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## PERFORMING THE 'INVISIBLE' IN *YEMOJA* AND 'OUR FAMILY SECRET' THROUGH MULTIMEDIA AND VIRTUAL THEATRE

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### **Abstract**

Modern technology has necessitated the digitalisation of stage performances, especially in the 21st century. Although, technology applies to many industries as it enhances productivity and creativity, however, theatre industry seems to benefit from technology more than other industries as the use of digital devices has boosted the industry beyond the physical stage and it has also given stage theatre popularity in the media space. It is on this premise that this study examined the exploration of "Multimedia Theatre and Virtual Theatre" towards making the invisible visible in the performances of Ahmed Yerima's *Yemoja* and 'Biola Adumati's 'Our Family Secret.' The findings from the study revealed that many play directors on the Nigerian stage have experimented with multimedia and virtual theatres in the process of play directing which have enhanced the quality of their works. These production techniques have been employed by some artistic directors to tell flashback stories by projecting them to the audience during live performances, some explored the same technology to create scenes that seemed impossible on stage such as sea or fire scenes. Hence, this paper concludes that the art of play directing can be a lot easier with the use of multimedia theatre technique to tell the hidden stories within the play and making the invisible visible.

**Keywords:** Multimedia theatre, Virtual theatre, Visibility of the invisible, Digital devices, Digital performance, Technology.

### **Introduction**

Globally, the art of the theatre is daily evolving. The social media has affected theatre productions both on stage and the screen. Pasikowaska-Schnass claims that "recent developments in digital technology have influenced arts and culture in many ways (2). Information and communication technologies have provided artists with tools enabling them to access new modes of self-expression and of linking and interacting with their audience." Tajtáková observes that "the evolution of new technologies and media in the knowledge era has had a huge impact on the field of the arts and culture. In particular, two areas should be highlighted: the way/how the arts are created and the way/how the arts are delivered to their audiences" (1). Hence, theatre practitioners, especially the directors are conscious of digitalising theatrical productions to meet 21st century theatre standard. Iyamah and Akpuge affirm that:

Theatre practices of different ages have used available technology in order to produce visual transformation, intervention and spectacle. As technological

advancement and awareness is created, the evolution changes of the technical devices used on stage became necessary, in order to meet up the needs and requirements of the ever growing society. (3)

The society and theatre audiences particularly are daily yearning for innovation and creativity in the theatre productions as “new technologies and media have enabled the creation of completely new forms of arts, mainly within digital culture” (Tajtáková 1). The influence of digital multimedia on contemporary performing practice cannot be overemphasised. Technology has been defined as the “theoretical and practical knowledge, skills and artifacts that can be used to develop products and systems (Burgelman et al. 21),” while digital technology is described as “technologies that allow information and processes to be created and stored in digital form, with the possibility of distribution over electronic networks (Poore 9). Technology has impacted theatre presentations in various ways since the deus-ex-machina technique of the ancient Greek theatre (Magbagbeola 249-251). Kara avers that “towards the end of a performance, a crane-like device was often used to lower an actor playing a god onto the stage in order to solve an apparently intractable problem in a plot-line” (1). Furthermore, Bisschoff asserts that the impact of digital technology has transformed activities such as painting, drawing, sculpture and music/sound art, while new forms, such as net art, digital installation art, and virtual reality, have become recognized artistic practices. Moreover, digital art offers new hope for art at a time when the traditional media seem to have exhausted their potential (262).

Since the outbreak of coronavirus in 2019, for instance, when all theatre practitioners and theatregoers were in a compulsory lockdown and theatre performances seemed impossible, theatre practitioners explored technology and digital devices to beat the menace. Performances were streamed live for a larger audience; some were recorded with camera and zoomed or projected to the audience by sending them via emails, WhatsApp, telegram, YouTube, among others. Hence, “the new technologies have significantly changed the field of cultural economics, more than in any comparably short period in human existence” (Cowen 261). This has made theatre performances grow beyond the stage to the audiences’ doorsteps as the 21st century audience yearns for new ideas and concept in the theatre. Therefore, the “wide spread of internet, development of new personal devices and social media emergence caused radical changes in the distribution channels of cultural products based on their digitalization and dematerialization” (Tajtáková 1).

In this study, two performances are considered; the first is the performance of Ahmed Yerima’s *Yemoja* as staged by some final year students of the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko (AAUA), Ondo State, Nigeria. The second is ‘Our Family Secret’ written by this researcher. The director of *Yemoja*, Mojisola Oguntade explored the multimedia theatre method as her directorial approach, using technological devices while the researcher as the director of ‘Our Family Secret’ employed the virtual theatre technique, an element of multimedia theatre as directorial approach. This paper, therefore, examined the exploration of multimedia and virtual theatre techniques in the performances of Ahmed Yerima’s

Yemoja and 'Biola Adumati's "Our Family Secret" to make invisible characters, place, space, and objects visible on the stage.

Studies reveal that many African and non-African theatre directors have explored the use of multimedia theatre technique. These directors include but are not limited to the following: Katie Mitchell, London theatre director, who directed an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves* in 2006, where she "combined theatre making with the use of live video, creating a form later called 'live cinema.' Mitchell also directed *Schaubuhne Theatre* in Berlin and the *Schauspielhaus* in Cologne" with the use of multimedia approach; Ayo Akinwale in the performance of Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* (2010), Yemi Atanda in the performance of Akinwumi Isola's *Efunsetan Aniwura* (2014), Segun Adefila in the performance of "Omo Dumping" (2009), Kayode Ibiowotisi in the performance of Femi Osofisan's *Medaye* (2022), among others. "Innovative directors and playwrights are bringing the technology on-stage through the use of theatre audiovisual equipment, such as visual displays and projectors" (<https://specialtytheatre.com/a-multimedia-approach-to-theatre/>). When discussing 'faux-interactivity', one of the elements of media theatre; Vincent, Caitlin, Vines, and McCormick document the performances that explored the concept. They recount that:

The spectre of 'faux-interactivity' harks back to an era before real-time interactive systems were technologically available or commercially viable for performance, and when a live, responsive, and intelligent computer generated dancing partner was little more than science fiction fantasy. Josef Svoboda's *Laterna Magika*, introduced at the Brussels World Fair in 1958, is an early example of a 'faux-interactive' performance, though one that was arguably 'faux-interactive' by necessity, rather than by choice. Svoboda's intention was to fuse film and slide projections with the performances of live dancers and actors in order to create an artistic 'simultaneity, a synthesis and fusion of actors and projection. (44)

Vincent, Caitlin, Vines, and McCormick's account of a 'faux-interactive' performance reveals that multimedia theatre has been in existence since the 1950s and it has continued to thrive till date. 'Multimedia theatre' is defined in two ways by Klich, firstly, performance where media technologies are brought into the theatrical frame as a feature of the *mise-en-scene*, and secondly to refer to the area of new media performance, where a live performer may not be present but a high degree of performativity and liveness are achieved (5). It is evident in the foregoing that the interrelationship between theatre and multimedia cannot be overstressed. Salihbegovic avers that "the most important and vital feature of theatre is its ability to absorb all other media, in other words, its totality and multimediality" (1).

Virtual theatre on the other hand is a term that encompasses any activity that is associated with theatre performance in which cast and crew do not share a physical space during rehearsal and performance. Although, this could be very difficult and problematic but it is not an impossible task. In recent times, virtual theatre has become one of the prominent performance techniques explored in the digital age. One of the

most important roles of multimedia and virtual theatres is to enhance the telling of a story by making visible the invisible through the use of technological or digital devices such as projector, camera, and phones, among others. Examples of virtual theatre include performances that are staged via online platforms such as the YouTube, telegram video, Whatsapp video and zoom. Zoom theatre, for instance, is a theatre that uses “web-based conferencing software to deliver live theatre to a live audience... it is live every time. The plays are selected and staged specifically for webcam presentation (<https://zoomtheatre.com>).”

Virtual production tends to be used to help visualize complex scenes or scenes that simply cannot be filmed for real. In general, though, virtual production can refer to any techniques that allow filmmakers to plan, imagine, or complete some kind of filmic elements, typically with the aid of digital tools. Although, VPTs is known for filmmaking, it has also been proved to be useful in stage performances where complex or invisible scenes are to be made visible for audience to see instead of narration or imagination. It suffices to state that the aim of this kind of performance is to bridge the gap between the actors and the audience.

Research shows that two methods of live virtual theatre exist; the first is the performance which gives room for audiences’ interaction and participation amidst the performance. The audiences are allowed to use their microphones and make comments verbally. However, the second type of live virtual theatre is live-streamed over social media as the performance is ongoing but audiences do not have access to participate directly, they can only post comments in chat boxes. It is worthy of mention that this mode of performance is still developing in the African theatre space, however, many dramatists have explored the method, especially during Covid-19 compulsory lockdown period in 2020.

The term invisible as used in the context of this paper refers to an unseen, abstract-like and non-physical subject or object. Invisible refers to unseen characters built within a play to act as driving forces to the dramatic actions in the play. The invisible characters are playwrights’ insinuations and creations that are not physically present in the play. They are people who have had or will have encounter with the physical characters. Hence, they are either in the past or future of the physically present characters. Some invisible characters have voices of their own while some are totally deaf and dumb. Consequently, the playwright keeps their achievements, failures, actions, victories or downfall in the mouths of the physically present characters to tell the audience. For instance, Prince Adelu who later becomes King Adelu is a major character in Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi*. He is though, not physically present in the play but plays vital roles. A removal of his character (invisible) will distort the storyline.

Aside from non-physical or absent characters, ‘invisible’ in this study also refers to places or objects that are abstract in nature or difficult to realise on the physical stage such as the sea, fire, running/moving car, among others. Klich’s definition, earlier referenced above, is apt for this paper because both performances of *Yemoja* and ‘Our Family Secret’ explored media technology and the new media performance technique. “The word ‘multimedia’ had been around since at least the 1960s, describing various manifestations of avant-garde theatre, mixed-media, performance art, installation, and

other uncategorizable forms involving video, film, and electronic music” ([https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2013/09/23/...](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/09/23/...)).

### **Using Multimedia Theatre to make Visible the Invisible in Ahmed Yerima’s *Yemoja***

The performance of Ahmed Yerima’s *Yemoja* was staged on the 29th of July, 2021 at the Olusegun Obasanjo Multipurpose Hall of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State. It was a students’ final year project, PFA 400 in the Department of the Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts. The fact that the crew will soon enter the labour market makes their work significant as it is obvious that they have learned the art, skill and techniques of performance including the necessary technicalities. There was obvious professionalism to the whole exercise from all the cast and crew members. The actors were at their best as they were versatile in both acting and mimetic performance. The aesthetics of the performance was obvious in the exploration of multimedia theatre approach.

The director explored multimedia theatre approach to make visible the invisible in the performance. Technological devices such as the projector and laptops inspired and enhanced the performance in the scenes where characters and locations are invisible. The sets depicted a typical sea environment, especially with the ocean and the sea creatures which appeared real, with the actors displaying the characteristics of real sea gods and goddesses. The costumes, make-up and props, in the manner they were used, were quite believable (as depicted in Figure 1). Light and sound added illumination of beauty due to the fact that the auditorium was shut entirely to be dark; the lighting output, therefore, was pronounced and well noticed. In the scene where Yemoja entered into the ocean, the lighting man focused the follow spot on her as she moved into sea. The use of the projector and microphone helped the quality of sound from the sea.



**Figure 1:** Yemoja danced off into the sea. Four young male slaves tied together, and four young female priestesses accompanied her. Photo Credit: Researcher

With the aid of the internet, the technical director downloaded a video of the sea and projected it on the cyclorama as the invisible Yemoja swam into it in a fishlike form. The scene looked so real and perfect as other sea creatures were seen on the stage. This was done artistically to create spectacle and give aesthetic value to the performance. The director blended the invisible characters' roles and actions into the play, using laptop, projector and the internet. Their actions and inactions looked so genuine. Hence, the director decided to blow the scene up for aesthetic and entertainment purposes and also for a better understanding of the play.



Figure 2



Figure 3

In Figures 2 and 3, we observe that the use of technology in *Yemoja* is a directorial creation aimed at reflecting the fast emerging theatre technology innovation in contemporary theatre than ever before. Each of the invisible characters who are made physical played an important part in the play. They also added beauty and meaning to the play such that the removal of any one of them would have affected the overall telling of the story.

The musical accompaniment added harmony to the performance. The orchestra maintained a magnificent drumming tempo which heightens the spirit of the audience. The harmonious songs complemented the sounds of the drum rhythmically. The space was properly used and this elicits loud ovation in the auditorium. It was exciting and fascinating to see the tremendous participation of the audience in the performance as they sang along with the orchestra. Another important elements of multimedia aids explored are social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok. The performance was advertised on these media even before the performance. Audiences were aware of the performance beforehand through these media.

### **Performing ‘Our Family Secret’ Using Virtual Theatre Technique**

‘Biola Adumati’s ‘Our Family Secret’ is a short play that tells the story of incest and the plight of some girl-children in their families. The story is of one locale (hospital scene) with three cast members – Florence, Bridget, Florence’s mother and a nurse. After learning that her husband has been sleeping with their daughter - Florence, Bridget collapses and suffers from amnesia for six months and later becomes unconscious for three days. Florence, a teenager who is impregnated by her own father and hospitalised for series of complications in the same hospital decides to check on her mother who has just regained consciousness. Event reveals that Beatrice, who is Florence’s sister, was also molested by her father and died of abortion complications. The culprit is, therefore, sentenced to forty years imprisonment but he later commits suicide in his prison cell. The play exposes a randy father who is in the habit of sexually molesting his biological daughters.

“Our Family Secret” was perfect for a programme organised by some professional behavioural scientists who invited this researcher to stage a play for some rape and incest victims in therapy session. The programme was a virtual event on zoom platform tagged “The African Woman, Her Struggles and Realities,” on the 20th of June, 2022. The performance which thrived on cast and character economy dramatises incest, fear and girl-child insecurity even among family members. The play explored psychodramatic style of performance to interrogate the traumatic and depressed victims of incest as captured in the play to aid psychotherapeutic healing in the audience.

This researcher who happens to be both the playwright and director decided to explore available technology to satisfy the requirement of the organisers by staging the performance on zoom platform. The actors interpreted their roles, articulating and rendering of their lines accurately. The various moods expressed penetrated the viewers. The reaction of the audience through claps, tears and smiles shows that they understood every bit of the performance. Songs were also instrumental to the success

of the performance. The message of the play was clear and it shows the danger of incest on all the characters; the tragic end of a randy father, the colossal loss of a dear sister, a mother in endless coma, an unwanted pregnancy produced out of a lustful and an incestuous relationship, a potential stigmatized child.



Figure 4: Zoom meeting of some cast and crew of “Our Family Secret.” Photo Credit: Researcher

During rehearsals, we relied heavily on technology, the play which is an unpublished manuscript, was emailed to the actors as a digital file. Thus, there was no physical rehearsal as meetings were scheduled to hold on zoom, WhatsApp calls and telegram videos. Actors held several online meetings mostly on WhatsApp videos. This went on for a week before the performance on Zoom. During the performance, only speech delivery and pouring out of emotion was possible, there were some scenes where the actors needed to hug one another but could not due to not having physical contact. This led to reduction in level of believability to almost 90 per cent. However, the target audience understood and enjoyed the performance.



Figure 5: Florence narrates her experience to her mother who just got out of coma since six months ago. Photo Credit: Researcher

As the director of the performance, the researcher explored the narrative technique that took the mind of the audience away from the reality on ground. The three characters in the play were played by Aduragbemi Bada, Temitope Amisu and Ogunjemiyo Omolola. The researcher joined the platform as an audience because the target audience watched the performance through their zoom link. The actors were fantastic on set, they exhibited traits of professionalism. Only one of the actors lit her scene with a ring light, this helped to illuminate her scene, the remaining actors made use of house lights for illumination. During the one week virtual rehearsal, it was decided that Aduragbemi (Florence) and Temitope (Bridget) should sew their costumes. We suggested texture and colour of the fabric to use. They did a good job on them.

### **Advantages of Multimedia and Virtual Theatre**

When multimedia and virtual theatre techniques are deployed, audiences can be reached irrespective of their locations. Dramatists or actors can be connected across the globe- actors whose locations are far apart can rehearse and perform on the same platform at the same time. The performance can be recorded to be watched later unlike a life performance which is transient. In regards of audience engagement, multimedia theatre gives rooms for audiences' interaction and participation amidst the performance. It may be characterised by the qualities of intermediality and interactivity.

### **Conclusion**

It has been well established in this paper that the most vital feature of theatre is its ability to absorb all other media. In the performances of *Yemoja* and 'Our Family Secret' the invisible characters and complex scenes were made visible through the use

of multimedia theatre technique. Hence, one of the advantages of adopting this performance technique is the ability to make visible the invisible characters and places on stage. The experimentation with technological devices in the two performances brought out unique results which added aesthetics to the plays and enhanced the telling of the story. It is, therefore, a method that can be explored by theatre directors in the process of play interpretation to achieve play-within-a-play, flashbacks and scenes or locales that are difficult to realise on the physical stage. It is pertinent to note that, the performance of ‘Our Family Secret’ gave the actors the feeling of being together in a physical space even though they were far apart. Similarly, the message of the play did not lose its relevance despite the different locations. The feedback from the audience also revealed that they understood the storyline, the concept and mode of presentation despite these deficiencies. Hence, through the success recorded in the performances of *Yemoja* and ‘Our Family Secret’, it is recommended that theatre directors should embrace multimedia theatre by employing the use of technology to project complex scenes; tell flashbacks stories and play-within-a-play scene; and win back lost theatre audience.

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