

# OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING PROPER SCENOGRAPHIC ENVIRONMENTS FOR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS IN THE FACE OF POOR FUNDING

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## **Abstract**

*Theatre as a performance can be looked at from both utilitarian and aesthetic perspectives. In the same vein, the scenographic component of theatre performance can also be viewed against its utilitarian and aesthetic considerations. With regards to how effective theatre is in passing across its message to the audience, the utilitarian aspect of it invariably stands uppermost. But even as the utility of a theatrical performance predominates, we cannot do away with the aesthetic. Indeed, the aesthetic feel of a performance and the elements that go into its making go a long way in conditioning how the audience receive the performance. The aesthetic quality of a performance particularly, but also the utilitarian aspect of it, depends on how much funding it receives. This is the focus of this essay. How does funding, or lack of it, affect the scenographic input to a theatre production? Beyond that, in a period of recession as we are currently faced with in Nigeria, how does the scenic designer execute his/her art and craft to ensure that the proper scenographic environment that adequately reflects the utilitarian and aesthetic dimensions is created for a theatre performance given that funding is invariably a challenge in the world of theatre practice that we find ourselves today? These are the issues investigated in this essay using the analytical research method and the findings indicate that with clear focus on the task at hand, the scenographer can overcome the challenge of poor funding that besets theatre production.*

## **Introduction**

Theatre is a world-wide phenomenon. By this we mean that theatre finds expression in every culture or society in the world. This is irrespective of the culture or society's level of development or lack of it. In these different cultures and societies that make up the world, we also find expressed different kinds of theatrical art, or what some scholars would prefer to call performing or performance arts. While we acknowledge the fact that the terms theatre arts, performing arts or performance arts may be given different interpretations by different scholars, what is without contention is the fact that they all have to do with the process of an individual or a group of persons engaged in the act of enacting a sequence of activities in a pre-determined or haphazard manner, consciously

or unconsciously before another individual or group of persons. In this wise, theatre or performance can come about either as an instinctive/natural or a self-conscious/planned activity.

Richard Schechner gives a wide interpretation to the term theatre and calls it performance. In the book *Performance Theory*, Schechner argues that theatre is just a strand in the wider phenomenon called performance. According to Schechner, performance is the all-embracing term, and that,

Theatre is only one node ... that reaches from the ritualisations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude (xiii).

While the breaking down of performance into this number of joints and the assertion that, theatre is just one of the nodes in performance are open to contestation, we cannot deny the reality that, indeed, theatre, or performance, finds expression in a number of activities that man engages in as human beings. This theatrical or performance quality of the activity can be conscious or unconscious.

So long as theatre, or performance, is to exist, it follows that a number of elements would need to come together to make the theatrical performance a reality. This is irrespective of the different situations that may give rise to the performance or the situations under which it is performed. This is because performance, in whatever form, is a collaborative endeavour as different elements contributed by different persons would need to come together and fuse, as it were, to bring into existence a new product that bears, of course, the imprints of the disparate elements that have been merged in the new entity.

Moving away from the anthropological and sociological view of performance, and looking at performance as something enacted by a group of actors on stage before members of the audience sitting in an auditorium, we notice that the same archetypal principles apply: different persons would need to contribute different elements, fuse them together and come up with a new product, a product that inevitably would have the signposts of the different elements with which it was made. In the modern world that we find ourselves, these elements cost money to acquire. This means that for theatre to occur, money would need to be spent to source for and bring the different elements together. And this is where the problem lies because money is an ever scarce and ever vanishing resource. This is more so in an environment where the economy is not so strong, or indeed in recession.

### **Scenography and Play Production**

The place of scenography in the play production process cannot be denied. This is because every theatrical activity must take place within a given scenographic environment, scenic environment, locale, setting, scenery or whatever name the scholar or designer chooses to call it. And this background may be elaborate or scanty. The

scenography is a defining element in theatre production because, in many cases, it introduces the audience to the performance and determines how the audience reacts to what is enacted in it. Parker, Wolf and Block inform us that the scenic background combines with other visual elements, which also blend with the literary and other production ingredients to achieve what they call the “total visual and aural effect of a dramatic production” (10). This is a unified total package that is presented before the audience.

What has been the place of the scenic environment down the ages? Some scholars would have us believe that the scenic environment is relatively new in theatrical presentation. Indeed, as Edward Wright says:

In our present day theatre we have come to take for granted the elaborate and detailed scenery, the appropriate costumes, and the lighting ... one does not often realise that these embellishments are all comparatively new, and that for hundreds of years the script and the actors were considered to be the only real essentials in the theatre (150).

On the contrary, the scenography does not necessarily have to retain such embellishments to be effective. We do not share the view also that these “embellishments” are “comparatively new”, because they have been part of theatre productions down the ages. Perhaps the point we can agree with is the fact that components of scenography are taken for granted. To the point that a scenography does not necessarily have to be embellished to make meaning and be effective, Frank Whiting says:

... if we think of scenery in its larger sense, as the background against, upon, and in which a play is produced, there is no escape. In this larger sense all the non-scenery plays do have scenery. Actors cannot act in a vacuum. An environment of some sort is inevitable (290).

Edwin Wilson supports this view by saying, “the theatre experience does not occur in a visual vacuum ... always present are the visual images of scenery” (333). This shows that it is where the play is performed as defined by the scenography that matters and not whatever embellishments that may be attached to it. The scenography, in whatever shape and or level of sophistication, is the locale of the production. But if we are to take a historical look at the development of the scenic environment down the ages, we would notice that this environment had served different and several purposes from one epoch to the other. In the growth of theatre from Ancient Greece to the present age, Edward Wright gives us a concise history of what the scenography meant to different people. He says:

The scenic background can be traced to a hut that stood at the rear of the Greek playing area. This small building was used by the actors to make the changes necessary to impersonate other characters. Its basic purpose

was concealment. When this structure was enlarged and decorated, especially by the Romans, the second purpose of scenery came into existence: decoration. During the Middle Ages, when theatre existed primarily in the Catholic church, the various stations of the church served as stages, and the third element of mood came into the picture. With the coming of perspective in the art of painting a fourth purpose was born – that of suggesting the locale of the action. Only within ... our own realistic theatre, has the effort to portray place been a factor (150).

This long quote has been made to show that scenography is not a “modern” invention or addition to the theatre production process. Indeed, one can extend the argument by saying that even from pre-historic times when man lived in hunting and gathering tribes, when “sympathetic magic” dictated how performances were enacted, scenography was present even if it was done and used in an unconscious manner. After all, even in those primitive performances, it was necessary to prepare the environment of the enactment to acquire some semblance of where the original action being re-enacted was believed to have occurred. The place of scenography in the play production process, therefore, cannot be denied. This is because a given as it has always been there, and would always be there, even though as its structure and characteristics may change from age to age.

### **Funding and the Theatre**

It goes without saying that funding is required if a theatrical exercise is to be engaged in. Theatre, being like other human endeavours, requires funds to be actualised. Of course, the characteristics of the producing company and the nature of the performance to be mounted would determine the kind of funding to be sourced or to be provided.

Theatre companies come in various shapes and with different characteristics. From a broad perspective, we can delineate the profit making and the not-for-profit theatres. Going beyond that, we have the strictly commercial, partly commercial, community and educational theatres among others. These different theatres require different levels of funding in order to execute their mandates. The question to ask is: is funding for the theatre adequate? A straight forward answer would be, NO. Of course some theatre companies are able to source for some kind of sponsorship, grant or advertisement that may help to ameliorate the effect of dearth of funds. On a general note, however, funding is hardly ever adequate. Scholars and practitioners have continued to bemoan the sorry state of the theatre as far as funding is concerned. Sam Ukala, for example, in his essay, “Two Decades of Directing Educational Theatre: The Problem of Funding”, paints a gloomy picture as far as the funding of the theatre is concerned. He chronicles his experiences at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma (former Bendel State University) and Delta State University, Abraka. Ukala argues that there is some discrimination against the arts by official policy of the Federal Government of Nigeria which translates into discrimination in admission quota, in provision of facilities and in funding. And this is a policy that university administrators are eager to

implement, according to Ukala. Given this situation, theatre productions in the universities would invariably suffer.

Theatre does not reside only in the universities. Indeed, so much theatrical engagement takes place outside of the four walls of university campuses although it is safe to argue that in Nigeria of today, the universities and other tertiary institutions seem to be the heart of theatre practice. Be that as it may, the theatre that is engaged in outside the university campus also suffers the same fate. This, essentially, is occasioned by unfavourable government policies, the downturn in the economy, security concerns and general apathy towards the theatre, among others. As a result, it is almost impossible to get sponsors for theatrical performances, and the producers may not be able to charge reasonable fees that would ensure a break even and possibly the garnering of some profit. Thus the funding situation for Nigerian theatre is rather gloomy.

It would not be right to assume that the sad picture of poor funding of the theatre that we have presented is a peculiarly Nigerian problem. The contrary is the case as it is more or less a global problem even though many countries have put machinery in place to address it. Vincent Diakpomrere makes reference to Jide Malomo, Muyiwa Awodiya, Stephen Langley, Thomas Wolf and Lawrence Stern, who “have separately and consistently maintained that a major challenge facing the arts, globally, is sponsorship. The funding of the arts has at no time in history been satisfactory” (60-61). Diakpomrere further argues that in the United States of America and Europe, arts sponsorship or grants-in-aid are in place and well oiled, and so there is some amelioration of the problem of funding. However, he says, the problem still very much exists because the maintenance of theatre troupes and the presentation of well packaged productions require enormous capital outlay (61).

The above view is strengthened by a report released by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands. In a study conducted for the Ministry between 2011 and 2013, which findings are captured in *Culture at a Glance 2013*, it is reported that public funding for the arts and culture sector fell by about 9% on the average. Of this, the report says, the performing arts and visual arts felt the pains more as their funding fell by about 42% and 33% respectively (87). If such phenomenal drop in public funding for the theatre can occur in a clime that has a robust culture of art funding and sponsorship, with its attendant consequences, it can best be imagined what the situation would be in a country like Nigeria where there are no such clear-cut policies, and where the perception of the arts (theatre particularly) is that of bare tolerance, apart from when it is engaged for receptions and civic ceremonies.

This unpalatable situation with funding for the theatre in Nigeria is not necessarily because of the absence of policies and general government grandstanding by way of pronouncements. Rather, it has to do with the lack of will to effectively implement policies and statements, and the lack of institutional framework to ensure proper funding and sustenance of the theatre. There are ministries in charge of arts and culture at the federal and state levels of government. Also, we have the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) at the federal level in addition to State Councils for Arts and Culture in all the states of the federation. But these are devoted more to performances at ceremonies and civic receptions, and the hosting/attendance of cultural

jamborees. Worthy of note also is the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*, which contains a lot of ideas and that proposes a number of institutions that should ensure the promotion, funding and sustenance of theatre in Nigeria. Sadly, these lofty ideas are still glued to the pages of the policy, and thus theatre continues to suffer from poor funding in Nigeria.

The golden era of theatre patronage and funding in Nigeria can be traced to activities of the defunct Nigeria International Bank (NIB) in the early 1990s which perhaps drew inspiration from the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* and took it upon itself to devote huge resources to the sponsorship of one Nigerian theatre masterpiece every year. Apart from the NIB initiative, a few other organisations/institutions have also contributed their quota to the sponsorship of theatre in Nigeria. These include, but not limited to the Delta State Directorate for Arts and Culture, with Richard Mofe-Damijo then as Honourable Commissioner, who generously sponsored performances by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter, The People's Theatre and other troupes for two years consecutively (2010 and 2011); The MTN Foundation and Heritage Bank, among other organisations, have also at one time or the other sponsored theatre productions. These interventions have, however, not been statutory or sustained like the NIB sponsorship was. Theatre funding and sponsorship have, thus, not benefited from sustained intervention, whether from the public sector or private sector in Nigeria. Nnamdi Mbara attributes the current poor state of the theatre in Nigeria, among other things, to institutional deficiencies, the erroneous belief that theatre is cheap, lack of political will on the part of government, and inadequate funding. These attitudes and situations, according to Mbara, are worsened by the global economic downturn (136-137). Given this bleak scenario, the theatre in Nigeria continues to suffer.

### **Funding, Scenography and the Performance**

Just as funding is crucial to the successful realisation of a theatre production, different aspects of a production invariably suffer if the funding for the production is inadequate. The place and significance of scenography in the play production process cannot be over emphasised. The scenery creates the environment in or against which the actions of a play are enacted. It follows, therefore, that a scenic background, in whatever shape and with whatever characteristics, must be created for a performance. Given the demands of the play, and a whole lot of other considerations, the scenographer designs the scenography and translates that design into a physical entity on stage to be used by the actors. In the course of making the design and bringing it to actuality, the designer must have at the back of his mind the kind of funding available or that is being expected, in addition to other factors. This consideration of funding is on a case-by-case basis. This is why Vincent Diakpomrere says, "for every theatrical encounter or experience, a new budget is required" (61). This means that the designer must consider each design project on its own terms and work towards actualising it.

Considering each design project on its own terms, however, does not mean the designer would simply focus on what the design entails without bearing in mind how it impacts on other aspects of the production or how those other aspects impact on it, particularly with regards to the amount of money available for the production. In the

face of poor funding, the scenographic aspect of the theatre invariably suffers. Ernest Agoba, in “Ideology, Design Concepts and the Need for Integrated African scenic Forms”, while discussing how the scenic artist fits into the equation as far as creating works that tie in with certain postulations, says that,

In most instances, his entire efforts in creative visualisation and scenic rendition are totally encumbered by the monetary demands of loyally envisioning and creating exclusive scenic forms for plays fecundated by ideology (148).

The argument by Agoba on the difficulty of creating designs for productions tailored to specific ideological postulates because of poor funding is applicable to scenographic design generally, whether it is tied to specific ideology or not.

The issue then is not that of the ideology that labels the design but the inadequacy of funds. This is why when Charles Nwadiuwe, in “Art and Attitude ...”, identifies some factors that militate against the practice of good scenic design in Nigeria, he does not hesitate to name funding as a prime suspect. Other factors, according to Nwadiuwe, are the inexperience of some designers and state of theatre architecture, among others (97-99). This view is echoed by Dapo Adelugba, who laments in an interview with Sunday Ododo that, “unfortunately, at the Arts Theatre, we do not yet have the money or the facilities to really do technologically inspired productions” (142). All these point to the fact that the inadequacy of funds can have some adverse effects on the scenography created for play productions.

This writer had a personal experience of how funds, and the lack of it, can impact the scenography of a performance. In 2002, the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter in conjunction with the Department of Theatre Arts, Delta State University, secured funding to the tune of two hundred and fifty thousand naira (₦250,000) for the production of “Harvest of Ghosts”, a visual theatre production co-written by Sam Ukala and Bob Frith and directed by Sam Ukala with this writer as Designer/Technical Director. This was for the International Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), hosted by Delta State in Asaba. Based on the funding received, designs were made for the different aspects of the production and plans made to procure other things that would make the production a huge success. As things would happen, the National Executive Council of ANA ran to the state chapter that it had run out of funds. In addition to monies previously expended by the state chapter, it had to cough out one hundred thousand naira (₦100,000) again from the grant given by the Delta State University authorities. This drastically reduced the money available for the production and, therefore, strategic meetings were held to massively alter the designs and materials for the production while still maintaining the basic essence behind it. Even though the production did not turn out as lavish as was envisaged, it still came out successful. But that was due to a lot of improvising and the use of some unconventional materials to achieve what was intended.

## **Overcoming the Challenges**

There is no doubt that funding is a big problem with theatre productions globally, but particularly in Nigeria. Consequently, the scenographic aspects of performances, just like other departments, suffer some form of neglect. What then should be the way out? Do scenographers simply bemoan their fate and resign themselves to the vicissitudes that poor funding throw at them? As the popular saying in the theatre goes: “the show must go on”. Therefore, scenographers ought to look for ingenious ways to overcome the challenge of inadequacy in funding that attends theatre productions. The problems that beset the scenographer in the theatre generally, but particularly in the Nigerian setting, are legion. In addition to the problem of the inadequacy of funds, we also have delay in the release of the meagre amount budgeted; delay in bringing the scenographer aboard the play production process; lack of understanding by some directors and other production personnel of what the scenographer and scenography contribute to a production; and outright disdain for the work of the scenographer by other production collaborators.

In the face of all of this, the scenographer has to look for ways to ensure that the scenography designed and built for a particular play meets the demands of the play in performance, accentuates the performance and communicates the message of the play to the audience. To be able to do this, the designer needs to think outside of the box, be creative and think of ingenious ways to actualise the scenographic design within the limits of the available scarce resources. This point is stressed by Charles Nwadiuwe, in “Acting and Scene Design”, that,

The creativity and success of the scene designer are measured by his ability to utilise available resources to provide a suitable living environment for the play’s characters and enhance the actor’s art (245).

This runs against the grain of the quarrel that Ernest Agoba, in his essay, “Concept Multiplicity and Indeterminacy...”, picks with some scene designers. In the essay, Agoba argues that the Nigerian scenic designer is stupefied and confused by the multiplicity of scenic styles that can attend a performance. He says that as a result of this confusing constellation before him, the Nigerian scenic designer distances himself and degenerates into “complete passivity” (168) in his art and craft and thus finds solace in over simplification of scenic design efforts. Using several productions, Agoba postulates that the referenced designers shied away from embracing any style of design but rather chose to use “make shift” (169) materials to actualise the scenic environments for the productions. This is a step which, in his view, betrays their indeterminacy and lack of commitment to pursue scenographic practice at a level that would be at par with international standards. However, Agoba contradicts himself when he makes reference to certain styles that were apparent in the designs (166-187). A discussion of this contradiction is, however, not the focus of this essay. What is of importance to us, from Agoba’s essay, and given the thrust of this paper, is his identification of finance as a major factor for Nigerian scenic designers adopting certain styles for their designs. If Nigerian scenographers are not ingenious and creative in the face of scarce resources,



how then are they able to create scenographies that reflect these design styles and be functional to the productions they serve?

Scenic designers must impress it on directors and persons in charge of funds that the money budgeted for the scenography of a production needs to be released quite early. It is bad enough that the fund is inadequate. To delay it in such a manner that it becomes almost useless does not help the course of the designer. This point is decried by Molinta Enendu as he says that,

In most university theatres, the money available for the purchase or hiring of materials and equipment is either not sufficient or is very belatedly released in relation to the rigid deadlines, to be meaningfully utilised (136).

There is, therefore, the need to impress it on the handlers of production money to be a little bit quicker in dispensing cash to the various departments of the production. One way to enhance this process is to also make directors understand that the scenographer in fact ought to start working even before rehearsals commence, rather than the annoying but common practice of bringing in the scenographer sometimes very close to opening night, believing that, somehow, magic can be worked to have a workable and meaningful scenography on stage before the play opens to the public. The above situation may arise because quite a number of theatre practitioners, including directors unfortunately, are confused as to the place of the scenic designer and the scenography in the overall scheme of a production. This situation needs to change.

Scenographers also need to change their mindset. Scenographers in the developing world need to understand that the ideal may not always be available. With this disposition of mind, they would see limitations, such as poor funding, to the actualisation of scenographic designs not as obstacles but as challenges that should be surmounted; as opportunities to showcase their skills and their understanding of the art and craft of scenography. This is possibly why Vincent Diakpomrere posits that, "... where finances are low, theatre work can be very challenging, tedious and perhaps innovative" (61). Innovativeness helps the scenographer to overcome the challenges of poor funding. This is in tandem with the admonition of Charles Nwadiuwe in "Acting and Scene Design" that, the limitations imposed by the inadequacy of a number of the elements of production "... should be seen as a challenge and not a hindrance to creativity" (252). The attitude adopted to confront these limiting factors would, of course, determine whether the scenographer succeeds or not.

Having adopted a positive mindset to confront the limiting factors, the scenographer needs to look for ways to make designs that are achievable and that would bring the production to life. The scenographer thus needs to be able to experiment and improvise. The experimentation should be with different ideas that can bring the production to fruition, scenography wise, and with different materials that can bring the ideas to life. In this wise, the scenographer's mind should be open to improvising with different materials, particularly bearing in mind that the real thing may not be available. In the absence of the ideal, therefore, the scenic designer ought to be able to improvise

with whatever materials that are within reach so long as the use of such materials do not compromise the integrity of the design and helps to convey the performance to the audience. It was such improvisation in the production of Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* as directed by Austine Anigala and designed by Hilary Ararile at the Delta State University Theatre Arts Studio that Ernest Agoba looked at critically in "Concept Multiplicity and Indeterminacy ..." (169); but which, in the considered view of this writer, was quite innovative, valid, meaningful and aesthetically pleasing.

Tied to the issue of experimentation and improvisation is the need for scenic designers to strive towards using inexpensive materials as much as is permissible. Theatre thrives on make believe and the scenography is usually at some distance remove from the audience. This affords the scenographer the leeway to use inexpensive material that looks like the real thing. If well utilised, and because of the distance of the scenery from the audience, the audience can be "fooled" into believing that, the "cheap" thing it sees on stage is actually the real component of the actual scenography. This way, the scenographer would be showcasing his/her creativity by solving a scenographic challenge with the limited resources available, and helping the audience to understand and follow the actions of the play through the scenography so created.

Very critically too, scenic designers should pursue simplification as much as is possible. Audiences come to the theatre not to watch a cinema performance but to be engaged theatrically in a make believe world populated by persons pretending to be some other persons which they know is not real. That is why they willingly suspend their disbelief. Such disbelief that is willingly suspended does not apply to the actors and their dialogue/actions alone, but also to other elements of production, including the scenography. Armed with this knowledge, scenographers should rather give primacy to the functionality of the scenery and embellish it with supportive elements of beauty within the limits of available funds. To refer to an instance earlier mentioned, this was the principle adopted for the production of "Harvest of Ghosts" in 2002 for which this writer was scenographer/technical director. We need to stress here that the mere fact of allowing simplification drive the design of the scenery for a production does not deny the scenery of its aesthetic appeal. Scenery can be simple but not drab or boring, simple but rich, simple but functional and highly aesthetically captivating. Indeed, this has been the trend for some time, essentially on the strength of the paucity of funds and other situations necessary for ideal theatre engagement. Taiwo Adeyemi's submission on this is quite apposite:

Generally, in recent times, high cost of production, the needs [*sic*] for more creativity as well as technological development have influenced scenographic form and style. Designers all over the campuses now tend to prefer the suggestive, the abstracted, the symbolic scenery to the realistic. The former are easier to build, easier to paint, lighter and easier to shift and transport. This calls for selectivity, simplicity and consistency (119).

This is the way to go as far as overcoming the challenge of funding with regards to the creation of scenographic environments for productions is concerned.

## Conclusion

This essay has tried to x-ray the problem of poor funding and its impact on theatre production. Looking at the issue from a global perspective, it was discovered that the problem reverberates across different climes, even as we must agree that the Nigerian strain of the problem is particularly excruciating and debilitating. Poor funding does not only affect the play production process as a whole but impacts very negatively on the scenographic aspect of play production, ostensibly due mainly to certain biases that attend that component of the theatre ensemble.

Critically considering these challenges, the scenographer needs to reach outside the norm, be inventive and seek for ways to design and bring to life scenic environments that are not only functional, but that move the action of the play forward, make the dialogue and actions of the characters meaningful to the audience, and that are also aesthetically pleasing. That way, the scenographer would not only create a work of art, but would contribute significantly to the efforts aimed at ensuring the continuous survival and relevance of the theatre in a world filled with an almost infinite variety of competitors and distractions. It is a noble task that the scenographer, in conjunction with other artists in the theatre, must execute with a deep sense of responsibility.

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