

Signifying Meaning through Theatrical Design: A Reading of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* in Performance

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Abstract

Design in the theatre is a very specialized area of theatre study and practice that is as creative as it is interpretative in delineating a play's meaning. Thus, design helps in furthering the audience's understanding of a play production. This paper interrogates the methods through which theatre designers bring out the intrinsic meaning(s) of a play through their designs using the March 2014 production of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka as a case study.

Introduction

Theatre in its simplest definition is a place of seeing. It presupposes a varying range of activities from the re-enactment of stories told through the performance of written text to the activities of singers/musicians, dancers and more. So, the activities involved in the theatre are such that must be seen and observed by people in order to appreciate the functionality of the theatre hence it is often taken that for theatre to have occurred there must be performer(s) and an audience. Therefore, theatre in its basic form and structure involves the interaction between audience on one side and the performance on the other. According to Oscar G. Brockett and Robert Ball (297) "the essence of theatre lies in the interaction of performers and audience assembled in the same place at the same time, ...". This audience come to the theatre to witness an event as put up by some performers. These performers on their own part communicate the message of their performance to the audience through several means some of which are encoded in some symbols which require the decoding of the encoded messages through some other avenues outside the media of the performers' body and voice which are the principal means of communication in the theatre. These other media of signifying meanings are often undertaken by the artistes of the theatre beyond the director and the stage manager known as designers. These various artistes work together in harmony to make theatre happen. According to Edwin Wilson (57) "theatre is a collaborative art, where the playwright, artistic director, technical designers, performers and audience come together to make a theatre experience".

These designers perform the task of advancing the message of the production through visual and aural forms. This is because, "the design idea is aimed at stimulating an intellectual or emotional response in the audience" (Parker and Smith 75). Basically, the design areas of the theatre are the set, light, costume, make-up and properties (props). These design areas of the theatre provide the visual background of the production and this is what is known today as 'scenography'. According to Agbo Folarin (14) scenography is "the dwelling place of a play". It is "not just the ability to put rostra and flats on a stage but the art of the stage architect, the scenery, lighting and costume designer brought together". Similarly, Pamela Howard (126) observes that, "... to be called a scenographer means more than decorating a background for actors to perform in front of it; ...". This paper interrogates the methods of signifying meaning in the theatre through design using the production of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka as a case study.

Design in the Theatre

Theatre design literally means "a series of steps through which we pursue the goal of creating what we hope will be a work of art- scene design, costume design, light design" (Gillette 19). It is in fact, a process which involves the interpretation of a play or dramatic piece through the creative application of set, light, costume and make-up designs. Theatre design therefore, is often said to "consists of different architectural and stage designs as well as designs for costume and stage lighting" (Nasir 92). The basic function of theatre design then is to bring to life a dramatic action in visual form usually as conceived

by the playwright. Thus, through design, the respective designers present a visual interpretation of the actors' actions and illusions which "often include specific details of a period or locale, mood and atmosphere, spaces for moving actors and the visual progression of an idea" (Kernodle and Kernodle 366). More so, when it is considered that:

Design in theatre and performance involves the creation of a background that enables the audience not only to be in the same environment with the dramatic characters but also to imbibe the message thereof for attitudinal correction, self-development and societal change. (Iwuh, "Design Aspects..." 110)

Design in the theatre therefore, must be very functional. Consequently, theatre design performs three primary functions viz:

- (i) To provide the setting for a play;
- (ii) To portray the personality and emotions of the characters as well as the general mood of the play; and
- (iii) To appeal to the audience through visual unity.

This presupposes that any design for a theatrical production must not be monstrous rather it must please the audience so as to capture their attention. Scene design or scenery provides the general background of the action. It is "a creative attempt to conceptualize a suitable environment to house a dramatic action" (Oshionebo 141). In other words, scene design defines the locale of a production, situates the production in time and place and creates the environment within which the actions or events of the production takes place.

Lighting design provides the illumination and makes the audience 'see' the action. Through an intelligent and artistic manipulation/control of light,

the designer creates a living space around the actor. This links him with his surroundings and completes the process of making a living environment within which he can perform, thus emphasizing to the audience the full meaning and emotion of the play. (Pilbrow 14)

The 'living environment' is the space created by the scene designer thus lighting brings together the entire visual element in a production. It always is the most flexible of all the design areas of the theatre.

Costume design, on its own part, is primarily concerned with the visual appearance of the actors. It basically deals with the clothes the performers put on while on stage and its most significant aspect is that it always captures the audience's attention because the audience's concentration is on the actor(s) and the costume(s) is always on the actor(s) body. Chukwuma Okoye (46) defines costume as "all materials, by way of dress or clothing, which a theatre performer has on his/her body in the course of a performance".

Make-up is used to define the actor's physical features. It is mostly on the face and on any other part of the body that is not covered by costume and it is very important because the face is very important because the face is the major focus of a character's identity. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajuh (83) encapsulates the importance of costume and make-up in a stage production thus; "for the stage actor or actress, costume and make-up transposes him or her into the reality of his/her role and illuminates the character both for the impersonator and for the audience".

The stage properties (prop), as the name implies, often constitute the stage furniture and the costume accessories which aid characterization because they are what the performers utilize on stage. These visual elements or design aspects of a theatrical production must be done to help the audience's understanding of the production. No singular element should be made to draw undue attention to itself thus they must be seen in a fine composition and that is why there are the elements and principles of design that must be adhered to for the design to be aesthetically pleasing and functional. The elements are line, shape, colour and texture while the principles are balance, proportion, rhythm, emphasis and

unity. The principles of design are concepts used to organize or arrange the structural elements of design. Where balance is concerned with visual equilibrium and stability, proportion is the concept of unity that relates all aspects of design to the whole. Emphasis gives the design direction and eliminates whatever confusion may arise from the design while unity presupposes a unification of all the elements of design to achieve an aesthetically pleasing production.

Signification implies the expression of the intrinsic meaning of a thing through signs. It presupposes the creative application of symbols in expressing the meaning of a work of art, in this case, a play production. To signify therefore, implies showing the meaning of something such as word or even a phenomenon. It means making things, words or actions “known by signs, speech or action”. Thus a theatre designer can employ various means in bringing out a play’s meaning through his set, costume, make-up and properties.

Signifying Meaning through Design in *Hangmen Also Die*

Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* is a metaphor. It depicts the aimlessness of human existence especially among the masses particularly in nations and climes where there is a chasm between the rich and the poor, in societies where jobs and choice positions are given not by merit but, by filial and ethnic affiliations and where the end justifies the means not minding whose ox is gored. It tells the story of a nation where the citizens are in a cat and mouse game, where the winner takes it all and the fate of the majority is decided by a select few that are not more intelligent than the rest. There is, as presented in the story, a situation of people suffering in the midst of plenty and the innocent suffer for crimes they know little or nothing about and the mediocrity is celebrated then things are no longer at ease and in the end they fall apart.

In the production of the play by students of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka as directed by Mr. Somtoo Arinze-Umobi; the designers were Dim Chibuike/Sam Nwosu (set), Rita Nwaire/Chinyere Okeke (costume), Gloria Yerumoh (Make-up), and Nonso Oforbueze (props). The play was staged at the Multi-purpose Hall of the University. The hall has what can pass for an end stage. So, the audience viewed the production from one side. The auditorium is on a flat ground and the seats are arranged to create two aisles on both sides thus having three rows of seats. As the auditorium is not raked, there is the problem of sight line.

The designers, for economy of space, created a simultaneous setting. There is a clear distinction between the prison with the waiting room and the hanging room and the hide out of the suicide squad. On Upstage left is located the Waiting Room and on Down Stage Left is the Hanging Room. These were depicted by signs boldly announcing the activities that take place within these locales. A thick rope is conspicuously hung above the Hanging Room as a pointer to the death that takes place there. On Stage Right is a setting like a settlement representing a small clearing in a bush. There are shrubs used as camouflage and some household items scattered about the place. It is the hide out for the Suicide Squad.

These two settings depict two contrasting images and a paradox. The contrast is in the fact that while the Waiting Room with the Warders and Prison Doctor who work in the location Stage Left seemingly live in opulence albeit in official capacities, the ‘Renegades’ who camp in the location Stage Right represent the oppressed masses not minding the fact they have slaved and toiled to earn a University degree which ordinarily is enough to earn them a good job rather they are frustrated by the same government that gave them the opportunity of going to school. So, in placing the sets side by side the designers are making a bold statement on injustice, corruption and oppression in the country.

The paradox is in the fact that, yes, the government is insensitive to the plight of the masses where those who are supposed to be leaders and policy makers end up being near society rejects yet, those who steer the ship of state are not more intelligent than those they lord it over. Another irony in the simultaneity of the settings is that, though the Suicide Squad may have good reasons to justify their anger and subsequent rebellion against the society, the law must always take its full course not minding how good

or bad the system is, so, anyone who walks on the wrong side of the law, for whatever it is worth, must face the music.

The director and his crew has made this bold statement through scene design because they had an option of using scene changes or shifting scenery but in placing a simultaneous setting on stage they are constantly reminding the audience that there is always two sides to a coin and that there is a very thin line between love and hatred, like and dislike. It is a reminder that the Nigerian state is still far removed from the ideal nation state every citizen hungers for where there is equity, justice and fair play. The design was able to evoke this feeling of nostalgia in the audience through “the careful selection and imposition of the objects of scenery in line with the scenic designer’s vision” (Iwuh, “Space, Natural Forms...” 9).

As the play progresses we observed that a very symbolic scene was played on the apron; (an apron is a space beyond the foot of the stage where some actions could take place in the course of a theatrical production). In Phase Three, there was a celebration. We beheld a celebration before an empty throne yet to be occupied by someone of affluence and influence but it was later found out that he is not qualified to ascend the throne:

Tamara: Tell me about your son. And forget that thief. I am just from his house. And I told him to his face that he is a thief. I said to him “Isokipiri Erekosima, if you don’t give us our compensation money I will broadcast it to the entire village that you are a thief”.
(*Hangmen...* 40-41).

The throne therefore, becomes a symbol of oppression and countless opportunities given to better the lot of the masses but, because the just has never been in power, injustice still reigns. This is because in creating a setting or an environment for a production, the scenic designer “only seeks to recreate them within the limits of man’s involvement therefore, the scenic designer aims to represent reality by approximation...” (Iwuh 10).

The hall for the production is a very large one with poor acoustics and poor site lines because the seats are on a level floor, the designers had to set the set a little distance from the first row of seats such that the members of the audience at the back row can have a view of the stage without having to stand on top of the desk, this however, tasked the actors projection.

This multi-purpose hall has all its entrance doors stage left, this posed a little problem to the designers but, they were able to get round the problem by creating entrances which ordinarily would have been made from Up Stage Right and some others through the aisles.

Again, the placement of the Hanging Room DSL is another sign reminding the audience of the vanity of human existence especially when it is considered that the condemned criminal is placed inside the room with the noose round his neck yet the Hangman could not bring himself to turn the guillotine because he (Yekinni) is fed up with the system.

Yekinni: ... And since that day I climbed into these uniforms and put on this black glove on my right hand, and started to turn the handle of that useless hanging machine, something in me has been dying. Dying daily. Doctor, for every man I hang a part of me dies...

Doctor : What part is that?

Yekinni: The living part of me.

Doctor: The living part?

Yekinni: (weeping) The human part of me.

Doctor: (turning away) Yekinni, this is no time to be sentimental.

Yekinni: I am not being sentimental, Doctor.

Doctor: You are.

Yekinni: (weeping) I am not.

Doctor: Imagine a prison hangman wallowing in self pity. (9)

So, the picture of a condemned criminal with a noose round his neck before an audience becomes a sentinel in the minds of the audience with a poser, 'check thy self'. It a pointer to the judgment day and a symbol of self-assessment where everyone is called to ruminate and find out if any is as guilty or more innocent than the 'criminal'.

As costume, Yekinni, the hangman, was costumed in all black attire and so were the members of the Suicide squad, except that the Suicide squad had red berets on their heads. The colour black is usually "associated with gloom or with something sinister or evil" (Okeke 183). Yekinni, by the nature of his job, sends people to the grave and death is not a happy event. Similarly, Dayan and his group, (the Suicide squad), kill and maim. So, the colours of their costume, black and red, represents evil;

R.I.P: We kill, we murder, we massacre...

Chorus: We are masters of mayhem.

Mortuary: (*demonstrating as he prowls*) Yes, like the hangmen we come, our wrists as ropes, our hands groping for your neck, our fingers itching for the grip, the grip on your neck... and once our talons find their target...

Khomeini: (*wringing*) We wring your neck like a chicken's neck, yes, like a wet towel, (*through clenched teeth*) we twist and twist and twist until the bone breaks behind the neck, and the spinal cord snaps behind the back, snaps like a twig between...

Chorus: (*fingers clawed*) Our fingers of steel. (37)

With the colour black as their costume and a red cap, the Suicide squad portends real evil irrespective of the reasons they put up for their actions. Red is danger and black is sinister therefore, a combination of the two colours signifies doom.

The Doctor, professionally, was costumed in a white hospital gown. The white gown, though synonymous with the medical profession, is symbolically used to contrast the colour of Yekinni's costume because the Doctor could well have been costumed in any corporate outfit with a Stethoscope as a hand prop to signify the profession but, the colour white was chosen to show the difference between a profession that saves life and the one that does not. Yet, there is an irony in the choice of colours for the costumes for Yekinni and the Doctor. This is obvious in the dialogue between Yekinni and the Doctor on pages 7 and 8 where the Doctor who is supposed to save life is persuading Yekinni who ordinarily is a messenger of death to go on terminating life:

Doctor: ... look, Yekinni (*stops him*) he wants you to start early so that we can finish in time. You must realize we have seven convicts today. You must...

Yekinni: Even you, doctor?

Doctor: What was that?

Yekinni: So you follow the people who want to make I hang those boys.

Doctor: There's nothing to be sentimental about, Yekinni. Those boys have been condemned. Condemned for killing a fellow human being. They have to be hanged. And they know it. They also know their blood is on their head. So...

(*herds him towards the scaffold*)

Yekinni; (*breaking free*) I no fit. (*frightfully*) I no fit.

The designers were also able to create stage properties that helped the actors in their characterizations in spite of the limitations posed by the total absence of lighting. The greatest challenge faced by the designers is in creating and sustaining the illusion of reality that set, props and costume bring to bear on a production on the absence of any form of stage lighting. But, the solution was got through the ingenuity of the designers; first was the simultaneity of the settings and the domineering presence of

the Hanging Room in addition to the colours of costume and properties. Props like guns, knives and cudgels were painted black such that from the aesthetic distance between the audience and the stage they appeared real. This made all the aspects of design to reflect “the life and very being of the actors who inhabit it” (Folarin 14).

Here, the colours of costume have become a signifier to the fact that ‘the hood does not make the monk’ for where Yekinni could easily have been singled out as a messenger of death, the Doctor has become the vehicle through which people die. Therefore, in spite of the supposed innocence and benevolence of the Doctor, as the colour of costume ordinarily proclaims, the designers have shown a contradiction in the character through the colours of costume because what is seen is no longer what is done.

In all, in the design for the set, costume, make-up and properties are signs that the community represented in the play have come to terms with the activities of the Suicide squad and rogues in high places like Chief Erekosima. These are constant reminders to the audience that it is not yet Eldorado for the Nigerian society and that everything that glitters is not gold. Yet, as there is a careful mix of colours, as was evident in Phase Three and Five, where there were celebrations, the designers are sending out a message of hope, telling the audience that there could yet be some silver linings in the horizon through collective effort.

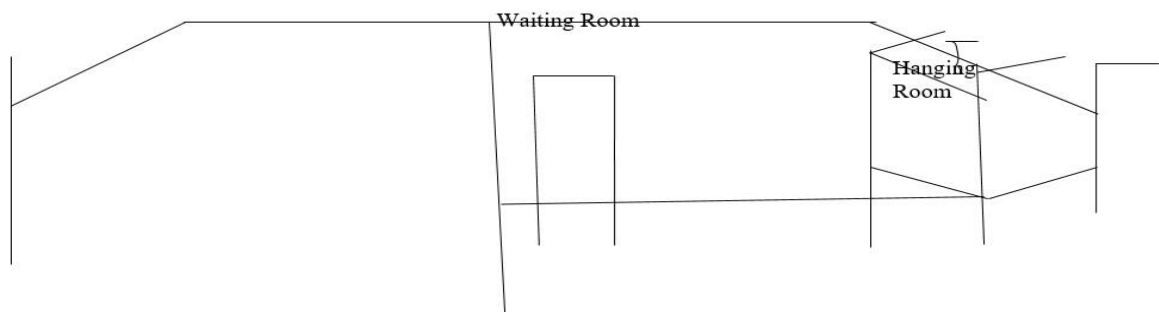
Conclusion

Theatre occurs through the collaborative efforts of various artistes and it is by this collaboration that the theatre is taken to be the most dynamic of all arts and the art that comes closest to life since it apes life in its operations and its subjects are often drawn from life. Similarly, through its close association and interaction with the audience theatre is set apart from other forms of entertainment like film and television and from the plastic arts. This collaboration is most effective in design, as this discourse has tried to prove, where signs and symbols are used to aid the audience’s understanding of a play. It follows therefore that in a theatrical production, though the director is the artistic head of the production, his primary duties include the inclusion and harmonization of the other elements of the theatre, especially, the design elements in order to achieve a unified and aesthetically pleasing production.

In this study of the production of Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* at the Multi-purpose Hall of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka by students of Theatre and Film Studies Department, it is obvious that the visual components of the theatre, set, costume, make-up and properties were effectively utilized as signs in delineating the plays theme and the playwrights intended message to the people. Through the designs for the production the designers have helped the audience understand the play better. Thus, while the play is an articulated metaphor, the designers have through the respective designs and careful manipulation of the elements and principles of design made the audience understand even the most encapsulated words of the playwright using set, costume, make-up and properties as signifiers.



The Hideout



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