

CONSTRAINTS OF SET DESIGN IN THREE SELECTED EDUCATIONAL THEATRES IN NIGERIA

*Olusegun K. ABODUNRIN, Ph.D.

**Olufemi E. ATARASE

Abstract

Set design in educational theatre houses in Nigeria is an important area of theatre studies that assists the designer to interpret the play's message during performances to make the audience understand both the message of the play and the directorial vision. However, it has suffered serious neglect. The neglect affects the experts and non-experts in different areas of the theatre profession. This study takes a look at set design in Nigerian universities with emphasis on University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and University of Abuja. A descriptive method that entails observant participatory approach was adopted. Observations and conclusions reached were through visits to the mentioned institutions above as well as the functionality of the set construction of plays watched. This provided the opportunity to assess the functionality of the equipment used and the quality and value of the sets constructed. The following findings were reached: equipment was obsolete, the staff and the students relied on improvisation and recycling during performances in most cases. Many departments of theatre arts lacked adequate set design equipment which reduced the quality and value of their productions. The funding required to procure or acquire design equipment was a paltry sum and this also led to lack of regular training of designers. The recommendations of this study, therefore, are that play directors and set designers should have a sense of history of their theatre structure. They should also bridge the gap between the expected and actual set design and their roles towards success in play production. Furthermore, set designers within the academy should be sent for training regularly

***Olusegun K. ABODUNRIN, Ph.D.** is of the Department of Theatre Arts,
University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria
Email: okabodunrin@gmail.com

****Olufemi E. ATARASE** is of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja,
Abuja, Nigeria
Email: femiatarase@gmail.com

to enable them update knowledge in the constantly evolving area of automated theatre design and technology.

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Introduction

Stage and set design is a vital part or component of the theatrical form. It combines many related arts into the intricate, sometimes frustrating, but always fascinating whole. In drama or literary theatre, the written words of the playwrights are transformed by the director and his fellow artistes into an audible and visual expression of the author's ideas for the audience. It should be noted as Parker and Smith observed that, in the presentation of a play, stage and set design exists solely to bring through the stage setting, visual substance to the dreams of the playwright (157). In a nutshell, stage and set design is the designing, executing and lighting of a drama or performance setting. The basic concept of theatre today-albeit modern or indigenous, has brought stage and set design out of the pretty background class into full partnership in the production process. The designer brings to a production the visual expressions of the playwright's aim. It can be considered as a fusion of impression.

Set design in educational theatre houses in Nigeria is an important area of theatre studies that assists the designer to interpret the play's message during performances to make the audience understand both the message of the play and the directorial vision. However, it has suffered serious neglect. The neglect affects the experts and non-experts in different areas of the theatre profession. This article takes a close look at set design in Nigerian universities with emphasis on University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and University of Abuja with a view to critique and or analyzes three play productions selected.

Set Design in Three Selected Educational Theatre Houses in Nigeria

Although many Nigerian universities offer Theatre Arts courses and have theatre auditoriums, only three were selected for the purpose of this study. These are: University Arts Theatre Ibadan otherwise known as the premier University from the Western part of the country, the Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village in the North and the University of Abuja Open Air Theatre located in the Middle Belt of the nation. They were chosen for this research because of their uniqueness as regards the physical structures they possess. The Ibadan Arts Theatre

is an indoor theatre house with a proscenium stage, the Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village has a northern architecture with an arena acting area opened to the sky and the University of Abuja Theatre is an open air theatre with a trust stage in nature.

University of Ibadan

The University College Ibadan was 69 years old by the year 2017, while the Arts Theatre was 62 years old by the same year. Worthy of note is that the Art Theatre in the University College Ibadan was figured by various kinds of entertainment from its inception in 1948. The overwhelming competence and engagement attributes of the academic staff contributed to the success of entertainment then (Oshionebo 131). In a nutshell, it can be said that the entertainment and the theatrical activities started in the University College Ibadan very early in the 1950s, during the Arts theatre days. In the 1950s, University College Ibadan was the only University in the country, interestingly that marked the beginning of serious literary theatre in Nigeria. The pioneering influence of theatre activities as seen in the University College Ibadan was greatly influenced by two theatrically committed lecturers, Ferguson and Geoffrey Axworthy who began productions of classical plays in order to make play texts live on stage and to illustrate classroom teaching of their courses. The Department of Classics was headed by Ferguson while Axworthy was in English Department respectively.

The early culture of dramatic performances at University College Ibadan can be credited to the active social performances of Tom Child and Randall Hogarth, two founding fathers and members of University College Ibadan. Tom Child was a photographer and a very active member of Ibadan Operatic Society in 1954 and created four operas every year. He is credited for the spread of the operatic culture mostly before and after Nigeria gained Independence in 1960. The University of Ibadan Arts Theatre has been in existence since 1955. However, it was not until 1959/60 that it was modified. After the modification, a deeper stage, an apron, a basement with changing room facilities and lighting and property stores were added to it. It also has a scenery dock behind the stage; a workshop for the building of properties and sets underneath the stage. An attic which has the costume room and wardrobe space is situated high above the stage. At present, the Ibadan Arts Theatre stage is 26ft 3 inches deep by 30ft wide from the proscenium opening line. It has an extended apron of 11ft deep by 39ft wide. Both ends of the apron have a dormitory leading outside. Domba Asomba has noted that the theatre has: Mini 11 packs and a 30 channel control, 22'T spots, 14 patterns 223/743, a follow spots

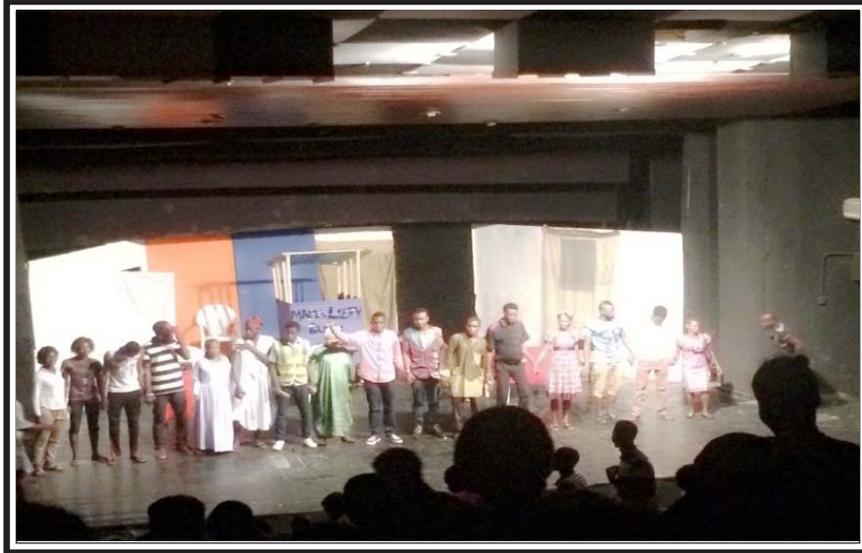
and strip lights. The auditorium which was initially designed for 304 is currently seating only 228. Other facilities in this theatre are timber and plywood floor finish, a manual flying system, cinema screen/cyclorama, orchestra pit and apron....and worn out stage curtain (176). The Theatre has witnessed several productions by students, lecturers and professional groups within and outside the country (Ododo "Challenges of the Young" 93; Oni 63). Among these productions are; *Yoruba Ronu*, *Oba Koso* and *The Palmwine Drinkard* by Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola respectively. Among others are Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* in 1977, a South African group's *IpiTombi* in 1976, Femi Osofisan's *Who is Afraid of Solarin?*, Bode Sowande's *The Night Before* in 1979, Wole Soyinka's *The Road* in 1979, Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* in 1979 and 1981, Williams Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1988 and J.P. Clark's *All for Oil* in 2001. Most of the facilities now in the Arts Theatre University of Ibadan can no longer satisfy the needs of modern productions. For instance, the flying system is obsolete and poses a threat to performers, the orchestra pit is almost non-existent and the scene dock is now too small to accommodate the Theatre's set pieces.

While at the University of Ibadan, in the course of this work, a play *The Lottery Ticket* was staged. The play is written by Ahmed Yerima; dramatist, scholar, and a former Director-General of the National Theatre and National Troupe of Nigeria. *The Lottery Ticket* is a one-act play and was staged at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre during the Student Union Government week on the 22nd November, 2015. The play is a comedy and its central theme is "Greed"- human greed for money, women and food. It is said that every human being has a devil hidden inside of him or her and something reveals the original "us." This is the case of the characters in the play, which opens in Mama Lizi's Buka. Lizi, Mama Lizi and Oga Landlord are seen discussing about the "Tuba-cola" Lottery where the winner will go home with "One hundred Thousand Naira" (N100, 000). Oga Landlord wants to win the lottery; therefore, he ensures he buys tuba cola drink every day. The play is set in a contemporary way to give it a realistic modern approach. The setting was simple as everything was set before the light came on and it was on from the beginning to the end of the play. The props were well arranged but because of inadequate funds and well trained scenographer, the props were not well constructed and so, the realistic approach was not completely achieved by the designer. It was equally poorly-lit as a result of inadequate light or low intensity of the lights. It was observed that only halogen lights were used and so each time Mama Lizi goes to her *buka*, her facial expressions that should add to the beauty of the play were not seen properly by the audience that were far away

from the stage. Due to the low intensity of light again, shadows of actors/actresses was obvious all over the floor of the stage. Flats were not sufficiently used for construction and demarcation; the few lights provided were used to direct the attention and concentration of the audience from one part of the stage to another. The attached pictures in plates 1 and 2 below will show and explain the above:



**A realistic set for *Lottery Ticket*
University of Ibadan, Ibadan
Plate 1: Picture courtesy of researchers (2015)**



**Cast and crew for *Lottery Ticket* at the end of the production
University of Ibadan, Ibadan
Plate 2: Picture courtesy of researchers (2015)**

Theatre is defined as a well-structured performance before an audience. It is meant to comment on one of our negative or positive attitudes in our day to day life, talk about it and proffer solutions or make people learn and abandon such attitudes. It is well-structured because it has gone through the hands of expert playwrights who interrogate various acts of humans in a skeletal but very important form. The director gives it legs by fleshing it up with the assistance of his/her other collaborators who are the designers and other technical personnel in the house for the audience's consumption. A critical look at the one-act *Lottery Ticket*, a play, written by Ahmed Yerima, reveals that the style and concept adopted by the director of this play is unit setting with Stanislavsky's style of realism. As a result of the challenges facing the profession, there was no expert to handle the set construction neither were there adequate props needed to create a better environment to acquire funds. Furthermore, the type of lighting equipment used for illuminating the production could not provide any effects to further add meaning, colour, and glamour to the work of the director and other technical crew.

Ahmadu Bello University

Other theatres antithetical of the western convention also abound in Nigeria with their uniqueness. Perhaps some of these are designed not only to checkmate dominance of the proscenium theatre but they seek to reflect in truth what the concept of African theatre entails, especially in staging. Among these is the Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre which was designed by a young American architect, Steve Erlich, with the outstanding involvement of Michael Etherton (Ododo "The Nigerian Theatre Stage" 75). The Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre that was built in 1976 consists of four thatched roofed circular houses, two of which have diameter of 7.4m each. The other two are 5.5m in diameter. They surround the stage area, a combination of which gives a clear picture of the theatre-in-the-round. Among plays that have been produced recently are; *Hard Choice* by Sunday Ododo, "Life On Campus" an improvisational play by the students of Theatre Arts Department and an installation arts of Meyerhold style all in 2016. At the time of this study, the researcher visited the Ahmadu Bello University's Drama Village, and Sunday Ododo's play *Hard Choice* was staged. It was coordinated by Dr. Rasheedah Liman as one of the 400 levels (final year) projects. *Hard Choice* is an African play with Stanislavsky's realism as the style implored by the director of the play.

The play is set in both Yoruba and Igbo kingdoms. This is a case of two ethnic groups living together in the same environment which is a typical case of Nigeria. The struggle for power is a major problem among the citizens. The playwright now identifies marriage between them to be the solution to the problem. A rotational (zoning) style of ruler-ship was now introduced and this solved their long time problem of succession in the kingdom. In an arena stage like that of ABU Studio Theatre, the director was faced with the problem of how to convert the arena to a proscenium so that he could divide the stage into sections to be able to properly interpret the play to the audience since it required for an elaborate set mainly for Yoruba kingdom, Igbo kingdom, shrine and so on. He surmounted this problem by creating a back wall with clothing material. The stage light was used for the Yoruba kingdom, stage left was positioned for the Igbo kingdom and the centre stage, a common meeting point for the two kingdoms. With the demarcations, he was able to shift from the arena stage to the proscenium. Events were now unfolding from one part of the stage to another from the beginning to the end.



One of the realistic scenes for *Hard Choice*
Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village, Zaria
Plate 3: Picture courtesy of researchers (2016)



A scene where an artist was fixed to the board at the
background as scenery
Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village, Zaria
Plate 4: Picture courtesy of researchers (2016)



**Another scene where artists were used as light to illuminate the acting area
Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village, Zaria
Plate 5: Picture courtesy of researchers (2016)**

While at the Ahmadu Bello University's Drama Village, Zaria, three (3) performances were watched. The first had to do with realism in style and concept and the last two had to do with bio-mechanics. The first that had to do with realism was *Hard Choice* written by Sunday Ododo and the other two were improvisational plays that embraced the Meyerhold bio-mechanic style of design. Plates 4 to 5 were improvisational play by the students of the Department of Theatre Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to welcome newly admitted students to the school. The producers of the play *Hard Choice* by Sunday Ododo made use of Stanislavsky's ideas and styles. This is realism, a group Meyerhold belonged to before moving out to experiment on his own style. It is a style that presents things the way they see it. Making the audience feel it is a true story that they are seeing live on stage.

A discussion with a student director and designer at the Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village, Zaria under a close supervision of Dr. Liman Rasheedah reveals that while directing or producing *Hard Choice*, there were occasions where the director need to divide the stage into sections as a result of the nature of the theatre and the acting area which was a challenge. Among other challenges he faced

was how to finance the project. Again, he was faced with how to get experts in all areas of design to give expert advice especially in the area of scenery. He ended up asking a fine artist from the Department of Fine Arts to do some paintings for him. From the beginning of the play to the end, he had to shift from arena to proscenium staging. According to him, "It was a matter of exploring your expertise as a professional to make the stage flexible to achieve your desired goal even though some African aesthetics of design aspect will not be perfect." With this, it is evidently clear that there are neither designers nor technicians at all in the Department of Theatre Arts at the Ahmadu Bello University Drama Village, Zaria as at the time of this study.

Chidi Edeh the director of *Hard Choice* at the Drama Village Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria noted that as a result of the nature of the stage, it is a case of if you cannot get what you want you make do with what you have. When it is a play that requires thrust staging, you provide a back wall and make the performance project into the audience. He went further to say that one of the ways you can achieve this is by rearranging the seating arrangement of the audience to achieve a three quarter shape. And when it is a play that requires Proscenium Staging, what happened for Thrust will equally be done by providing a back wall and arrange the seats directly facing the stage. Lastly, the issue of funding in the Theatre is not different from what we gathered at the University of Ibadan Theatre Arts Department. The interaction of these researchers with the director of the play revealed that most times they source for money for themselves to produce any play by going or visiting private organizations for all private productions but for plays meant for ceremonies like matriculations and convocations, the department writes to the school for funds.

University of Abuja

The University of Abuja Open Air Theatre was built in 1992. Prior to this, productions took place at the quadrangle of the classroom blocks and later moved to the multipurpose hall. It was to be a theatre in the round as conceived by the Department but the university did not have a good estate department then so they gave what they think they could give as a theatre. It was modelled after that of the University of Jos theatre because of the nature of the climate of Gwagwalada where the school is located. It was deliberately conceived to give students a thorough African sense of the theatre. At the University of Abuja Open Air Theatre where the researchers have been working over the years, a play *Bishop Basse* was staged in the first semester 2015/2016 academic session by the 300 level students.

The play was written by Saint Gbilekaa; scholar, dramatist, playwright and politician. He has written many books and plays, including *Prized Chickens are not Tasty* (2002). *Bishop Bassey* is a seven-situation play staged at the Open Air Theatre, University of Abuja to end the first semester 2015/2016 Theatre Workshop course for the 300 level students of the department. The play is a satire whose central theme is religious hypocrisy conceived within the ambit of evil genius. That is to say that when the going gets tough, Bassey and his friend, Dede must get going. They devised a strategy to survive the hard times through religious entrepreneurship. *Bishop Bassey* is an apt exploration of a society that fails to appropriate and retool the resources, energy and creativity of its youths properly. It is a play that will leave readers thinking deep on many topical issues of life.



**An office scene in University of Abuja, Open Air Theatre
*Bishop Bassey***

Plate 6: Picture courtesy of researchers (2016)



**A scene in University of Abuja Open Air Theatre
Bishop Bassey
Plate 7: Picture courtesy of the researchers (2016)**

From the beginning of the play to the end, the approach was Stanislavsky's style (realism). His system and style was based on deep character study and realistic acting which has become the basis of most contemporary plays. This concept (realism) was championed by Stanislavsky where both set and acting was made to look as real as possible and this atmosphere was captured by the director in *Bishop Bassey*. Realism concerned itself with how life was structured socially, economically, politically, and culturally in the 19th century. Realism has sought to create a drama without conventions or abstractions. Cohen maintains that "likeness to life is realism's goal; and in pursuit of that goal it has renounced among other things, idealised or prettified settings, versifications, contrived endings and stylised costumes and performances" (cited in Abodunrin 235). On the same note, Abodunrin observed that "realism only selects the representative elements of life" (48). According to Brockett and Hildy, the main tenets of realism is : Arts must depict only the contemporary can be observed directly, truth can be attained most fully from impersonal, objective observation and representation of the world around us (370).

Conclusion

A theatrical performance is a semiotic experience that showcases the aesthetics of design in theatre. A designer is known to bring all the signs and symbols that are known by the audience to add aesthetics, colour and meaning to a given performance. Set design in theatrical productions is very important because it makes the audience to understand the central essence of the play which goes along side with the action on stage by the actor. It also creates a congenial environment for the actor to perform on stage freely without hindrance because with set design, the actor can work more effectively, and consequently boost his actions and line delivery. Following the analysis and comprehension of a given script, efforts are combined by the set designer, lighting designer, costume designer, make-up artist and sound designer in harmony with that of the artistic director to enhance the performance and create meaning.

The scenographic limitation and challenges posed by the arena stage can be averted by creating a back wall on the stage that divides the stage and conceals half of the stage and auditorium, thereby giving room for easier demarcation of the stage to suit the type of set to be employed for a given play, whether unitary or simultaneous. With the creation of a back wall on the arena stage, a shift to the proscenium world is made visible, thereby curtailing this scenic challenges posed by the arena stage. The proscenium stage poses the least challenges than those posed by the arena and thrust stages in terms of set design. The proscenium stage provides multiple opportunities for the production crew to experiment with a lot of ideas. The proscenium stage can be converted into a thrust stage by folding the stage between the acting space and the auditorium with a constructed rectangular shaped stage towards the auditorium, leaving space to the left and right. Also, the proscenium stage can be turned to an arena stage by arranging chairs round the space between the stage and auditorium in the case of the University of Abuja Open-Air Theatre. The realizability of sundry ideas on stage depends largely on the theatre structure, types of stage, the ability to make the stage suit a particular design concept, the availability of funds and adequate facilities, technical know-how, expertise, availability of time to plan and execute design concept. Design on Nigerian theatre stage has gone through major phases from old to modern techniques owing to the training and exposure of a lot of scenographers and theatre technologists to computer aided devices to quicken the paper work of set construction for any theatre production. A critical look at the way sets for the three plays is watched reveals that carpenters from outside the academic environment were employed to do the constructions of

the sets. This article has critiqued about past productions, comparing them with some present productions thereby pointing out lapses in order to better shape future productions. The study would, hopefully, help us to know why some theatres are still functioning while others are not. It, therefore, helped us to assess theatre designers to know if progress is being made to meet up with current trends in world theatre or not.

Recommendations

In theatre today, set is an important part of design that light assists in revealing its beauty to the audience during a production. Set and light work hand in hand with other branches of design such as costume, make-up and sound to best interpret the script or give meaning to a text on a stage. While light provides visibility for the performers and audience in the theatre, set provides an enabling environment for theatre performance. However, for proper acknowledgement and appreciation of educational resources in the university theatre, there is a strong need to modify and promote design generally among theatre students and in the society at large. The recommendations of this study, therefore, are that play directors and set designers should have a sense of the history of their theatre structure. They should also bridge the gap between the expected and actual set design and their roles towards success in play production. Furthermore, set designers within the academy should be sent for training regularly to enable them update knowledge in the constantly evolving area of automated theatre design and technology.

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