

Theater in the Throes of Panic

T

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HE discourse on theater and drama is bursting at the seams with odd Eurocentric "isms" that threaten to marginalize others. Our critics and theater theorists have been very anxious to join in this salvation chorus. While these ideological postulates are worthy of our attention, we must continue to remind ourselves that they are the product of some experience that is not particularly interested in our own discourse and destinies.

In the African world while we are still concerned with the basic humanist needs of God, spirituality, morality, food, clothing, shelter, health and good governance, the West has moved on to more 'desperate!' issues. With a projected surplus in the staggering range of two trillion dollars, the American economy is unable to contain itself. It is no wonder that humanity is being transgressed and regressed in the isolating arenas of sexuality, life in space and e-trading by dot coms.

One of Broadway's most successful dramas in the last two years is known as *The Vagina Monologues*, in which women talk about their relationship with their vaginas. Senator Hillary Clinton was reported to have been contracted to act in this drama last fall. A Yale Law graduate and one of the most powerful women in the world would discuss her vagina with hundreds of

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Coming home to Nigeria, it seems that the only time that theater ever thrived was during the era that began with the efforts of Hubert Ogunde, through Wole Soyinka's 1960 *Masks*. Any further discussion of our live theater has always been one lost in the dramaturgy of plays and those playwrights who are lucky enough to get themselves published, read and performed in the West. And these are but a few plays, a few productions from a few names, that, rightly have earned the acknowledgement—Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and, maybe, Bode Sowande, Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme. The impression given is that if there is any form of live theater in the country, it must be those located within "Ritual" or "Festivals" or at best the "Apidan/Alarinjo" traveling theaters. Whereas those sources have served our playwrights very well, there is a practice of conscientious theater in sharp identification with the social, critical and performative requirements of the nation today. And there are actors, directors, designers and managers of theatrical enterprise, who, in spite of the daunting odds, continue to stage plays, make movies, and produce television dramas. It is a whole generation with its own structures and vision. We shall attempt to collate a path, a possible movement and character of the Nigerian Theater in its

struggle through the debilitating throes of panic and Structural Adjustment 'Privatization' of the last two decades. In doing this, we shall, very quickly, sketch the state of the theater today, by reviewing the history of theater in Nigeria from the early eighties when it was largely situated in Ife, Osogbo, Ibadan and Benin, to the present when it is largely concentrated in Lagos.

The temptation presented by the oddly philosophical lead character in an NTA-Ibadan comedy series of the 1980s was simple and frightening. The character aptly named by his philosophical bent was one garrulous "Why-Worry-the-Barber." A little barber's shop was the perfect setting for the hand-to-mouth existence of this World War veteran who was never shy in sharing his war adventure. At every opportunity, or at the least agitation from any of his customer-friends, he would offer his unique postulation. "Why worry?" he would ask (or urge). "If you worry you go die. You no worry you go die, so, why worry for notin." While this at its face value, was a strong dose of existentialist offering, he was definitely not a disciple of Sartre, neither was he a Beckett who proclaimed there is "nothing to be done". Not that we could not borrow some tangible ironies from Beckett. But Why Worry's postulation was a cry from the depths of a pained soul who had seen all, done all but was still struggling to comprehend all. He was asking us to worry, to carefully comprehend the atrocities around us and urging us to do



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Why Worry's (Akin Lewis) quaint philosophy as well as his sparse barber's shop, were both symbolic manifestations of an ailing nation and a stressed people. He was a man in the evening of his years, casting a constant glance into the past and wondering with a scream how we got into this morass. What was unique about the comedy series was that it was created and acted by a group of young University-trained theater artists—actors, playwrights and directors. The cast also comprised members of the NTA Theater—Akin Lewis, Tunji Fatilewa, Dele Morakinyo, Bosede Awatefe, Sunday Stevens, Becky Musa, Olumide Bakare, Jare Adewolu, and Sandra Omo Madojemu. They had stealthily continued in the tradition of the Hubert Ogundes, the Moses Olaiyas, Duro Ladipos, Kola Ogunmolas, Oyin Adejobis and their most recent teachers: Wole Soyinka, Dapo Adelugba, Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi, Sonny Oti, Zulu Sofola, Yinka Adedeji, Bayo Oduneye, Femi Osofisan and Dexter Lyndersay.

This second set of dramatists had received part of their training in British, French and American institutions, often in subjects like literature, philosophy and theater. They taught by practice, writing plays for all manner of situations, including radio, staging plays, writing reviews for newspapers, and acting for television. It was a seamless marriage of pedagogy and professional theater practice. Without any careless generalization, their concern was largely the same.

It was/is not only to challenge the hegemony of Europe over African societies, but essentially to carve out a performative strategy for self definition while articulating the dynamic complexities of class, governance and social justice. It is to engineer a strategy for Osofisan's "surreptitious insurrection," or even more so Soyinka's "Etika revo-wetin?" Such urgent—sometimes disguised, sometimes blatant—calls for social change came from a mixed bag of humanist Marxist leanings. A casual foray into the heart of life in our cities — Ibadan, Nsukka, Kaduna, Kano, Port Harcourt, Osogbo, Ile Ife, Enugu, Onitsha, Benin, Calabar — would easily sanction the efficacy of the binary role of these dramatists as teachers/ social critics and as performers.

If Festac '77 left us with the impression that it was nothing more than a big jamboree, the artistic enterprise of the nation, from the forties through the sixties to the seventies and beyond, should not be read in the same vein. It was not all about putrid dances garnished with some nostalgic Oba-Nki-O (The King Greeted You) stories of feudal celebrations. There was a clear signal of what the future portended in Soyinka's 1960 *Masks with A Dance of the Forest*. Following this was John Pepper Clark's *The Raft* (published in 1964), predicting a drifting nation across the River Niger. Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, performed in 1966 a few months before the outbreak of the Biafran war, could as well have been the story of the derailment of democracy by a roguish military class. It was



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in 1968 that Ola Rotimi and Oladejo Okediji came up with *Rere Run*, using the feudal setting of kings and chiefs to expose the growing corruption and tyranny of the ruling class.

When Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and Bode Osanyin brought their energies and radical temperament to the plate in mid- and late-seventies, there was suddenly a new urgency and a bolder commitment to the practice of theater in Nigeria. This period saw the productions of Osofisan's *The Chattering* and *The Song, Who's Afraid of Solarin*, and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Sowande with the Odu Themes staged *Afamako*, *Farewell to Babylon*, and *Flamingo*. Bode Osanyin's contributions were *The New Status*, *Omo-Odo* (The Houseboy), and *The Shattered Bridge* (an initially unacknowledged adaptation of *Rere Run*). Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* in 1977 was perhaps the most daring and most pungent attack on the military class. *Why Worry* was the creation of a generation of theater artists who studied under tested masters and had all the scars and promise of their training to show for their efforts and their vision. In their plays as in *Why Worry*, they urged us to observe the decay, the shocking paralysis and absolute panic that had taken over the quiet corners of our nation—a nation that once comprised people of soul, pomp and pageantry.

These teachers and their campus-based theaters were successful in attracting national and international attention to universities as reliable decoders of the goings-on in the country. University administrators were encouraged; they built more theaters to house new theater programs across the country. With this we saw the birth of the Pit Theatre and Oduduwa Hall at the University of Ife, the Arts Theatre and the University Auditorium at the University of Lagos, and the Arts Theatre at the University of Calabar, to mention a few. There was also of course the brand new and monstrous National Theater in Lagos. These facilities served

as replacements to the Obisesan and the Lagos City Halls of earlier fame. New television stations came to the scene as new states were created. The Television Station of Oyo State (TSOS), with Laolu Ogunniyi as Director of Programs is one memorable example.

Apart from the traveling companies of the Ogundes, Soyinka's 1960 *Masks* was the precursor of many more companies that would later flourish. By the mid-eighties, following in the heels of Soyinka's Orisun Theatre and the Unibadan *Masks/Masques*, there was the University of Ibadan Theatre Company with actors like Sam Loco Efe, Ayo Oluwasanmi, Toun Oni, Yomi Layinka, Kunle Famoriyo, Ajayi Olatide, Clarion Chukwura, Joke Muiyiwa, Tunji Sotimirin, and Emmanuel Oga. Equally, Femi Osofisan had started his company—"The Kakaun Sela Company." Its members included Amatu Braide, Tolu Idowu, Tunde Laniyan, Lola Fani-kayode, Bimbola Williams, Ayo Akinwale, Segun A.Y.O. Taiwo (late director and founder of the Ayota Theatre in Lagos), Eyobong Ita, Didi Unu Odigwe, Kunle Adeyemo and Akpor Otebele (Kappo Productions), Moji Sorunke, Ife Oderinde (late), and this author. All were students at Ibadan, learning to hone their skills. In Ife there had been the Ori Olokun Theatre led by Ola Rotimi with Olu Okekanye, Ayantunji Amoo, Peter Fatomilola, Ojetunji Ojeyemi, Adefisan, Kola Oyewo, Muraina Oyelami, Laide Adewale, and many others. When Soyinka took over from Ola Rotimi, the company became the Unife Theatre and was often joined by a crop of highly talented student actors like Funso Alabi, Niyi Coker, Edmund Enaibe, Awam Amkpa and Ahmed Yerimah.

Perhaps the most exciting of these companies was the Performing Arts Troupe of the Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Lagos, under the reins of Akin Euba, Bode Osanyin and Uwa Hunwick. This troupe was probably the most unusual collection of talented actors, dancers and musicians to forge a total African Theatre Company. It offered



GOVERNMENT must review its self-serving definition of democracy, which so far does not seem to include the arts and our cultural well-being. If not, we would wake up with the delicate magic of life sucked from our nation's soul.

Lagos its first major opportunity to challenge Ibadan, Ife and Zaria, where such troupes had been in existence for some time with considerable success. There were names like Jumoke Fashola, Stella Monye, Daniel Koranteng, Francis Awe, Lari Williams, Yemi Akinremi, Toyin Ajetunmobi, Folake Akinremi, Francis Kadiri, Kola Dahomey, Golda John (nee Braide from the Unibadan Masque) Lola Ebhotoime, Ademola Olayiwola, Phillips Osumare, James Adesunmole, and Adesina Odukoya. While members of the Original Ori Olokun Theatre at Ife had been pulled from the indigenous theater companies of Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola and Oyin Adejobi, the crop of performers at the University of Lagos was pulled from diverse and equally exciting sources. For example, Daniel Koranteng, a Ghanaian, came from playing with Fela Anikulapo Kuti while Lari Williams came from a flourishing professional acting and directing career in the British Theatre. Sometimes, names like dele jegede (artist, art historian, and art critic), Femi Robinson (Mr Araba, the headmaster of NTA's Village Headmaster), Adeyeye Fadele (late), Rosemary Ngoh and Funmi Adams (recording artist), Joke Jacobs (nee Silva) also showed up on the cast list.

There was definitely the beginning of a very healthy and fluid movement of talents from one company to the other, and from one medium to another. Osofisan wrote the series of investigative television dramas for the Unibadan Performing Arts Company then under Jide Malomo, while Sowande wrote, directed and produced "Acada Campus," a mini-series, for NTA network. Wale Ogunyemi was writing for Theater on the Screen at Ibadan and Bode Osanyin's *The Shattered Bridge* was moved from the stage to the television. State governments were now giving more funding to the State Arts Councils for their resident companies. Not to be forgotten were other sectors: the vibrant Bendel State Arts Council from

where came Ben Okoegwale, Sam Loco Efe, Efosa Aiwasendo; the Kwara State Arts Council from where came Yomi Layinka, the Lagos State Arts Council, and the National Council for Arts and Culture among others.

Dapo Adelugba who directed Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*, Nigeria's entry at Festac 77, eventually became the Chairman of the Oyo State Arts Council under the Bola Ige administration and started a company with a new Theater to house it. This was perhaps the most flourishing period for theater in Nigeria since 1960. These companies rigorously pushed the boundaries and reinvented the language of theatrical performance. The clamor for a national troupe for Nigeria was suddenly re-energized, to cap the glory. In the face of all the growth, there was always an unsettling uncertainty with regard to the direction that the country was going. This was Why Worry's main point. These gains of the theater would soon —like the promise of the newly independent nation of 1960— be suddenly trapped in a ricocheting panic of weak dreams and sagging will.

Various harassed, war-worn, panel-beaten, baton-whipped, and gun-lashed through the draconian ages of the military and civilian administrations from Ironsi to Buhari, the political foundation of the country grew rickety. The worst came with the sledgehammer of satanic rulership that became the hallmark of the Babangida-Shonekan-Abacha years. On succeeding Murtala Mohammed, Obasanjo led the attack on the university system; it would be the turn of the Babangida/Abacha partnership to finish the destruction. The demolition of the University system was part of a systematic anti-intellectual culture which denied funds for research and basic infrastructural development. In addition, university dons and artists with the slightest hint of radical inclinations were arrested on frivolous charges, harassed, tried and sometimes jailed. The campuses were suffused with career secret government operatives who masqueraded as students to

infiltrate students' communities. Arts Councils and media stations were not spared from this treatment. While the 'troublesome' elite was being dealt with, military schools of "coup studies" were elevated to degree-awarding institutions with generous funding to the bargain. Even civilian professors were brought in to teach our gun-totting felons the way to think.

In many ways these cultural institutions were always the first to bear the brunt of any of the several IMF-supported economic catastrophes, with the frightening acronym of SAP: Structural Adjustment Program. In town, people were being forced into endless days of agonizing and uncertain future. The press was increasingly under attack and, gradually, Nigeria began to gasp for breath. One after the other, many of the earlier mentioned actors and dramatists were laid off or simply frustrated out of their positions. Many of the companies went bankrupt, unable to pay mounting arrears of salaries owed to their actors, playwrights and directors. Landlords who used to boast about their famous tenants now impatiently advised them to go and look for "proper" jobs. Parents, wives, children and the dependants of these artistes began to wonder if their jeering neighbors and friends were not right after all. The lessons were hard. The song on the lips of everyone was privatization. But what was there to privatize about the arts, and about theater? While the newspaper industry took the lead in showing that private enterprise was viable (*The Guardian* and *The Concord* newspapers are prime examples), Radio and Television remained firmly in the clutch of government.

In 1981, a group of Theater Arts students from four universities—Benin, Ibadan, Jos, and Ife—got together in Ibadan. Undeterred by the signs of an ominous future, the leaders and representatives of these institutions inaugurated the Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Students Association (NUTASA). In two years, NUTASA's membership grew rapidly to ten universities, with others waiting to be enrolled as members. NUTASA gave birth to the annual theater festival of plays and ideas known as the Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Festival (NUTAF). Hosting was rotated among the campuses, beginning with Ibadan, and on to Jos, Benin, Zaria, and Calabar. First, this movement was part of the conscious growth of the theater beyond the University worlds and Arts Councils festivals. While the generation from Soyinka to Osanyin was comprised largely of writers (with the exceptions of Adelugba, Oti and Oduneye), this new group of theater artists decided to pursue professional careers as actors, directors, designers, dancers, choreographers, and theater managers. NUTASA and NUTAF were initiatives to create an extended platform for their ongoing training and provide a rich opportunity to test their mettle in preparation for the life ahead. There were no illusions anymore. Students wrote, directed, acted, and produced their festival presentations. It was after all an era of private enterprise, of tall hats and tall tricks. Important friendships and professional alliances that would later be very useful were formed through these festivals that registered an average of between five and six hundred students at each occasion. Every year, as they graduated in batches, they migrated to Lagos in large numbers in search of professional careers in theater.

A city of multiple identities, Lagos is known to have made

a good number of professionals rich. It also has been known to make the foolish smart after a couple or so of very searing jolts of life. It is a landscape of perplexing paradoxes. Oyingbo, Iddo, Mushin, Oshodi, Balogun, Sandgrouse, Mile 2 and Orile are perhaps some of the most impressive sites and "theaters." Teeming with all kinds of essences—the living and the dead, the somnambulant and the catatonic, the hopeless and the hopeful, the buying and the selling, the sane and the insane, the wicked and the angelic—these sites mark Lagos out as a hugely vibrant theater of characters in search of a story, or a play, or in search of some cognition. And this was where the fragile souls of our new theater graduates poured in search of opportunities. Many fell by the wayside and became traders of wares, like the mendicant in *Madmen and Specialists*. Many others opted for immediate positions in advertising agencies, the public relations arms of banks, the oil industry and those wealthy transnational companies. This was their day jobs; their nights were spent at rehearsals.

Quite industrious, they were determined to make a difference. Some sold part of their inheritance to fund the production of plays, while others with nothing but will power registered new theater companies. These fledgling companies were often headquartered in the one bedroom apartment of the founder or "Director." Otherwise, they were located in the borrowed premises of a restaurant or a bar that was owned by some young lady with whom a lot more was shared. The *modus operandi* was tailored to a briefcase enterprise. The plays were compact, rehearsals were quick and the performances were intense as if tomorrow would never come. Whatever monies they made, they spent paying up on overdue rents and preparing new proposals for funding. The hope was that some private institution was watching and would take up the campaign. If they lacked in anything, it was neither passion nor commitment to the cause of the theater.

Two young men who were themselves not actors, but who were simply ecstatic about the whole movement were Hakeem Shitta (late) and Kole Ade Odutola. Shitta was a martial arts expert before taking to photography. Odutola was trained at the University of Ife as a botanist; he too took up photography. Whenever there was a show in the city, they were there. They took upon themselves the project of documenting history as it unfolded, mostly for no pay. Their photographs, the only gratification that budding dramatists went home with, gave meaning to what otherwise was regarded as some insanity; some intangible fancy.

At the National Theatre, the Federal Department of Culture was now producing these companies in monthly seasons of plays. It was called "The Open Theater". The National Theater provided the space, publicity and some technical assistance. Gates were shared, even if never equitably. This occurred at the same time that the Yoruba traveling theater companies moved into movie making. These movies were also shown at the National Theatre, thus providing a very keen competition. With funding from the Ford Foundation, J.P. Clark resuscitated the 200-seater Randle Hall at Onikan and named it Pec Repertory Theatre. For three years, he had a resident company and an artistic director in the person of Bayo Oduneye, a senior lecturer from the University of



Tristram Sharps as Mr. District Commissioner (right), and Chucks Okoye, wielding a gun (centre) in the stage adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*. © R. Moran.

Ibadan. At Ijoko in Ota, a suburb of Lagos, Bode Osanyin of the University of Lagos opened The Writers' Resort where performing artists and writers converged every month.

The big turn-around came in 1986 when Fred Agbeyege, lawyer, businessman and politician, collaborated with Jide Ogungbade (radio drama producer) and Ben Tomololu (at that time the Arts Editor of the Guardian Newspapers) to produce Ajofest Theatre-Splash at the National Theatre. It was the biggest theater event since FESTAC 77. It ran for a whole month, and involved about 150 actors, dancers and musicians. The pool of performers came from Lagos, Ibadan and Ife. Fees and conditions of rehearsals were as professional as could be - a remarkable improvement on past settings. This was a clean break from the hitherto uncomfortable reliance on government or university for funding. At the end of the festival, many of the actors from Ibadan and Ife never went back. There was a flush of renewed efforts by newly established companies to keep theater alive. These companies included Lamb Productions (Albert Odulate), Gangan Productions (Ayo Oluwasanmi, Segun Ogunfidodo, Segun Ojewuyi and Lara Akinsola), Fezi Productions (Israel Eboh), and Komitat (Funso Alabi). Kappo Productions (Kunle Adeyemo and Akpor Otebele) tapped into Ojukwu's political ambitions and got him interested in assisting with staging Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, which instantly took the company on tour of the United States. However, by 1987, it had generated a new interest. Foreign cultural agencies like the USIS and the Alliance Française became very supportive,

providing funds that made the production of a number of plays possible. In 1987, USIS supported Lamb Productions in producing the play, *The Man Who Never Died*. A year later, USIS also funded Sam Art Williams' *Home*, which was directed by Chuck Mike, an Africa-American who relocated to Lagos from the University of Ife, where he was a faculty member. During this period, the Alliance Française funded *Oriki of A Grasshopper*, by Femi Osofisan; it was produced by Ayo Oluwasanmi. Much earlier, in Ibadan in 1984, USIS had funded Dapo Adelugba's direction of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. With funding from the United States Information Service, Chuck Mike began his series of American plays with the Festival of Black American Drama (FESBAD) in 1989. With this, he also established his company — Collective Artistes — thus bringing an international, intercultural dimension to the movement.

The funding sources having expanded, there were more productions and more tours. Actors, directors, and designers were able to freelance, and were usually contracted for specific runs. Before long a healthy movement had resulted. Lagos had emerged as the last standing center of commerce and even with plans far gone to move the seat of government to Abuja, many businesses were still reluctant to move. So, our generation of NUTASA graduates, in concert with the veterans of the university and arts council companies of the seventies and early eighties, were now generating new productions from Lagos and touring the country. In no time, some banks and multinational companies, encouraged by

those NUTASA graduates who were now part of their corporate structures, joined the act. The city of Lagos, being a very heterogeneous entity, was perhaps the right place with the right attitude for the divergent themes and styles of these productions.

In the midst of this, the Federal government established the much sought after National Theatre Company, which, to everyone's disappointment, was composed of dancers in the main. When it had to stage Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman*, the National Troupe had to contract top-notch freelance actors like Olu Jacobs and Taiwo Ajayi-Lycett, both of whom who had made very successful strides on the English stage. In 1990, Becky Musa, an ex-NUTASA member and now a member of Collective Artistes, was down with a life-threatening ailment. The movement came together and mounted a fund-raising campaign to get her medical attention in England. The campaign brought to the fore the issues of health care, insurance and other union-related issues. The campaign was successful and riding upon the wave of efforts by some other actors like Efosa Aiwase and Ignis Ekwue, the movement organized its members into a national professional organization akin to the Actors Equity. In fact, it researched the equity rules book in fashioning its own constitution. The main goals were to establish a uniform professional modus operandi for members and create an enabling environment for the development of professional theater in Nigeria. It was a landmark. This body was known as the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), with Mahmood Ali-Balogun an ex-NUTASA/NUTAF member, as its first National president. NANTAP quickly became the most virile advocacy organization for the performing arts in the country. It got busy with the bold plan to establish a national endowment for the arts with funding from private institutions and donors.

It was this state of labored growth and panic that characterized Nigerian theater from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties. In 1993, Babangida annulled a widely successful election and the country was thrown into a much-anticipated chaos. Abacha took over and mounted a vigorous clamp-down on public expressions, forcing the press and cultural institutions like theater companies that were perceived as being critical of government to go underground. The transnational companies and foreign agencies which were now the lifeline for these theater companies cut their operations drastically, and the funding for plays dried up immediately.

For six years the dark ages would reign again. The bold effort by Lagos to house Nigeria's theater as is done in the big cities of the world—Moscow, New York, Paris, London, Rome, Greece, Tel Aviv, Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna, Bombay, and Johannesburg—was suddenly aborted. At the International Theater day celebration hosted by NANTAP in 1994, Ray Orley, USIS Cultural Attaché, asked, "Where is Nigerian Theater?" He was asking a deeply socio-historical question from outside the pot. Part of him was searching for the buildings and the air-conditioned foyers with coffeepots and cookies, while part of him was marveling at the intimidating paralysis of a militarized society. Some would say the project of the Ogunde/Soyinka generations to rediscover for us our African persona is done. I would argue

otherwise. The work of this generation of theater artists whose journey we have traced here is but a continuation of the agenda pursued by the Soyinkas, Achebes, Osofisans, Osanyins, Sofolas and their precursors. They have woven a tapestry of theatrical styles that is ever inventive, freely traversing the strategic performative boundaries or geographies imposed on theater by the Western theorists and 'mapmakers' whose definition or review of African Theater has always been myopic. Importantly, they emphasize a socially and politically dynamic role for the theater.

The Nigerian Theater of the eighties through the twenty-first century will continue to be, first and foremost, African. Yet, it would never shy away from the project of liberating itself from the domination of exploitative agencies, be they European, American or even local. If we are to answer Orley's question and by so doing educate our Western experts on Nigerian Theater, we should say it is more than rituals, more than festivals, and more than concert parties or Alarinjo. And it is not AGITPROP either! It is a totality of all of these entities, experiences and more. It is to be found in our Nigerian persona, a unique socio-politically conditioned humanity. That persona is not one frozen and trapped by the conditional discourse on Afrocentricity — a nostalgic and emotional, anti-Eurocentric definition of Africa and Africans from a Diasporic perspective. Neither is it one defined, abused and controlled by one of those Eurocentric "isms" like Postmodernism.

The movement I have described, and which I was privileged to be a part of, was one in constant flux, reinventing its strategies and production exegesis as it went along. Its reality was, and remains, European and African, the two major influences on its experience. We contended with the Western critical, performative and expressive nature of the genre and spaces within which we defined the praxis of our shows and, yet, we drew freely from the opposing traditions and institutions into which we were born, and from which we were wrought. My own personal life—and even my name—demonstrates this affinity with tradition, this constant synthesis that today's theater artist employs.

My grandfather, Ojeyemi, who now heads the powerful body of Oje in Ikirun continues to sustain his role as the custodian of the agelong cult of Oje; he also doubles as the artistic director of the egungun 'theater' in Ikirun, with his repertoire of casts—Owolewa, Agbegijo and co. Every season, his cast of spirits and performers respond to their true missions, updating their strategies to serve their king and people without fail, and in growing strength. That is the way our culture works. That is the way our custodians have performed their roles. I see the role and the efforts of this movement that I have described in the same vein. What I have done in the theater, be it in Nigeria or the West, I see as a natural progression, a carrying forward with the same seriousness of purpose. Our strategies may necessarily differ but I still freely draw from that tradition, even when I struggle to understand Soyinka, Shakespeare, Brecht or August Wilson for that matter.

This is what four generations of Nigerian theater have done. It is both inter- and intra-cultural—a dialogue with self in the glare of alien realities. This is where Nigerian

theater is located. There has been no other period in our history where the role of theater in the society has been more challenged than the last two decades of the twentieth century. And Lagos was the arena where we were all forced to confront the poverty of means within our homes, the lack of jobs, of roads, of food, the sequential impoverishment of our integrity and, worse, the poverty of dreams in our people's overburdened souls. Government must review its self-serving definition of democracy, which so far does not seem to include the arts and our cultural well-being. If not, we would wake up with the delicate magic of life sucked from our nation's soul. Left would be the cadavers of wasted promises, wasted

lives bereft of pulse, decaying and smelly in the trunk of history. Our lives would be past, our present would be absent and our future would have been mortgaged at the hands of rigormortic Tokunbos. Again! GR

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