

Theatre Scenography and Adaptations: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

For any work of art to be able to transport the reader into the utopian world of any artistic expression there is great deal of manipulation of semantics. Such can be said of Achebe and his works. The creation of suitable environment to house a dramatic action is a no mean feat as it involves selection of appropriate elements from the imagined world of the writer and merging such elements to the concepts of the production and finally to the realized stage of televised depiction of the works. To say that Achebe is an artist who uses words just as the painter uses his brush on canvas is merely stating the obvious. The richness of scenographic elements in Achebe's works has attracted attempts to dramatize these works. The aim of this paper is to highlight the various scenographic elements as exemplified in selected works of Chinua Achebe. It also establishes the similitude of drama and prose as artistic genres of entertainment and transportation from word to life using scenographic and technical elements loftily.

Keywords: Theatre, Achebe, Adaptation, Scenography

Introduction

Scenography or stage design is the art and act of creating a suitable environment to house any dramatic event. A dramatic production is informed by a script or scenario of an imagined or real experience. Stage design technology is involved with the engineering, developing and coordinating all the technical elements of production to ensure conformity with the scenographer's vision. Theatre scenography, often referred to as the "art of creating space," encompasses various visual elements such as set design, lighting, costumes, and props that collaborate harmoniously to bring a playwright's vision to life on the stage. When it comes to adapting Achebe's works for the theatre, scenographers face the intricate task of encapsulating the essence of his literary genius and conveying it through a visual and spatial medium.

The suaviloquence of Achebe and his way with words has ushered in a lot of debate as to who a scenographer is, generally literature, oral or written should be able to elevate and transport the reader into a world of make-believe. As can be seen in Chinua Achebe's works like the highly acclaimed *Arrow of God*, rich and copious with materials that support stage design and painted valuable page by page pictures of actions inherent in the work.

Stating that theatre scenography involves all the detailed processes guaranteeing the production of a suitable locale for a production is merely stating the obvious. But the novelty of theatre scenography emanates when the impediments militating the success of such delicate art in an educational theatre becomes the focal point of a study. Scenography is applicable to every form of performance that would require presentation before an audience whether heterogeneous or homogeneous. The effect therefore is that attempt is usually made to create an ideal locale for such production. This stems from the fact that irrespective of the art form and the medium of presentation, the atmosphere housing such performances within the period of its existence as created by the director or whoever in charge must have to reflect the verisimilitude of the art form being packaged and presented to an audience. This view corroborated by the opinion of Edith Hamilton that "the way a nation grows whether that of the mind or the body is decisive in its effect upon art." (35). For the purpose of this study, the scenography focused on would involve the theatrical stage scenery. This is to ensure that there is precision in scope of study. The scenography of live stage entails relationship between all the mise-en-scene that constitutes proper interpretation of a creative work of art, the creative materials (actors) and the process of communicating it to the audience. While reaffirming this view Burris Meyer and Edward Cole aver that "(scenery) is the conceptual thinking, designing and planning which affect it and to the

organizations by which the production is planned, produced and operated” (ix). From this opinion it can be easily deduced that scene craft is a process that starts with any technical production and even persists till after production since striking the set still entails one of the scenographic considerations though in most cases it is ignored. While upholding the chronological development process of scenography in theatrical production Oscar Brockett states that:

The scene designer is concerned principally with designer and characterizing the stage space through the placements of scenic elements, he outlines the areas that will be used by the actors.... He provides a visual environment appropriate for each scenery and to the play as a whole. He dresses the setting with appropriate furniture draperies, pictures or other properties (75).

This view explains the detailed processes involved in scene design and communicates a tasking art that must be always evolving with time and technology. The role of scenography and the challenges to successful achievement of such roles especially in a university-based theatre justifies the essence of this study. For an art form that combines several audio–visual components to deliver its final product, several militating factors would likely be against it especially if not properly planned. This is because of the ever evolving nature of scenography justified by Burris-Meyer and Edward Cole thus:

Aside from demands exerted by playwright in their scene plots, designers and technician have responded to technological developments in the world outside the theatre by using new materials and devices to achieve traditional effect in better ways and to create new effects. The creative urge has often been happily coupled with the competitive drive for novelty to the ultimate benefit of the playwright, director, actor and producer and to the edification of the theatregoer (16).

This view summarizes the true nature of scenography which involves conceptualization and graphical or practical interpretation of concepts. This brings scenography to work with several other fast evolving fields. The ability of the scenic artist to keep abreast of development while delivering thrilling locales for and in a productions and the flexibility of doing so further reaffirms the essence of this study.

Design has broad meaning and could be subject to various applications, and so does scenery. But design in the context of this study refers to a diagrammatic expression which directs the technical applications for the purpose of achieving effective theatrical scenery. Theatre scenery is not what exists behind the stage, but rather, all items which are visible to the audience in the course of a dramatic performance. It is the totality of what the audience sees and feels in terms of set (including props and ornamentation), light, sound and movement (including characters in costumes). The effective application and management of technical wherewithal in a production determines the contribution of scenery in theatre experience. Theatre experience is activity based. In scenery, it is projected through setting, lighting, costumes and props because it is already present in them waiting to be applied. Because scenery lacks self-motivated intelligence, it is like a mechanical device that requires an ignition to kick-start. Like the law; it bites only when it is given teeth, otherwise it remains dormant.

Theatre artists have for many years relied on their natural creative abilities in designing makeup, lights, sound, costumes, and sets. It has been suggested the nature of the creative process, however, can be delineated and organized in such a manner as to allow for a more systematic approach to the designer's creative work.

Scenography is just as important as other aspects of theatrical production, in fact, in the theatre, the vision of the theatre experience is set in motion by the playwright who conceives the idea... the actors' role is just to embody the characters. Technical theatre is what makes that creative vision come to light; it is the technical aspect of the theatre that reveals the action through the use of light, defines the performance space through set design and characterizes the playing area through set pieces and

properties. Achebe as a scenographer has been able to in his works employ scenographic elements to depict the mood and the atmosphere in the story unfolding.

Achebe's use of words and language manipulations is so timeless that even after generations, it gives insights into the scenarios in the work thereby making it easy for the audience to picturize the events as if they are present when the actions took place. The power to visualize and deliver any level of entertainment is vested on the artist. Achebe in some of his works like *Arrow of God*, *Things fall Apart* and *Man of the People* played the role of a scenographer who aids in accentuating the socioeconomic standing of the characters in the story, emphasize the historical period of the events in the story. His tenacity also helps tell the personality of the characters and the season of the year, considering the inadequacy of technical equipment and facility in Nigeria however, the ability of scenery: setting, lighting, costumes and props and its contributions to the communication of theatre experience to the audience is rather underestimated. Even though, these appear visible and in some cases and are mobile throughout the performance, they are taken for granted like the natural occurrence of day and night unless another element intrudes to bridge the process. It can suggest a lot about the kind of people who will inhabit this stage world before the audience encounter them.

Methodology

The method applied for this work is content analysis as it explores the intricate relationship between Achebe's literary world and the theatrical realm, shedding light on how scenographers have risen to the challenge of bringing his works to life on stage. It examines the artistic decisions, creative processes, and technical considerations involved in adapting Achebe's narratives into theatrical experiences, it also investigates the impact of scenographic choices on the overall interpretation and reception of these adaptations, analyzing how visual storytelling shapes our understanding and engagement with Achebe's timeless themes.

Scenographic Depictions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

As has been earlier stated, the use of words by writers to create the imagined world where a story takes place demands a level of creativity. Chinua Achebe created a piece which does not only embody the *mis-en scene* inherent in the work. He sheds light into what the reader of such work will encounter and good example is the depiction of Okonkwo's homestead, he went thus:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the obi. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for goats, and each wife built small attachment to her hut for the hens. Near the barns was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. (12)

As seen here, Achebe supplies almost all the necessary scenic description of the locale, providing information as the kind of person Okonkwo is, his family size and background, the number of wives he has, his occupation, and other minor details that will enhance the creation of a suitable environment. He went further in another instance to give insight into what the season of the year which will not only influence the setting manipulation but will also inform the use of other technical elements in the scene, the description of Ekwefi's kitchen does not just support the story being unfolded but also helps transport the reader into the world of the story as seen thus:

It was not yet noon on the second day of the new yam festival. Ekwefi and her only daughter, Ezinma, sat near the fireplace waiting for the water in the pot boil. The fowl Ekwefi just killed was in the wooden mortar. The water began to boil, and in one deft moment she lifted the pot from the fire and poured the boiling on to the fowl. She put back the empty pot on the circular pad in the corner.... (32)

There are other uncountable instances where Achebe displayed his scenographic instincts in *Things Fall Apart*. The description of the scene where Ikemefuna was killed transports the reader to the imagined environment where the incident took place. To continue a count of each scenario as painted by Achebe will be inexhaustible in this single paper, but another scene worth mentioning here is the Umuofia village square also known as *ilo* which was depicted as follows:

The whole village turned out on the *ilo*, men, women and children. They stood round in a huge circle leaving the centre of the playground free. The elders and grandees of the village sat on their own stools brought there by their young sons or slaves. Okonkwo was among them. All the others stood except those who came early enough to secure places on the few stands which had been built by placing smooth logs on forked pillars. (37)

These portrayals show that Achebe unlike other writers takes into cognizance the fact that his works will be better appreciated if dramatized. Again, because of Achebe's wordcraft, his words can easily be understood by readers from all ages, the picture below is a dramatized performance of *Things Fall Apart* by Primary and Secondary school children.



Photo 1: A Dramatized Production of *Things Fall Apart*. June, 2018

Scenographic Depictions in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

In his epic piece, *Arrow of God*, there abound instances that was what gave impetus EmekaNwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds* and also birthed KaluUka's *A Harvest for Ants*. At the opening of the work, Ezeulu is seen sitting in his obi which as described is positioned in the way which Ezeulu could as the custodian and chief priest of Ulu, the village deity observes the sky so as to announce the seasons as and when due. It went thus:

His obi was built differently from other men's huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right as you entered. The eaves on this traditional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch that part of the sky where the moon had its door. It was getting darker and he constantly blinked to clear his eyes of water that formed from gazing so intently (1).

This depictions does not only tell of time and seasons they also spelt out in graphical details of the scenes, the materials and construction techniques of the scenarios. The play *When the Arrow Rebounds* by EmekaNwabueze was made possible by Achebe's dexterity in putting the story together. This in turn aids the work of the artist and the designers in achieving the desired effect for the production. The depiction of the white man's house in play is exemplified below



Photo 2: White man's house in EmekaNwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds* May, 2017

Conclusion and recommendation

From this his work so far, one will dare say that Achebe no doubt has more of prose than drama to his name but it is obvious that his works makes deliberate attempt to incorporate visible scenic images that will aid the eventual translation of the prose into drama. The world of theatre is a captivating realm where artistry and creativity converge to tell stories that resonate with audiences. Within this many-sided art, scenography plays a crucial role in shaping the visual and aesthetic elements that enhance the overall theatrical experience. The study delved into the realm of theatre scenography and its role in adapting the works of renowned Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe. It is also not an exaggeration to say that all Achebe's works are easily adaptable and stageable. It is recommended here that future and emerging writers study Achebe and adopt his writing patterns; this will make their work more scenographic and easier to adopt.

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