

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SCENIC DESIGN: A STUDY OF ESIABA IROBI'S "THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MASK" IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL THEATRE

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Abstract

The stage picture depends to a great extent on the setting and costumes. The placement of doors, windows, and furniture allows some compositional patterns and impedes others. Thus, the ability of the designer to conceive ideas on the arrangement of scenic properties to conform with the playwright's ideas and the director's ideas creates a balance in the stage visual composition. This explores the conceptualization of scenic designs in Nigerian educational theater through an analysis of Esiaba Irobi's play, "The Other Side of the Mask." By examining the use of space, set elements, and visual aesthetics in the production, this study aims to uncover the ways in which scenic design contributes to the overall theatrical experience and educational goals in Nigerian theater. It also looks at the possibilities of an artistic or set designer creating effective designs and the aesthetic transformation of a play text. The paper equally suggests appropriate measures towards improving scenic design in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Scenic design, play production, set designer, Aesthetics of Scenic design, set design

Introduction

Background to design is crucial to the understanding and appreciation of the subject. This is because it deals with the visual and spatial aspects of theater. But in African theatre studies, there are very few detailed works based on individual playwrights or their plays. This is a major drawback, as the African dramatist has always used traditional African theatre forms in a modern context, and traditional forms are always direct in the use of visual and spatial expression. In his study of Pete Edochie and the actor's craft in contemporary Nigerian drama, scholars like Dapo Adelugba emphasized the need for such works to be properly understood, and its interpretation in realistic acting styles has been accounted for by Nigerian playwrights. It is necessary that its essentials (ere, concept, and form) be properly explained. The same can be applied to the use of Western actor training methods in traditional performance genres.. There are many different ways in which this training is put into practice, but one suspects that an inappropriate use of scenic signs is probably the major factor in the failure of such attempts. In terms of accessibility, reliability, and availability, internet research on *The Other Side of the Mask* proved unsatisfying. As a result, the researcher has relied almost entirely on the text of the play.

Scenic design is the designing, executing, and lighting of a play set in motion for production. It is primarily to establish, for an audience, a physical and atmospheric environment on stage for the duration of a dramatic experience. In addition, it is a special area of design based on a wide background of semi-related as well as specific training in modern theater. Moreover, it is concerned with the total visual effect of a dramatic production. Scenic design is also known as scenography, stage design, or set design. This includes the creation of theatrical as well as film or television

scenery. Scenic designers come from a variety of artistic backgrounds. In this way, Chris Guzardo (2017) asserts that "scenic designers are professionals in theater who design sets for the stage that communicate aspects of a performance, such as time of day, location, and era. Scenic design plays a very important role in shaping the audience's perception and understanding of a theatrical production. In the context of Nigerian educational theater, scenic design serves not only aesthetic purposes but also serves as a tool for conveying cultural, social, and educational messages. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on the scenic design of Esiaba Erobi's *The Other Side of the Mask*, a play to explore how scenic elements are conceptualized and utilized in Nigerian educational theater. "Sets are supposed to lay a foundation for performances as they communicate information to audiences through visual design" (p. 1). To this end, scenery, lights, property, costume, and sound effects are coordinated. Thus, ways and means of developing this coordination and the effect of each individual element are influenced by the sociological, cultural, artistic dynamism, and technological resources of the locality in which theater production is to be presented. In this wise, Utoh, T.C states that,

The Nigerian Society cannot, but pay heed to the issues of social concern which are given ample exposition in many plays. This is because the dire need for mass consciousness a lever which propels people to re-order and re-assert their values and priorities. The unprecedented development, growth and subsequent expansion of the Nigeria theatre bears a direct relationship to the dynamics of social change evident in most Nigerian plays. (p.126)

The weight of this assertion centers on the basis on which an artist, a playwright, and the designer's ideas evolve, as well as being guided by their surroundings. Thus, an artist is affected by his society. In this case, art can, through intimate identification, create empathy. This means that art challenges the view not just visually or through the intellect but through their whole emotional, spiritual, ethnical, intuitive, and psychological being. To find empathy requires us to reach beyond our differences to a point of shared humanity.

In any educational Theatre environment, there are many different ways in which a student or group of students' training is put into practice, but one suspects that an inappropriate use of scenic signs is probably the major factor in the failure of such attempts. In terms of accessibility, reliability, and availability, internet research on *The Other Side of the Mask* proved unsatisfying. As a result, the researcher has relied almost entirely on the text of the play.

Also, unconsciously, the environment will influence the actors and their performance, with a culture of set design being that actors don't feel ownership of the space until they have something to interact with. This both affects the process of character development and the final outcome, primarily because acting is an action-based practice, not one of contemplation. So, anything that influences an actor's actions will also influence character and performance. For example, in the development of his character Lysander in the 2008 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, David is cited visiting the set and getting in bed. This change is largely attributed to the tangibility of the bed enforcing the action of actually getting into it; something that would likely not have happened had the set design been different.

Thus, the basic communicative qualities of set design are the same as in any other visual art. In complementing this, Carroll N. (1998) posits that,

We can challenge the radical autonomist's appeal to the nature of art with appeals to the natures of specific art forms or genres which given what they are warrant at

least additional criteria of evaluation of supplement whatever the autonomist claims is the common denominator of aesthetic evaluation. (p. 227)

This refers to the understanding and appreciation of plays or any work of art. Thus a playwright's view might differ from how the director and the designer view his work. But the Director ensures that he strikes a balance in the playwright's ideas with his and other crewmembers of the play production like the designers.

Aesthetic Factors in Scenic Design

The aesthetics of scenic design in Nigerian educational theater often blend cultural elements with practicality. Designs may incorporate vibrant colors, traditional motifs, and versatile sets to accommodate various productions. Additionally, there's a focus on engaging students through immersive environments that reflect Nigerian heritage and encourage creative expression. In this regard, certain elements are considered and applied; some elements are what make up the aesthetics of a scenic design for a stage production when producing a play. As such, the aesthetics of stage design for play production encompass various elements such as set design, lighting, props, and costumes. In creating a visually compelling stage, designers often consider the themes, mood, and setting of the play. They may use techniques like color palettes, textures, and spatial arrangements to enhance the storytelling and evoke emotions in the audience. Additionally, attention to detail and creativity play crucial roles in crafting sets that transport viewers into the world of the play.

The act of the theatre differs from the other art forms, although it has some relationship with them. Their basic difference lies in the aspect of their impermanence. Since it exists only for the brief space of time in which the play is performed, design in theater becomes a temporal art with its visual quality. Based on the visual quality of the play production and the intended message of the playwright. It serves more than just the physical characteristics of a work of art. Thus, beauty is a quality of the transformation experience that awakens the unconscious and grasps human solidarity. As such, scenic design in most educational theatres focuses on enhancing the overall aesthetic experience while also serving educational purposes.

1. **Visual impact:** The design ought to captivate the audience's attention and create a visually stunning backdrop for the performance.
2. **Authenticity:** it should accurately represent the setting of the play or performance, whether it's a specific time period, location, or mood.
3. **Symbolism:** Utilizing symbolic elements to convey themes or motifs present in the production, helping to deepen the audience's understanding and engagement.
4. **Functionality:** The design ought to be practical and functional, allowing for smooth transmission between scenes and accommodating the needs of the performer.
5. **Composition:** Consideration of arrangement and placement of set pieces, props, and lighting to create a balanced and cohesive visual composition stage.
6. **Colour and Texture:** Thoughtful use of colour palettes and textures to evoke specific emotions or convey the mood of each scene.
7. **Detailing:** Attention to detail in set construction and prop selection to add depth and richness to the overall design.
8. **Accessibility:** Ensuring that the design is accessible and inclusive, considering factors such as wheelchair access and sightlines for all audience members
9. **Adaptability:** Designs should be adaptable to the different performance spaces and budgets, allowing for flexibility in implementation.

10. Collaboration: Collaboration between directors, designer, and performers to ensure that the scenic design complements the overall vision of the production and enhances the educational experience for both participants and audience.

By carefully considering these aesthetic factors, scenic designers contribute to the overall artistic vision of the theatrical production and help transport audiences to the world of the play. As such, when we consider design, its specific not general forms we being to understand that design is an interpretative art. It is interpretative in the sense that it helps to bring out performances based on a set script. Obviously, without a given script, or the play in which it is created, design cannot be independent. Thus, every element of the design of a play should complement the others. In this sense, empty costumes do not comprise design for design. Rather, it exists only during the performance of the play. As a result, the lack of independent existence of design and its conception is thus influenced by a number of factors. The factors will be discussed in the course of writing this paper.

Conceiving an Idea for Scenic Design

In designing for a play production, a set designer takes certain steps in generating ideas in creating an environment in the play text revolves in. He or thus, develops series of questions which will lead to the generation of ideas through discussion and research into the play. Of course, this is done with the knowledge of the director's concept. At each stage, there may be a number of ways to proceed. So the designer will need to judge which is the most appropriate. The process details the method through an example in which w follow a designer work in Ng on a student production of Macbeth with a minimal budget. At the end of the process is an example of how the design work on the play might be broken down into visual materials and methods.

Generating ideas for scenic designs in play production aims to describe a process which will help a scenic designer to organize and plan the scenic design of a play from reading the script to an effective design. This process concerns the generation, development and to some cases, production of a number of visual materials that may affect or effect the way a play might look. The results of this process might be anything from a verbal description of suggested scenery to a fully formed maquette or model. The creation of imaginative worlds and environments for actors to play within is a fundamental activity for theatre designers. At the very least, this should significantly add to the audience's understanding and experience of the play. However, it can also establish long-term emotional connections. A good set design for a forum theatre production concerning domestic violence could create a house in incredible detail and invoke a real memory for an audience member of watching action unfold in that same house. According to Ajiwe U. C (2008)

... design involves creativity and skill to express thoughts. And this thought is appreciated when manifested physically in its several art forms. Thus, the act of conceiving an idea and executing same physically ... (p. 247). This implies that through design ones thought is conveyed which is appreciated when creativity and skills is exhibited physically. In designing a play for production the designer should be high in imaginative reasoning. And the designer's ideas should base on the playwright's views and ideas of the play. This is the first hand aid by which the quality of the design is judged. Moreover, there is need for originality in the work.

The originality of art can be seen as the uniqueness of the piece of work that derived from the creator. Definitely, when the concept of originality is lost in any work of art, it become detrimental to the artist and the society. Addressing the subject on the art of creativity, it is this sense that

the theatre artist is being conceived in its own right as an art. Thus, a courageous artist, in this forum, exercises the instruct to create through the power of imagination, dreams and concretisation of idea(s). As well as perception, perception yields creativity.

Psychologists like Anders NH (1968) arguing the importance and significance of perception in human life and living, pointed out that, "The story of how man knows the world begins at the sensory surface the interface between the knower and the known, where physical energy is transformed into neural activity, to be treated as information". Thus, it is clear that without perception a designer or an artist cannot execute or conceive ideas. With this, effective creativity will not be seen in the artist's work. This applies to all faces of art, especially the theatre artist. To improve, there is need for change in thoughts, behaviour which will arise from experience. Just as Norbert N. Okoye points out that, "any attempt made at improving perception will also hopefully improve learning and cognition"(p.83).

It is thus clear that improvement in thoughts and perception of images will yield effective designs for play production. Theatre art is not art that solely exist on its own, it is a conglomeration of all other various forms of art. In this light, the theatre artist is described as the being with a particular inner deposit of creative energy. Thus, the designer as a theatre artist is enabled to operate within the right framework of creativity based on profession and aesthetic of myriad art forms. According to Oren Parker and Harvey Smith

From the theme of the play the designer can usually find a visual image that can lead to a design concept. And from the style of the play the designer gets an indication of the form of his design. (74)

This implies that a designer can draw up a visual image from the theme of the play and it will lead to a design concept. Also designer develops the form of his design from the style of the play. In same vein, Chris Murphy explain that "a scenic designers work ...involves imagination, creative abilities, technical skills and crafting to create worlds for live performances, but opportunities can be inconsistent at times." This affirms that the scenic designer's work is dependent on his imagination and creative ability to conceive and develop design concept and imprint his style in play production. This is achieved through reading and understanding of play. In addition, having knowledge of the playwright's ideas and making additional research on some images described by the playwright as well as culture and environment in which the play is situated. For instance, for a designer to design the play text *The other side of the Mask* written by Esiaba Irobi must get the picture of a typical university quarter for lecturers the playwright is describing. And if possible visit a university with lecturers' quarters, thus this will widen his idea for an effective design of the play. Thus, a designer as an artist replicates life on stage. This can be seen in the words of Jamike and Njemanze as they were arguing.

Jamike: Prof., this is reality

Njemanze: Your own twisted reality!

A depressing reality!

Jamike: Is that not the function of Art? To exhume the truth of a reality. Not to mask it or perfume it.

Njemanze: Jamike, Art deals with beauty not ugliness.

From their argument we can understand that art is a repetition of life. Thus, designer must endeavour to recreate in time and space the setting of the play. And should possess some form of individuality. Art is an expression of thought, no matter the source(s) in all creation and recreation; there is still the individuality of the designer. This is the artistic figure, the instant process of the designer to create.

A Brief Summary of the *Other Side of Mask*

This is a play set in a university environment, a typical Nigerian university quarters. It is about a man named Jamike, an artist who is a sculptor. Jamike who believed in his artistic works and has been with hope win an award but was turned down. Though he never relents in chiseling out more pieces of art works. But did not sending any work for another year's national award. Jamike has a muse named Zhipora. She (Zhipora) understands him more than anyone else. And Jamike a brother named Kamuche who is Nervy commander. Kamuche wanted Jamike to marry Elesie, forcing her on Jamike in which he did not succeed. Moreover, the whole story describes the essence of art and the processes in art as a whole. It also discussed the struggle of an artist to achieve a "master piece".

Identifying the Playwright's Directorate Stage Design of the *Other Side of the Mask*

In identifying the playwright's intentions it warrants obvious textual references to the setting, the social class of the characters, the metaphorical implications of actions, etc. Sometimes the playwrights will have a very clear image of what he or she wants, and sometimes it may be a projection of what or where the action took place in his perception of his society. Other times, it may be very vague, leaving much to the director. As such, there are two forms of stage design: one is the playwright's apparent or mental image of the play, and the other is using the play as a starting point for the director's concept. This paper therefore discusses the case in which the playwright has left various hints on his or her perception of the play production and the possible variation the intended design could be change using the play as a base inciting new design idea.

Design Art is located primarily within the disciplines of image conception and object making. Thus, basing this on stage media, in design practice with an emphasis on the study of material culture relative to the play. The playwright ideas and visions on the story he is writing should include the setting and sets to be used. This is seen in Esiaba Irobi's *The Other Side of Mask* arching the designer in design play for production. It is important to note that the whole play takes place in one room until the play ended.

In scene one the playwright gave description of how the setting of the play should be. Thus, easing the work of the designer. Esiaba made good choice of words in creating a picture of Jamike's apartment. Reading the play text alone creates a clear picture in the reader's mind, leaving the designer with fewer thoughts about how to gather material for his designs. For example, in Side One:

A screen of flowers masks the frontage of a typical African university apartment for lecturers. Stretching fully across the stage is the framework of the apartment's insect-gauzed balcony. Within the balcony are potted flowers.

This description took a full-length page of the play text, which is to the advantage of both the reader

and designer, for proper enhancement of visual composition of the play.

In giving a directorial stage design of the play-text, Esiaba has heightened the beauty of play-text, at the same time enhancing the conversion of the dramatic text into a stage performance. Thus, presenting elusive image representations of his imaginations. Moreover, materials mentioned by the playwright are tools functional to plot of the play. These materials for the design of this play has reflection of the society (Nigerian Society). Just as Tracie Chima Utoh rightly confirmed, Nigerian playwrights have remained committed to the cause of social reforms. They use their plays as avenues to give exposition to the experience, values and worldview of the Nigerian people. Through these expositions; the playwrights strive to achieve the social, political cultural and moral purification which has consistently eluded the nation. (13)

Thus, the scenic design of "The Other Side of the Mask" exemplifies the integration of aesthetic and educational elements in Nigerian theatre. By drawing on indigenous cultural motifs and incorporating them into the design, the production not only enriches the theatrical experience but also serves as a platform for cultural preservation and education. The use of symbolic imagery and spatial arrangements fosters a deeper understanding of the play's themes and encourages critical reflection on Nigeria's colonial legacy and postcolonial identity.

For a Nigerian educational theater production, consider a scenic design that reflects the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria while also incorporating modern elements. You could create a versatile set that can easily transform to depict different scenes, such as a traditional village setting, a bustling urban area, or a school classroom. Utilize vibrant colors, traditional patterns, and symbolic elements to represent Nigerian culture. Incorporating local materials like woven fabrics, wooden carvings, and pottery can add authenticity to the set design. Additionally, consider using innovative lighting techniques to enhance the mood and atmosphere of each scene, creating a visually engaging experience for the audience. Thus, a scenic designer takes into consideration designs, symbolic patterns, and design motifs that capture the essence of the play's settings and themes. In this regard, the set designer creates a dynamic set design that transports the audience to an environment in which the play production is set, portraying a typical Nigerian environment using Esiab Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask*, which is set in a typical university lecturer's quarters, and some sculptural motifs that portray Nigerians, especially Igbo cultural artifacts. To convey clashes in the play certain pictorial motifs could be placed at the backdrop which are relevant to play text and could be referenced to by the main character of the play. Symbolic elements such as masks, drums, and ritual objects could be incorporated into the set design to represent the spiritual and cultural traditions of the Igbo people. Lighting effects could be used to enhance the mood of key scenes, such as when his muse enters the scene symbolically setting the mood that he is about creating a master piece. Likewise, when his creativity calls for blood, certain coloured light are creatively applied to set the mood of the scene.

From Tracie Utoh's statement, one will agree that Esiaba based his work on the culture and the environment of the Nigerian society through the setting of the play. In essence, creating a workable environment for performers. With the directorial stage design by the playwright, it aids the designer to set the tone and style of production, letting the audience know where and when the action takes place.

As well as telling whether the play is a tragedy, comedy, or some other drama. In addendum, Esiaba made use of symbolism in this play when he suggests that most artistic sculptural works to be displayed on stage represents the society and symbolic to one theme or the other. Moreover, all these art piece of sculpture relates to the theme of the play which is struggle between the oppressed and oppressor. Also, instruments used by sculptors are mentioned in the play such as woods, chisel, and hammer, carried woods are functional to the events that happened in the play. For example, the chisel is instrumental the shedding of blood in the play.

I have played a part as the stage designer for the production of this play, with the Director and other crewmember and the entire class members while I was in school (300 level). It was a great task designing the play. Though a martini production without lighting effects but achieved the same effect as achieved in a might production. Moreover, Esiaba Irobi's visual idea of this play is intense such that his idea for the lighting design falls in other which will aid in effecting the audience emotions. Such that the colour he chose for the lighting at the scene where Amadioha, the gods of Jamike's family is been brought out by Kamuche for inspection fits the scene. At this point, the mood of the play changed a little, becoming moody due to the red gel light on Kamuche and the fetish - (Amadioha) Amadioha is the god of justice, thunder and lightening in Igbo land (Igbo culture). This shows that Esiaba, is not irresponsive to social and cultural dictates of our society through his creative writing.

Conclusion

Therefore, through the playwright's ideas, a designer conceives his ideas and executes them. Moreover, the designer manages his material resources with the funding he has for the design of the production. As well as ensuring that his designs complement the total visual composition of the play production. Moreover, the designer notes the emphasized design materials to be used. This he does by reading the play and noting the necessary elements needed, as well as making sketches of the ideas conceived. There is a need for him to do research on some material to be used for the play. alternative might be provided if demands cannot be met. This should be done creatively.

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