

African Women Performing Men: Subverting Masculinity through Cross-Acting in Selected ABU Studio Theatre Performances

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Abstract

This paper examines the bodily politics of African women performing African men in the Nigerian acting scene. It appraises the complexities in conceptualizing masculinity and cross-acting vis-à-vis gender stereotyping. It argues against the backdrop that the female body is elastic and better positioned for cross-acting than the male body. It draws on the transitory conceptualizations of subversion to claim that the Nigerian female stage actor possesses a fluid ability to play eccentric male roles in ways that express the persona of the African male character. The paper argues that the fluidity of the Nigerian female stage actor is marked by three trimesters or trimetric factors; her innate ability to perform many roles as a woman, her ability to carry other bodies and to endure the pain of it; more so, attended by diverse bodily changes and lastly, her Freudian complex of desiring to *become* a man in challenging or turbulent situations. It avers that within the precinct of these triadic factors are elements which inhibit and/or propel the Nigerian female acting. The study used two experimental acting workshops from the Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre to affirm that the necessity of imaginative disruption in typecasting may be the mother of invention in acting. It concludes that

while the African male actor needs an extreme form of physical, social and individual dislocation to effectively play the African woman, the African female actor only needs a supple routine in rehearsals to perform the male character and roles.

Keywords: African women performing men, Subversion, Masculinity, Cross-acting.

Introduction

Acting has received tremendous recognition in contemporary Nigeria ranging from theatre, movies, radio, television and more recently, social media platforms (Nwaozuzu 180). Acting on stage requires great plasticity and projection. Stage actors are often called upon to perform a wide variety of roles before a large audience. Ayakoroma asserts that acting on stage is peculiar because it is confined to the physical space and it is before the audience (4). As such, acting must be credible and convincing. Acting can only be credible and convincing when it is approached as a craft and not as an exercise in ego (Pineo 186). This implies that acting goes beyond mere showing or displaying to live multiple embodiments that are lived. The crucial tool every actor has at their disposal is the body and the voice. The understanding and manipulation of these tools make good acting. A strong penetrating voice capable of great subtlety is an absolute necessity, as a face that projects emotions without mugging, a body that moves well and a personality that without straining carries well beyond the footlight (Nwaozuzu 180). Consequently, acting requires training and discipline. Pineo claims that:

Every actor should be an acting machine...what I mean is that every actor should understand all the tools of the craft and have the ability to manipulate those tools at will, that every actor should be willing to work harder than anyone else who is working on a production, giving 100 per cent of herself to the process. (187)

Pineo likens this process to a female “herself” perhaps because at the end of every production process is a ‘birth’ of something creative synonymous with the process of womanhood – the significant changes the female body encounters. Therefore, acting and the actor can be described as a process of birth where the actor goes through a series of changes to arrive at the birth of a believable and credible character. Ayakoroma

further notes that “the purpose of acting is to share a dramatic experience. The actor who we see as the beast of burden comes on stage to compare notes, show slices of life or mirror the society to the audience who have a common interest to hear and see what the actor has to perform” (45). Even when the audiences suspend their belief, they know and are sensitive to good and bad acting. Every sensible actor aims for good acting to bring to life imaginary characters to which the actor must lend his voice and body for the concrete representation of the dramatic persons (47). Thus, the actor is vital in the production process. Nwaozuzu, however, avers that “the [acting] profession is weighed down with charlatanism and stereotyping. Acting in film and on stage in Nigeria today is dominated by styles and techniques, which border on stereotypes. The fad and mannerism of popular actors and producers are reproduced consistently in most of the productions” (183).

Even though this is essentially true, the acting profession has been able to evolve significantly, especially with the contribution of women from all spheres to the profession. Gone forever are the days when women’s roles were played by men as in the Classical Greek theatre or when women were completely banned from performing on the theatre stage. The contemporary woman actor has evolved in the discourse of world acting. Unlike classical theatre where male actors were cast into their roles, women actors are currently leaving their imprints in acting and more so, doing that by truthfully playing male character roles. They have demonstrated the plasticity of their body by truthfully performing diverse male roles both on the theatre stage and on screen. In Nigeria for example, there have been some manifestations of female actors cross-acting on stage. This is evident in the productions of Femi Osofisan’s *Morontodoun*, an adaptation of the story of Queen Amina in ABU Zaria as well as other productions elsewhere. On-screen, women actors such as Hilary Swank (Brandon Teena) in *Boys Don’t Cry*, Amanda Bynes (Sebastian Hastings) in *She’s the Man*, Cate Blanchett (Bob Dylan) in *I’m Not There*, Glen Close (Albert Nobbs) in *Albert Nobbs* amongst many others.

While the Nigerian theatre stage has experienced a lot of cross-acting, it is yet to find expression on screen due to the, arguably, lack of experimentation in the Nigerian film industry. The industry is yet to take a lead from college theatre performances in Nigeria. This study focuses on experimentation in the ABU Studio Theatre. It uses two experimental productions from the Ahmadu Bello University School of Drama to contend that the suppleness of the female body makes her a better cross-

actor than the male gender. To ascertain this claim, it uses the production of Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*, an all-male cast performed partly by women and Olu Obafemi's *Ogidi Mandate* to make an argument for the location of the female embodiment and trans-acting. Before considering the productions under study it is imperative to give conceptual explanations for some of the key variables.

Conceptual Explanations: Binarism, Cross-Gender Acting and Subverting Masculinity

Binarism is a concept that finds expression in different fields of enquiry. Wherever it finds expression, it is mostly perceived or used to refer to the existence of two antithetical but related worlds that are irreconcilably opposed to each other. To define their place in the world, individuals, as well as groups, draw from it in the continuous search for identity and difference (Al-Bayatti and Alattiya 2). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin note that "binarism was first established by the French structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs" (18). The concept is often rejected by many scholars in diverse fields on the ground that it emphasizes difference and the superimposition of one to the other; or, overgeneralizations in identity construction using external precincts. While many scholars (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 19; Jevon Swan 9; Lynette Russell 3 etc.) in cultural studies, feminist and gender studies as well as postcolonial researchers assessed binarism from the lens of domination, this study takes a detour from the conventional theorization of binarism. The study borrows from Luhmann's perception of binarism which posits that every person or gender needs differentiation to achieve individuality (354). For Luhmann, identity is possible only through the experience of difference (242). To experience and fully appreciate difference implies that one must cross over to live in the world of the other. Cross-gender acting offers itself as one of the windows within which experiencing identities or the other can be assessed.

Cross-gender acting refers to actors or actresses portraying a character of the opposite gender. It is distinct from both transgender and cross-dressing character roles (Chung 1). In theatrical productions, the role of the opposite character being played is often referred to as the 'breeches role' or symbolically, a 'trouser role' when female actors play the opposite sex. In some theatrical traditions or performances, it is referred to as 'transvestism' (Hornby 642). Cross-gender acting requires an extreme

juxtaposition of fe/male body and masculine or feminine ideal to create a given effect. Even though cross-gender acting has not been fully theorized, it is a creative way of altering gendering within the landscape of acting in Africa. Cross-gender acting is a transformative way of living in an imaginative world other than the self. For Gorman, cross-gender acting maybe seen as a spectacle due to the open possibility of transformation by maintaining an in-between doubleness, a state of being, [in another world, may be imaginative] that could potentially (but not yet) resolve into masculine or feminine.

This state of being is not uniquely about gender but finds its parallel in other theatrical fascinations of transformative performability, including the virgin who exists as a being in transition, and the boy, who is potentially to become a man. In all of these cases, the audience is meant to speculate on these relatively “invisible” transformative identities, such that they become not transitional states to be passed over and resolved but the centrally spectacular aspects of the plays themselves as the actor are arrested in a state of potentiality, always on the verge of transformation. (10)

Transformativity in this context has to do with disguises; and in stage language, acting—the ability to enter into another character. The gender of the Nigerian female stage actor constitutes spectra of transformative possibilities even though these possibilities have not been tried. The theatre offers a space in which these transformations can take place. In the Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre, for example, there have been more women acting men than men acting women. Several experiments have shown that women are more capable of transforming and manipulating their bodies and voices to play male roles, unlike men who appear stiffer and unnatural when experimenting with female roles.

Cross-gender acting is not a new phenomenon in theatre. Performing the opposite sex is as old as the theatre. Male actors performed women in ancient Greek and Roman theatre, in Elizabethan England, and Chinese operatic drama. Traditional Japanese theatre had all-male companies; even today some Japanese still believe that only a man can embody the ideal of pure femininity in Kabuki theatre (Hornby 641). When women were allowed on the theatre stage in England after the Restoration of 1660, they turned the tables on Elizabethan custom by playing male as well as female roles and doing so even better than male actors at the time

(Hornby 642). With this, women actors were able to apprehend what it means in experiencing or living in the world of a man even though such apprehension took place within the universe of dramatic performance. Today, the tides appeared to have changed in that women, arguably, are more comfortable cross-acting *a la* playing male characters than men performing female characters on stage. The practice in Africa is relatively new, if not too eccentric. Senelick explains that gender impersonation or cross-acting should not be experienced outside the theatre (25).

Cross-gender acting in traditional societies in Nigeria as well as many parts of Africa is almost impossible as gender roles are clearly defined. Traditional African performances unlike the realities in Europe and Asia recognized the place of women in performances be it entertainment or for worship. Women were accorded their roles on stage. The idea of 'cross-gender' was more or less a taboo in communal lives and many Africans carry this attitude to actor training as well as performance. Even with the rise of college theatres across many Nigerian universities, cross-gender acting, arguably, appears to be lacking in the actor-training manuals of many theatre arts departments because of the structuration of African society and belief systems. Cross-gender acting is only a matter of theatrical experiment and nothing more than that. It is mere experimentation to help the adaptability of the actor to different conditions. The Ahmadu Bello University Drama School has had several experiments with cross-gender acting. However, one of the outstanding experiments is the performance of Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*, an all-male cast played by women and Olu Obafemi's *Ogidi Mandate* with one of the lead male characters performed by a woman. One thread that ties these performances together even though they were staged ten years apart is a subversion of masculinity in the respective performances.

Subversion is an elastic and discursive term that finds expression in different areas of study. The term owes its development to the beginning of the 20th century when the historic avant-gardes transferred metaphors of war to the field of art. Within the lens of literature, it refers to a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed, in an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of hierarchy, power, authority or social norms (Rosenau 5). In the performance arts, it can be seen as questioning or undermining the established order of things (Kapferer 8). Recently feminist thinkers have drawn on the principle of subversion to resist patriarchy as well as patriarchal arrangements in theatre studies and

performance. Feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, Ayako Kano, and Nor Hall, among others have used diverse elements of subversion to challenge the structuration of performative masculinity. Masculinity is a term used to describe a set of attributes, behaviours, and roles associated with boys and men. It is both a biological and social construct often used to describe the behaviours of a male. Though it varies from culture to culture, it shares or has certain commonality among the male gender – the likeness for power and domination. To subvert masculinity in acting therefore means reversing the established order of typecasting or gender stereotyping. The ABU School of Drama is one of the leading theatre arts departments in Nigeria known for subverting the ways theatre and drama are conceived. This has been evident in its subversive engagements with the theatre which have birthed popular applied theatre forms such as community theatre, theatre for development and the Samaru project.

The Experiment

The play *Attahiru* was written by Ahmed Yerima in 1999 and staged in the ABU Studio theatre in 2009. *Attahiru* is named after the hero and protagonist, Sultan Muhammadu Attahiru I of Sokoto. It tells the story of the penetration of the imperial British military into the hinterland of the current entity known as northern Nigeria. It narrates the resistance of Attahiru and other Muslim warriors against the British determination to rule over the old northern Nigeria and the scheming that led to his defeat as well as the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate (Yerima 1). It is worth noting that lead characters as well as his brave machismo were all played by female students. *Ogidi Mandate*, on the other hand, was written by Olu Obafemi in 2010 and adapted for the stage in the ABU Studio Theatre in 2019. *Ogidi Mandate* recounts the Okun-Nupe wars of the 19th century. Situated in contemporary Nigeria, the play narrates the power play, intrigues, resistance and the many inter-ethnic wars that fracture the relationships in modern-day Nigeria. One of the lead characters in the performance was played by a female. Both plays recount events that took place in the history of Nigeria and have been performed by 300-level students of the Theatre Workshop I (THAP 303) course in 2009 and 2019 respectively – 10 years apart. The THAP 303 course is usually the first attempt of students to perform scripted plays on stage with guidance from course coordinators to build upon their creative prowess from previous levels where performances were generally improvisational. In a class made of males and females, everyone is required to act to earn their

grades. This entailed students going through auditions, casting and rigorous rehearsals until they had perfected their pieces at a stipulated time. *Attahiru* has an all-male cast while *Ogidi Mandate* is a mix of female and male casts. While students in the THAP 303 2009 class did not have the opportunity to audition—they were handpicked by the course coordinators, the students of the THAP 303 2019 class auditioned for the roles they wanted and were chosen based on their performances at the auditions. In *Attahiru*, 9 females were taking the roles of men. This included; Calipha Attahiru, Madawaki, Mallam, Lugard, Abbas, Leader of Nupe Warriors, Warriors and Dancers while in *Ogidi Mandate*, 3 females played the roles of men; Oba Alaiyere, Okun Warriod and the Town Crier. Three characters each will be discussed in line with the gender dis/locations and suitability of women to take on male roles as argued in this article.

Subverting Masculinity through Cross-Gender Acting in *Attahiru* and *Ogidi Mandate*

Cross-acting on the Nigerian theatre stage is relatively new. It is mostly perceived as ‘too eccentric’ for traditional society due to the stereotypical casting of male and female roles. In parts of northern Nigeria where theatre and performing arts are offered as a course, acting is treated with such disregard. Worse, cross-acting is considered more or less a taboo. Cross-actors or cross-dressers on stage may be referred to as *dan daudu*—a pejorative word used to refer to homosexuals; or, *dan iska*, loosely translated to mean one who belongs to the wind or has no religion. For women, it is even worse as they can be called diverse unprintable names. It is from this lens that the experimentation with cross-acting in the ABU Drama School Acting Workshop can be seen as subversive.

The first point of subverting masculinity during the workshop for *Attahiru* begins with a statement posted by the acting tutor, Mallam Rabiuh Isah during the second rehearsals after reading and rereading the play texts. The statement read “bodies are subject to the regimented norms of posture, and written and unwritten exposure that is conditioned by socio-cultural appearance norms”. The women were taxed to take male postures of authority from their diverse socio-cultural affinities while the male students were asked to do the reverse. The images created were amazing as the female were more assertive in their postures than the male students when they were asked to take similar postures. The posture exercises continued for nine days succeeded by voice exercises and cultural drills.

The output of the female students prompted the course coordinator to opt for cross-casting as the female students showed equal strengths as their male counterparts.

Attahiru is an all-male cast with no women speaking roles. Nine (9) female actors played the roles of men. This included Calipha Attahiru, Madawaki, Mallam, and Lord Lugard, Abbas the Blind Beggar, Leader of Nupe Warriors, Warriors and Dancers. The character of Attahiru, the protagonist in this performance is one of authority, bravery, decorum, wisdom, manliness, and astuteness among others. The characterization of Attahiru best describes a role to be undertaken naturally by a male. The setting of the performance which is of elitism and leadership and warfare in the old Sokoto Caliphate further galvanized the motivations for a male actor. Yet, among the male students, a female actor was cast for this role. The course coordinators were convinced that she was right for the role of her ability to portray convincingly through bodily gestures and expressions and voice, the imaginary Attahiru. Naturally, the female actor is boisterous but she had to learn to be quiet and majestic. Although costumes—head wrap (*Rawani*) and long flowing *babban riga* helped to reflect the character, it was more interesting to watch the female actor twist and bend the body and voice to reflect the personae of Attahiru in all his majestic grace, bravery and strength. The course coordinator, Isah, stated that “the character of Attahiru was played so well by the actor that the audiences could not have doubted that s(he) was a man. Unfortunately, on one of those nights in one of the scenes, her head wrap fell off and the audience was amazed to see that it was a woman not a man after all”. The female actor cross-acting Attahiru gives credence thus: “it was not exactly easy for me to transform myself to Attahiru but it was worth it. I am a strong person all around but I did not know I had that much power and force in me until I mounted the stage as Attahiru...it was like a rebirth, a brand new me. I could be myself and be someone else too” (Robinson).

The above statements go to show that women are better conveyors of masculine logic or truths as evident in the intellection of Attahiru and Lord Lugard. Both characters, holding tightly to their religio-cultural affinity, communicate the headiness of the male gender in ways that is destructive all in the name of being dutiful. A reference case is the aggressive mentality of Lord Lugard well-articulated by a female cross-actor. The roundedness of the female cross-actors bespeaks the plasticity of the Nigerian female actor to adapt to different performative situations and roles. This plasticity is not constructed but experienced from two

standpoints; firstly, the bodily changes or cycle women go through as they grow from girlhood to adulthood which makes them adapt to different embodied conditions along with the pain; and secondly, the desire to transform into a male due to penis envy. Penis envy is the supposed coveting of the penis by a young human female which is held in Freudian psychoanalytic theory to lead to feelings of compensatory behaviour. It stems from Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex in which the phallic conflict arises for females (Freud 664-665). In Freudian theory, the penis envy stage begins the transition from an attachment to the mother to competition with the mother for the attention, recognition and affection of the father. Freud describes how some women develop a masculine ideal as "a survival of the boyish nature that they once possessed" (Freud 665). Ihidero (3) contends that the Nigerian female actor carries the girlish desire to own a penis, a symbol of authority to adulthood and on stage. This desire may be one of the myriad reasons the female actor can effectively play male roles – that girlish desire to *be* or *become* a man. This is also evident in the desire of women in traditional society to take over power from men.

In acting, people can be as many things or personalities as they want. While women in the past were restricted in real life, just as they were on stage (Grist 102), the desire to perform penis or seize on-stage authority found prominence in the 20th century when cross-acting systemically augmented cross-dressing and cross-gender behaviours. This behaviour points to the double-edginess of the oedipal complex (penis envy and castration anxiety) either on the part of the female or the male actor. For Isah, it is 'acting' and the goal is to see the performers as actors rather than as male or female. Notwithstanding, what propels the female actor, or the actor for that matter is psychological. For the female actor performing male roles, the acting is and has been experienced by what Konstantin Stanislavsky refers to as the actor's "inner world". The acting for the women may have been once lived; hence, the 'here' and 'now' action on stage is easily initiated within the world of the performance. The female cross-actor, Amaozodi, who played Oba Alayere in Olu Obafemi's *Ogidi Mandate* reverberates this standpoint thus:

Acting as a man was not as challenging as I envisaged. This comes from my belief in the actor's ability to transform and switch into different roles even though it took extra effort because I had to work on my voice, my carriage and my expressions. Judging from the audience's comments and the

sense of fulfilment I had, I can confidently say with every sense of humility that I did justice to the role.

What could be responsible for the ease of the female actor in effectively portraying Oba Alaiyere who we are told from the performance text occupies almost the same position as Attahiru in his right? Like Attahiru, Oba Alaiyere is a traditional ruler, a democratic leader and a lover of peace which is often mistaken for weakness. Oba Alaiyere's character is majestic, quiet, and astute but can be fiery. The female actor who took this role is heavily built and heavy-breasted but successfully played the role of a warlord king in ways that hide all her feminine traits. One of the course coordinators, Gana, attested to her performance as well as other female cross-actors saying "the women portrayed the male roles adequately, especially the role of Oba Alaiyere. Though I was part of the production process, it took me time to realize that the character was he/she. Some members of the audience could not tell that she was a woman." This is undoubtedly a good mark for the female cross-actor and an illustration of the flexibility the female actor possesses. The female actor avers that: many people did not deem me fit for the role judging from their perceptions of the character...Relatively, I had to conceal my voluptuous nature and a lot of pain throughout the process which made me stronger. If kings were known not to express pain then I was going to be a king and do the same. Offstage, I became a woman again. I was also determined to prove so many people wrong and that desire kept me going (Amaozodi).

What the female actor did here is to demonstrate a combination of physiological, psychological and emotional strength to portray the character, to share a dramatic experience and discredit the general notion that women are best suited for roles that portray women as daughters, wives or lovers. Thus, the female actor becomes the beast of burden and comes on stage to compare notes- about the general notion of her being inadequate and whether this is true and sets the record straight while mirroring society. In a private conversation, she attested that women possess residues of masculine strengths and that cross-acting is about going into the depths of "being" to bring out such strengths. In the case of the performance of *Attahiru*, Isah noted: I observed that the female actors were as strong and competitive as the male actors and they threw themselves into their work passionately. I was encouraged by their capacity and the need to promote female actors beyond sex objects and the avenue to do this was to employ cross-acting. My subsequent experiments

with students have been a result of weak actors. Sometimes, there were no boys in the class who could play the male roles while the girls were more willing to play the male roles.

Ghana gives credence to this position by affirming that: as a production process determined to build young actors, actors are encouraged to take up any role they might be interested in. Once they show interest, they are auditioned for it and if we are convinced, then the actor goes ahead to play the role. I like to challenge actors to move beyond their comfort zones and a female actor playing a man's role, I find it daring and bold. From the aforementioned citations, the female desire to re-live masculinity can be apprehended. This is manifested in the portrayal of the character of Lord Lugard played by a female actor. Lord Lugard in the performance of *Attahiru* is a colonial master and a British soldier. An arrogant yet cunning man with a condescending attitude determined to undermine the seat of native authority. In the play as well as the performance, he was called "The big bad bully." This character was portrayed by a female actor who was bi-racial—a Nigerian with a Polish mother. By all indications, she was more Polish than Nigerian yet she desired to become Lord Lugard. During rehearsals, she conveyed the character better than other male members of the workshop who were selected for the role. Sule noted that: it was quite a challenge to act as a man but it was not impossible. Getting my vocal cords used to speaking like a man hurt for a while, taking up a man's posture and character was a role that stretched my limits and it was a great feeling knowing I could deliver the role. As a woman acting in a man's role, I had to get used to talking deeper than usual. I can also not overlook the fact that once in the costume and makeup, my character was perfected. The actor added that: I achieved the role by studying Lord Lugard within and outside the text. Since he was a man who existed in reality, I tried to read about him to understand his personality and other elements about him which might not have been recorded in the play. Then I had to get into character and for the weeks we rehearsed until the last day of the performance, I was Lugard (Sule). She goes further:

As actors, we need to be versatile. It will make you and not break you. It will be challenging at first but after the work is done, you would fly, and you would be glad you took the leap and did something extraordinary. Even after leaving the theatre, I still had my deep voice and was the "big bad bully" (Sule).

By mounting the stage physically as a woman and fictionally as a man, women are empowered to feel and think differently about gender in terms of binaries. The gender of the woman actor is one packed with capabilities. To pin the female gender down to stereotypes as black and white, male versus female or any other binaristic lens is limiting her innate capabilities. The character of Mallam in the performance of Attahiru validates this position. Mallam is the spiritual leader and custodian of religion. He is also the personal adviser to the Sultan of Sokoto, Attahiru. This character is the epitome of serenity, intelligence, wisdom, and steadfastness; a prayerful and religious man. The female actor who played this character is smallish and energetic. Being a practical and experimental class, the coordinators desired to 'break' the actors away from the norm and push them to try out other aspects of acting like cross-acting. The actor, Bunu, noted that: taking the role of the gentle and humble Mallam was in sharp contrast with my personality. I am usually an energetic person but I was challenged to act as a quiet and meek man. Not only was my personality on trial, but my femaleness was also on trial. I internalized my role and the character of Mallam, so the stage performance was a good one and made me appreciate the northern culture and history.

Remarkable in the above statement is that the female cross-actor acknowledges that her femaleness was put on trial within the world of the performance. One of the ways she could surmount her trial was to enter into the world of the binary other – the character of Mallam – while at the same time living in her world. She sees herself as energetic and may be boisterous, traits that are mostly ascribed to the male gender. Being challenged to perform the other, the 'supposed self', is subverting and questions our apprehension of masculinity in the performance. In the performance, she was well cross-dressed so much so that her feminine features were all hidden. Even though her voice and tonality appear to have betrayed her identity, arguments were made by the traditionalists among the audience that a mallam as the one portrayed in the performance could possess the tonality of the character performed on stage. What this suggests is that masculinity is not much about voice or tone of voice but about bodily appearance and behaviours. A disguised female with all the markers of male behaviours can be constructed as 'being masculine'. In other words, masculinity should not be pinned down to biological constructs or being male alone. It is sociological and performative.

The actor added that: stage acting has a lot to do with body movements, gestures, voice modulations, and movement from one part of the stage to another. Now that I have to be a man, I had to bend my body to be like a man and stay that way until the performance was over. There was no room for mistakes so whether you were in pain or not, you had to endure until the performance was over. In the end, you got used to it and you didn't notice the difference (Bunu). From the testimonies stated by the female cross-actor above, it can be argued that the changes the female body undergoes from time to time put her in a position to adapt easily to diverse difficult roles as well as imbue her with the might to take on the challenge of cross-acting. Character formation like the birth of a child happens over a while. Acting is generally not a task for quick wins. For credible work to be achieved, reasonable time and commitment have to be dedicated. Amaozodi (Oba Alaiyere), a female cross-actor in *Ogidi Mandate* notes: actors should not be scared to try out new things and to give their best when called upon. As a female adult what I do is turn all the challenges that I have encountered and those I might encounter in performance into strength and apply it as propelling force. Such is the nature of us women. She goes further to note that "having encountered the process of cross-acting, female actors emerge as stronger and better versions of themselves". Gana puts it succinctly:

It is difficult for men to take up women's roles and easier for women to up male roles because women can easily hide their feminine attributes while the physiological makeup of the man makes it hard. Furthermore, the body of the female actor, from different acting workshops we have facilitated, appears to be more bendable. What we can achieve for twenty days with female actors takes more than six weeks for male actors...

This goes to show that the embodiment of the Nigerian female actor is instrumental in opening up the discourse of acting on the Nigerian stage. The body of the female is like an empty slate that can perform anything; or, a space where theatre directors can inscribe, or is it subverts, masculinity. The physiological make-up of male actors may not be the problem as claimed by the course facilitator but the failure to develop a distinct training manual tied with a practically try-out drill and routine to mould the body of the male actor. From the testaments of female cross-actors, the pain remains a source of strength for performing the other

gender. The question for the male cross-actor remains whether they can cross the engendered constraints of their body and channel the pain in doing so into a re/creative performance outing without making a mockery of the female character.

Similarly, in *Ogidi Mandate*, one of the leaders of the Okun warriors was played by a female. In the African sense, warriors are known to be characterized as tall, stout, fierce-looking, muscular, and possessing a well-chiselled and toned physique. In the midst of these was a smallish-looking girl who auditioned for the role. While other female actors of her physique auditioned as dancers or maids, she chose to audition for the role of a warrior. During rehearsals and on the performance night, she was as fierce as the men and quick on her feet among other male warriors typecast for the role. She affirms that: it was challenging for me to act as a man, more so as a warrior due to my smallish body size but I still took the challenge and even challenged the person that was cast for the role at first. I did not have a speaking role at the beginning of rehearsals. I led the orchestra and I was one of the dancers. A male was cast for this character, a month into rehearsals and he still was meeting the expectation so the director asked me to take his place. I ran on stage and took up the character of an Okun warrior (Kidida). Sometimes, typecasting is required in the theatre to convey believability. However, acting goes beyond typecasts or stereotypes to accommodate the actor's will to embody a character not just physiologically but psychologically and emotionally. While this female actor appeared smallish, she was able to pull the attention of the audience to her side. Though she felt she did not portray the role better as she ought to consider her body size, she was propelled to outperform other male characters. There was a forcefulness about how she performed the character of a warrior, something that other male actors could not hit.

Conclusion

Acting provides people with the opportunity to live as many lives as their bodies can endure and their minds can frame, encounter and explore the world and make it a better place. As with the examples presented in this study, acting offers a window for women to experience and appreciate what it means to be a woman and to redefine themselves. The involvement of women in the theatre as well as opportunities to cross-act is of benefit to both fe/male actors and has contributed to providing greater freedom and intellectual development for women (Grist 1). The historical associations of maleness with power and femaleness with submission and

frivolity mean that in the present time, a woman crossing as a man is considered an accepted activity. Women's incursion into acting and success as cross-actors has done much to relax the constraints of gender roles on men and women and by implication subvert the conception of masculinity. Having actors reverse roles has the advantage to do away with stereotypes and typecast for acting that is re/creative, and productive. It also encourages actors to explore their potential and capabilities, discover new talents and offers young actors the opportunity to grow within and without the theatre.

In the history of the experimental performances of the Ahmadu Bello University theatre practice, there have been more performances with women acting as men than men acting as women mostly informed by cultural demands of men to always portray masculinity. This is the same ideology that is brought into acting hence the dearth of male actors acting as women. From the year 2009 to 2019, there have been several experimental performances of women acting as men some of which include: Cory in August Wilson's *Fences* (2010), Barrister Jacob in Regina Ode's *The Masquerade Called Religion* (2012), Macheath in Wole Soyinka's *Opera Woyonsi* (2014), Julius Caesar in "Julius Cesar" an adaptation of *Julius Caesar* (2016) to mention a few. However, the period between 2009 and 2019 has shown a decline in the portrayal of female actors as male characters in the ABU Studio Theatre. Perhaps, female actors are becoming complacent or are no longer as ambitious as they used to be 10 years ago. The advancement in technology; film and the proliferation of social media and the fame attached to them, has more women occupied with other avenues to explore their creative and acting skills other than the stage.

PS:

The female actors under study and the characters they portrayed are opposites of their real personalities outside the theatre – from boisterous in the real world to too mild on stage and vice versa. The female actors used in this study needed their names concealed save for Grace Amaozodi who granted permission for her name to be used.

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