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son* began from improvisation to the literary text.

Mono drama by whatever name it has manifested is now both a literary and performance arts. Over the years scholars have been attempting to either define or make intellectually engaging comments on Solo drama and its associated forms and names. Theodore Shank cited by Wallace in "Monologue Theatre, Solo Performance and Self as Spectacle" expresses the point that "Monologue is an incredibly widespread mode spanning "conventional" drama to "alternative" theatre" (Retrieved online 14/3/2014:2). The drama has realistic language and deals with provocative and political solo performances. Clare Wallace is of the view that for some solo drama

writers, they might also delineate a fairly accurate outline of monologue drama and performance. Indeed, from Samuel Beckett's minimalist theatre of interiority, to Philippe Minyana's "inventories" of everyday speech, to Karen Finley's provocative and political solo performance pieces, these qualities are laced through radically different types of theatrical monologue (Clare Wallace, Online14/3/2014:1). Wallace further notes that

monologue theatre nevertheless remains contentious, soliciting questions about the very nature of theatre itself, about the nature of performance and audience response, truth and illusion, narrative and experience. Is it an undoing or dismemberment of theatre's core characteristics—imitative action and dialogue? (Retrieved online14/3/2014, p. 2)

Samuel Beckett is indisputably pivotal in the history of solo drama. While early examples of monologue plays include August Strindberg's *The Stronger* (1888-9) and Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* (1916), it is not until Beckett begins to explore the form in the late 1950s that its experimental potential is seriously developed. (Wallace Retrieved online14/3/2014:3) The diversity of monologue forms are categorised according to dramaturgical function (narrative, lyrical/emotional, reflection/deliberation) and literary form (aside, stanza, interior monologue, authorial intervention, solitary dialogue, the monologue drama) (Pavis 1998: 219). This observation and position is further illuminated by Wallace holds that solo drama is Poly-vocal and poly-perspectival in its treatment and plants the self at the heart of the spectacle. (Retrieved online14/3/2014:4) Solo drama gives attention to the conspiracy between the spoken and non-spoken words as well as the human body in making theatrical and social statements. Before we go into the nitty-gritty of this study, it is imperative to put in proper perspective the implication of mono drama.

### **Issues in Mono Drama**

There is need to give conceptual clarification to the art of mono or solo drama in this study. One thing that is clear is that these names are used interchangeably. But the fact remains that Solo drama or solo performances have become popular in modern times. Is there some kind of difference between solo drama and solo performance? The written text is mono drama; the performance of that text is solo theatre. Solo theatre can also be extended to such performative arts like dance and music/singing and solo mime theatre, apart from drama. But a full blown drama not written with a sense of solo drama can also become a monodrama. It is the acting of a drama that makes it solo or monodrama. When a single actor embodies many characters in a play through the use of voice and believable characterisation solo or mono drama experience occurs.

If contemporary solo texts like *the Prime Minister's Son* with thirteen characters is embodied by one character it then means conventional plays with less than thirteen characters can be reduced to mono theatre in an improvisational context. While mono drama is a play written to be performed by one man embodying several characters defined by the dramatic universe, mono theatre may not be based on a play written for the stage to be acted by one man but it may be a mono dramatic text or a conventional drama not written with a solo drama sense performed by one actor or actress on stage. What brings the mono and solo prefix of the drama or theatre is the emphasis on the one man performance. As a drama it is created and written for one man. As a theatre it is performed by one actor. The emergence of a literary text specifically written for performance by one man with techniques of language, characterisation plotting and narration brings scholarly and creative identity to the mono dramatic art in Africa.

The mono theatre concept as practiced in some universities like the Niger Delta University retains the tradition of a one man narrator. But it is interesting to note that the solo actor is assisted by an orchestral team that sings not only to strengthen the message of the play, but to add artistic and philosophic values to the performance. Most of the songs used by the orchestra stand as embedded narratives within the solo drama narrative. The songs draw, emotional, psychological, artistic and pedagogic significance to the performance. The aesthetic assistance of the choral ensemble in the Solo drama tradition of Niger Delta University is very significant for the successful performance of the solo drama. The orchestra in question is dynamic in contemporary solo Theatre practice. It is in composition and in its function, a storytelling device through song and movement. The orchestra embodies a collective consciousness and shares similarity with the Greek Chorus. Celine Delcayre notes "The Greek Chorus Dynamic in Ancient and Contemporary Theatre" that

throughout Greek plays such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Lysistrata*, the chorus functions as a storytelling device by serving as a link between the audience and the piece itself, highlighting important aspects of the scene and projecting and emphasizing the current emotional state of the piece. The chorus achieves this either through direct narration and explanation, or through analytical commentary or conversation about the events and characters of the play. In some instances, the chorus is in direct conversation with characters and actively moves and participates in the events of the story (retrieved online 28/8/15: 1).

In most of its solo performances, the orchestra pulls the audience with its choric force radically and strappingly to the imagery, rhythm, and music of the performance on an intellectual intensity. We can then understand and pontificate that some solo

performances are surplus performance for the very fact that they require more than the principal actor to be part of the narrative process.

In an attempt to further understand the concept of mono drama/solo drama it is imperative to embark on a journey of classification. The nature of this subject almost demands that we concern ourselves, in large part, with definitions and distinctions, of the solo drama nomenclatures and genus. In Africa, mono drama took cue from traditional mono performance of stories of legends, myths and saga. Hence as observed earlier, mono drama can also be called story telling theatre. Most African traditional epic stories legends or saga are told and acted by one man with sometimes spontaneous artistic support from the audience especially at points where the solo actor leads the audience to the peak of holy theatre.

### **Traditional Forms of Mono Drama**

This type of mono drama predates modern concept of mono drama in Africa. And it is drawn essentially from the traditional story telling tradition. A very glaring example is the Ozidi Saga which was told as a story in the ancient city-state of Orua in present day Bayelsa state of Nigeria. In *The Ozidi Saga, the Ijo/Izon text of the performance by Okabou Ojobolo* collected and translated by J.P Clark, the point is made that

The Ozidi Saga has a plot running into six phase or acts which in turn run into some eighty scenes or situations. In addition, there are there scores of times the story-teller protagonist weaves in and out of the general line of incidents representing the action. This spreads over a staging period of seven days with an average of four-hours per performance each day (xxi)

What this implies is that Ozidi drama started as a solo drama in an improvisation context as an oral literature piece before its version of modern drama by JP Clark. The Ozidi story is a local lore at Orua. It was a story that came through a trance by the high priest of Orua while worshipping at the shrine. So the first solo performer of Ozidi Saga is the high priest of Orua. The fact that there is a story teller who impersonates characters to represent the action establishes the solo performance credibility and identity of the Saga. In this traditional solo performance, the protagonist story teller impersonates all the characters in the drama-saga by word, mime and dance. If the phenomenon of solo drama in Nigeria is to be properly documented using the antecedent of traditional solo performance even before western forms of solo drama, the history of solo drama predated 1948 as claimed by scholars of Nigeria's solo drama history. Apart from Ozidi Saga, there is also the popular story of Kemefe-ere, the ogress also known as the man eating woman in Ijaw mythology. This time around, the story teller is a woman who switches into various characters and voices to tell the story. The

point this study makes here is that Solo drama has been a theatre form and experience in traditional African societies.

### **Solo Drama by Improvisation**

Another context in which solo drama can be taxonomised is improvisation. No doubt all stories told for entertainment in traditional African societies fall within this categorisation but the point of focus here is the making of solo drama from the improvisation of the scripted and even published text. In this case solo theatre becomes more useful. A published text not written as a solo drama, a conventional drama with few or many characters can be reduced to solo drama through the art of acting. In some university campus where the theatre tradition is practiced, most conventional dramatic texts have been staged as solo performances. One performer plays all of the characters in the literary piece. Sometimes the plays are autobiographical. Other times the performer is playing one historical figure. It is only through the process of improvisation that a conventional drama of many characters can be minimalised to a solo drama. The argument here is that well written conventional plays when acted by one person assumes a solo theatre status within a performance context.

A solo actor may decide to act William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and embody the other characters on the acting space. When this is done successfully, *Julius Caesar* becomes a monodrama in performance. Consequently, acting plays a major role in defining what a monodrama is. The solo actor uses the technique of narration by jumping in and out of characters in line with the ordering of actions and events in the dramatic universe. Most probably all the locations are reduced to one location or clearly mapped out locations. Thus in the transformation of conventional drama to solo performance, characters, location and sometimes dialogue are given the reductionist approach by the solo actor or actress. This type of solo drama is not very common but as the mono drama tradition grows and gains momentum, it is expected that most conventional dramas will be improvised for staging by the solo actor. It will not be a staggering option to see the blossoming of solo drama version of conventional plays.

### **Modern/Literary Solo Drama**

What we call in theatrical parlance as modern solo or mono drama refers to the literary art in which a drama is created and written essentially for performance by one person. Although, there may be active participants in the solo drama experience like those who constitute the choric force, the lighting, costume sound and sound effects, the responsibility lies on the solo performer to dramatise the solo text. Modern or contemporary mono dramatic text which has the characteristics of a story theatre or monologue is created and written as an art form for performance on the legitimate stage by the solo actor. It is at this point plays like *The Prime Minister's Son* and *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and "Karina's Cross" come into lime light as models. In this genus

of drama the creative artist, that is the producer of the master symbol, the literary piece constructs a story with a plot structure united by the narrative art. Most of the settings of the play are narrated in graphic language or through stage directions. The principal character who is the story teller or narrator impersonates other relevant characters that are embodied in the play. Modern solo drama provides the dramatic structure. It authentically holds fast to the critical conventions that authorize the construction and practice of modern theatre and drama. The vocal imitation practice becomes the actor's line of attack symptomatic of manifold distinctiveness. Composite and comprehensive body language cannot be achieved devoid of voice manipulation and transformation in the task of representation of the various characters that populate the play. Solo drama in the modern sense is created and written after the Western drama convention based on central conflict which usually follows progression: Exposition, confrontation, crisis climax resolution and sometimes no resolution.

Solo drama playwrights have held strongly to such classical conventions such as cause-and-effect relationships and verbal texts. Modern solo drama appropriates climactic, episodic, and situational play structures and expresses psychic distress encased in Stream-of-consciousness monologue. They present conscious and unconscious thought processes of the speaker or the solo performer. While early examples of monologue plays include August Strindberg's *The Stronger* (1888-9) and Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* (1916), it is not until Beckett begins to explore the form in the late 1950s that its experimental potential is seriously developed (Online 14/3/2014:3) Solo drama is a highly self-reflexive play of impersonation constructed around selfhood and depiction of interior, psychosomatic states. It is a play about the speaking self. Glennis Byron notes

As opposed to the notion of the individual self with agency and control over itself, the term "subject" suggests an "I" that is simultaneously a subject to itself within its own experience and always subjected to forces both outside the self, such as social and environmental forces, and within itself, the workings of the unconscious. (2003:45)

When we talk about a literary drama of a solo theatre kind, we mean a long speech in a play, usually with strong emotion that enforces a main theme. The monologue narrated with a high sense and demand of impersonation of various characters by the soloist takes up the entire play, which is sometimes called a monodrama. The literary or modern solo drama is an avant-garde dramatic form, an alternative theatre which came to the coast of Nigeria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its kind of playwrights both published and unpublished have evolved a technique of writing that serve as a template for emerging and prospective solo drama creators and writers. This solo theatre or monodrama tradition is a relatively new area of scholarship in Nigeria. This then poses a challenge to scholars of the solo drama. Thus as part of efforts by

scholars to develop the epistemology of solo drama, it becomes imperative to bring into academic and intellectual focus some other fundamental intellectual aspects of solo drama practice for the establishment of both theoretical and practical foundations of solo drama practice. The Art world is guided by theories. Theories that shape construction and criticism. The solo drama is not an exception. Thus it is important to reflect on the relevant theories that will give value, artistic and intellectual sustenance to Solo drama.

### **Theoretical Scaffold in the Solo Drama Universe**

From Aristotle's Poetics onwards, drama has been encased in a scaffold of theories. From the classical era to our present time, questions of theory have relentlessly developed in capacity and potency. What this means that every new dramatic genus invented has a theory that guides its creation and performance. The Solo drama is not an exception. One of the most fundamental theories associated with solo drama creation is minimalism. This is a theory which deals with anything which is spare or stripped to its absolute essentials. Cedric VanEeno expresses the point that

In New Media Arts, Minimalism is a way of expressing an idea and is an inescapable theme in modern day social concerns as well as art. As its name suggests, Minimalism means using limited material to create a desired effect (2011, p. 7)

The theory of minimalism is reductionist in nature. Some basic attributes of this theory are minimality of means of production, minimality of structure, of costumes and the application of patterns. It is a theory that deals with utility, structural design and composition of the crossing point. Under the minimalist design of dramatic creativity and performance the reduction of full theatre imposes a great challenge on the solo character/performer. This implies that the success or failure of the solo drama art depends solely on the performer. The minimalist theory of art is closely linked to the Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre tradition which has a link with the ingenuity of popular Moscow director and acting theorist Stanislavski

Here everything is concentrated on the "ripening" of the actor which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one's own intimacy - all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment. The actor makes a total gift of himself. This is a technique of the "trance" and of the integration of all the actor's psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct, springing forth in a sort of "trans-lamination" (Grotowski 1965, pp. 1-2).

This implies that solo drama or mono drama or theatre is one actor based. It is a drama that relies on the creative, theoretical and stage interpretation of the solo actor/actress.

Grotowski's total act is suitable for the realisation of the solo theatre. The point is made while developing the semantic implication of the total act that the capabilities of the total actor develop greatly overtime, as long as the actor stays organic in his reactions, eventually he would have the ability to be fully present in himself while remaining true in his reactions and behaviours. The first step is to dive deep inside one's self psychologically, to question one's behaviours, emotions and reactions (Vanessa Boss 2010:2) The Stanislavsky's theory of Psycho-Physical Action, is an artistic action that initiates acting from our bodies, a physical form is germane for the realisation of the solo drama. This is because the solo actor depends mainly on his body to tell the story. This gives greater artistic challenge to the actor/actress who by the solo drama tradition is not heavily assisted by other theatrical departments. This connection between internal experiences and their physical expression suggested by Stanislavski has since been verified and substantiated by scientists such as Ivan Pavlov and I.M. Sechenov (Moore 1984:17). Stanislavski system is a string of methods deployed to prepare actors and actresses to draw plausible sensations to their performances. This technique which came from his emotional memory theory evolved to a method of physical actions in which emotions are produced through the use of actions. The highpoints of the Stanislavskian system are: Units and Objectives, line of Actions and the Super objective, Analysis of Text through Action, Truth, Belief and the 'Magic If', imagination and subtext. Others are motivation, concentration, relaxation, communion, adaptation and apparatus. Art is a product of the imagination, as the work of a dramatist should be. Stanislavski holds firmly that the aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part. (Stanislavski 1986:54).

Stanislavski's pontification is useful for the solo actor for the development of acting skills, methods and strength. Like the acting theory of Stanislavski, we also find Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre as an imperative for the illumination and interpretation of solo drama on stage. The poor theatre is inspired by Grotowski's encounter with the Roman Catholic Church particularly on the notion of poverty vows in the Catholic practice of religious service. Grotowski is of the view that an actor should give up all futile aspirations to notoriety and rank and muse on giving attention to his expertise and practice of spiritual callisthenics reminiscent of Yoga. The poor theatre is a theatre that is stripped of all that is not essential to it. Poor Theatre can be performed in any bare space, so school drama departments with few resources often find this style of theatre attractive. Grotowski coined the term 'poor theatre', defining a performance style that rid itself of the excesses of theatre, such as lavish costumes and detailed sets (hence 'poor'). Poor Theatre pieces centre on the skill of the actor and are often performed with only a handful of props (Cash 2014:1) the minimalist theory of the poor theatre is also acknowledged by Mbajiorgu who expressed the point that Jerzy Grotowski's minimalist performing style is known for its extreme economy of such

production resources as cast, set, props, costume... (Retrieved online 12/3/14:103). Solo actor that observes these various exercises of physical action will no doubt present a most moving theatre. These theories will offer the actor/actress the advantage and opportunity of giving adequate interpretation to the solo drama universe on stage.

From a close examination of both the tradition and contemporary concepts and practice of the solo drama in Africa, the fact becomes glaring that the African theatrical character is not abandoned from the *Ozidi Saga*, through Greg Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son* to Ben Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and "Karina's Cross." The total theatre concept is woven into the dramatic web while giving prominence to the Stanislavski and Jerzy Grotowski's theorising on acting. This idea of the stage success of solo drama depends on the solo actor/actress's ability to express the very things that directly impacts on in his audience. Solo drama offers a theatrical form that explores the human body and voice by the combination of artistic inclinations. It is an intricate deployment of relevant theatre theories and techniques of both western and African, an extreme expression of cadence through verbal communication and movement within the action space. Solo drama puts into suspension the elemental configurations of theatre by sinking theatre to tokenism. The actor's body is thus presented and transformed as a veritable tool of self-revelation and scenic construction. It is a theatrical cannon in which psychosomatic whims overcome bodily walls.

### Conclusion

We are entering an age in the history of theatre in which attention has to be given to Solo drama and performance. This is because the theatre on the legitimate stage has been weakened by the out vent of stand-up comedy, film and very powerful western soaps that keep the audience away from the theatre as well as lack of funding from government and corporate bodies especially in third world countries. Even the campus theatre is gravely affected by these foreign soaps. The alternative to the existence of theatre is tilting toward the solo drama tradition. This is a drama and theatre archetype if well-constructed with relevant themes and given fever pitched enactment by the actor will compete in artistic popularity, social edification and economic empowerment favourably with the stand-up comedy train that runs through the length and breathe of Nigeria and other Africa countries. This is because of its smallness of means, its low cost of production and its ability to capture issues effectively and clearly within a short space of time more than the deep metaphors that characterise conventional drama.

This study has been investigating the taxonomy and theoretical scaffolds of solo drama both as a literary art and theatre in Africa. It is observed that solo drama in Africa can be classified into traditional form which has also been developed into conventional drama; there is also solo drama by improvisation of conventional drama texts and the modern concept of solo drama as a literary art. In addition the study

discovers that the solo art both as written text and performance depends fundamentally on the solo performer. The text is created and written for the solo performer and the theatre of the solo drama is essentially a one man show. It is one actor/actress visibly talking to an audience in an artistic manner. Because the artistic success of the performance is dependent on the solo actor. It becomes imperative on the solo actor to fully develop and appropriate his body and voice to give electrifying interpretation and staging of the solo drama. This is the reason why the art of drama and theatre is strengthened by solo associated theories. The study suggests frankly and strongly too that such theories as minimalism, poor theatre, the Stanislavski's system and total theatre experience are fundamental for the successful and illuminating enactment of solo drama on the legitimate acting space of Africa. Finally, the study notes the historical effort of Greg Mbajorgu in bringing creativity and scholarship to the solo drama phenomenon in Nigeria. Agreed he is not the inventor or originator of solo drama in Nigeria but it is a very lucid historical certainty that this academic and playwright-actor of solo drama was the very first of solo drama activists to write and publish solo drama as a literary art in Africa. His play *The Prime Minister's Son* enjoyed the creative process of improvisation and long years of performance on the Nigerian stage across ethnic and geo-political boundaries before it scored a historical goal as a premiere solo literary art.

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