

The role of Professor in Wole Soyinka's *The Road* is a taxing delight for the actor because it is demanding of both talent and training.

It is a complex role but the intrinsic beauty in it lies in the subtlety of changes which show the many sides of the character and the joy for the actor is in the ability to fuse the artistic and technical aspects of his training in bringing the complexities of the character into a credible realisation.

Our approach to the realisation of the role was two-pronged: physical and psycho-social. For the physical we considered gait, gestures, (facial, limb and body) and general comportment. For the psycho-social we took what is said about him by other characters in the play. But above all we let Professor's own words propose and substantiate him on the stage.

Keeping in mind the specific physical descriptions given by the playwright, the vocal interpretation was of first consideration. Breathing exercises came first for both capacity of breath and also for breath control. This was followed by and combined with exercise for clarity of speech. For effective realisation of any role in any play these exercises are necessary but especially so in the case of Professor. The nature of his speeches demands it because of the particular arrangement of text.

For capacity and breath control we started with the basics in general relaxation exercises. However, as we progressed the exercises gained more details and particular attention was paid to the areas of the neck, shoulders and the thoracic cavity because of the anticipated special postures to be assumed in the physical realisation of the role.

For capacity and breath control, monologues from other plays were used. The prologue from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Hamlet's advice to the actor

DEVELOPING a THEATRE ROLE

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From
an actor's
production file, showing
the processes of
preparation for a rather
intricate dramatic role.
Fatoba has seen this
important play develop
over the
years.



Femi Fatoba

(Hamlet, Act. 3 Sc. 2); the opening chorus of *Henry VIII*; and the speeches of Elesin, Iyaloja and the Praise Singer in Part III of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* are a few of the excerpts used. These examples, apart from their inherent poetic diction have many polysyllabic words structured into long sentences linked with commas and semi-colons.

We are taught by books on 'Acting' to ask some question towards interpretation of characters. Such questions are:

What are the goals or aspirations of a character?

What are the obstacles to the successful achievement of such goals?

How does the character react to such obstacles?

However some characters do not easily or completely conform to such general rules. Professor is such a character because he lives in the privacy of a self-created world and when other characters dare to step on the edges of his consciousness his reactions are prompted by the contents of a fermented mind, the explosion of which could intoxicate with its mere odour. In this line of argument, let us consider his use of the word 'cabalistic' in, 'There are the cabalistic signs again' (p. 65) which shows the esoteric warp of Professor's mind when ordinary Xs and Os on a football coupon are linked with the folklore and religion of the time of the biblical Moses. In his response to Samson's description of Professor's 'new wonder' as 'an accident', Prof replies;

You are afraid? There are dangers in the Quest

I know, but the word may be found companion not to life, but Death. Three souls you know, fled up that tree. You would think, to see it that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. Oh there was such an angry buzz but the matter was beyond repair. They died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. (p. 11)

The last sentence here shows the profundity of Professor's Christian background even though he is no longer

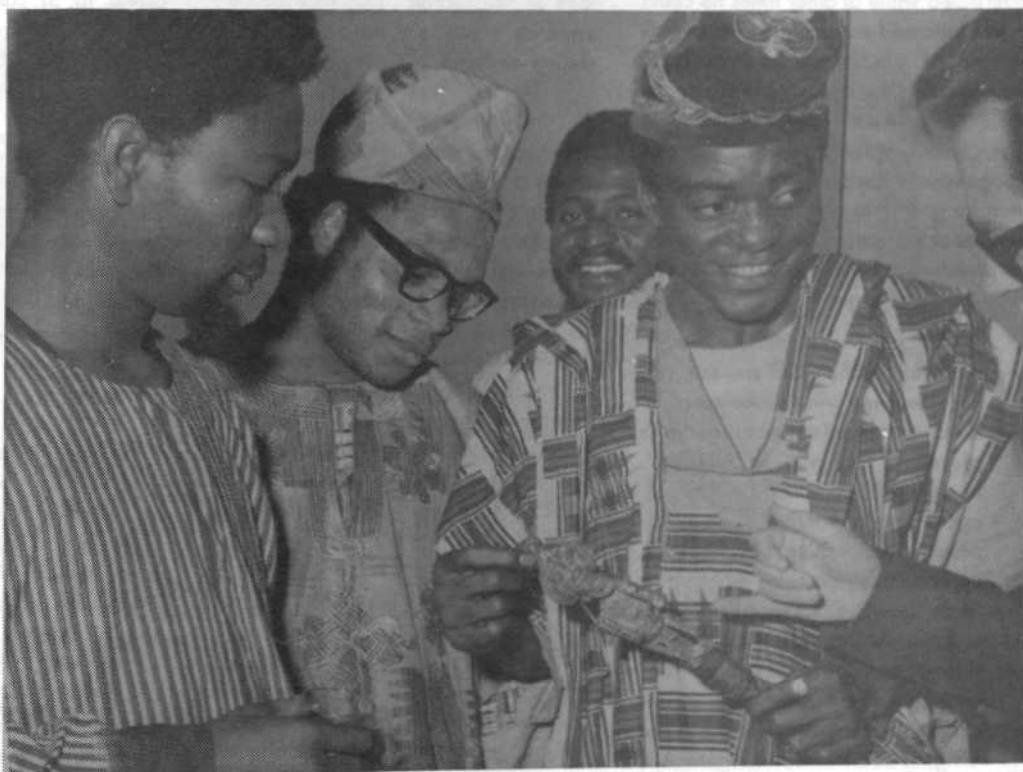
a member of the church. Such are the psychological nuances which affect one's interpretation which has to be made believable on stage.

We see professor as a symbol 'of a poetic vision', yet he is also human in his own way. His hangers-on behave in a human pattern and he responds and relates to them in a way not totally un-human. He can only be seen within the context of the play. To see him in any other way is to take him out of the distorted and narrow world built for him by the playwright.

The structure of the play supports the nature of this character of professor. The role is not divided into formal acts and scenes in the Aristotelian sense. It is a series of symbolic architectonic units in which the principal actors express themselves about the tragedies of their existence on the road of life, and also tell us about the other characters who cross their paths.

The Road is Professor's play. He is more often than not, the topic of discussion. When he is not, he is invited to listen, give an opinion or simply provoked with questions. Therefore the actualisation of his role on stage rests largely on the actor's ability to carve out these architectonic units and interpret them towards a meaningful realisation of the whole play.

For the greater part of his time on the stage Professor sits. The sitting position is a defensive one yet he has to generate a lot of aggressive action. This, therefore, has to be done through the vocal, facial



The playwright, Soyinka (left) with Fatoba, Dapo Adelugba (peeping) and Jimmy Johnson during the world premiere of *THE ROAD* in London, 1965.

and hand gestures. In doing this, a 'self portrait' of the action must be avoided. It could be tiring sitting upright for a long time on a stool without a backrest, and maintaining a relaxed posture without slumping. This is where one's training in relaxation and posture is paramount.

'Victorian' is the playwright's description of Professor's costume. Being 'Victorian' could also be a behavioural attitude as well as a style of speech delivery. It is quite noticeable that Professor enjoys speaking in circumlocutions. He loves polysyllabic words and archaic collocations. Quite a number of his sentences demand a lungful of air as well as precision in articulation to be able to render them meaningfully. He says,

My bed is among the dead, and when the road raises a victory cry to break my sleep I hurry to a disgruntled swarm of souls full of spite for their rejected bodies. p. 11)

You say the lorry overtook you - good. (Writes.) Lorry was travelling at excessive speed. You see, I can make up a police statement that would dignify

the archives of any traffic division but tell me - have I spent all these years in dutiful search only to wind up my last moments in meaningless statements?

What did you see friend, what did you see? Show me the smear of blood on your brain. (p. 56)

Apart from the length of the sentences, the alliterations, assonance and internal rhymes have to be said not only for their oral beauty but also for their relevance in meaning towards an understanding of the mind of the speaker. Where he uses short sentences, the words are very crisp and sharp. His alliteration often propel the tongue to such a giddy vocal speed during which it could be quite difficult to control the reins of the tongue. One peculiarity which we thought could be lent to the interpretation of the character was to end his sentences by a slight upward inflexion of the voice so that it does not fall and yet does not quite rise to the level of turning the sentences into questions.

Sometimes, Professor's humour, we observe, could be very subtle and

understated while at other times he could be sarcastic and mordacious. Besides all the air of aloofness and probing seriousness, he is quite capable of a hearty laughter. Thus, it is the actor's duty to allow his voice clarify not only symbolic meanings through vocal inflexion. Professor's speech when he goes into a disquisition on the fieryness of the word is an example of our interpretation of the role. The speech says:

Oh the Word is a terrible fire and we burned them by the ear. Only that was not the word you see, oh no, it was not. And so for every dwelling that fell ten more rose in its place until they grew so bold that one grew here, setting its laughter against the very throat of the organ pipes. Every evening, until I thought, until one day I thought, I have never really known what lies beyond that window. And one night, the wall fell down, I heard the laughter of children and the wall fell down in an uproar of flesh and dust. And I left the Word hanging in the coloured lights of sainted windows... (Almost humbly). As you will notice, I have made certain alterations. That corner was not there before. I have scraped the walls. Installed an electric light. Red neon. It is, I think, likely that I left the church coffers much depleted... but I remember little of this. Have you heard anything. (pp. 68/69).

The music in the speech harmonises with its logical structure. In actualising this on stage one's tones undulated according to the innuendos within the speech as it flows and ebbs from one situation to the other, first assertive and immediately denying that assertiveness with a tone which shows that Professor has progressed (or moved away from his original focus) in his search for the word. Then it becomes patronising by laughing at himself and the members of the congregation as he compares the life inherent in human voice with the sonorous weight of the sound of the organ pipes. From that point, the tone becomes reflective and winning as he confesses his ignorance of what 'lies beyond that window.' The word 'lies' could be translated as 'is' or 'untruths being told'. It then gets pompous coming forth with an "uproar" of contagious laughter at the words "flesh and dust". A

tone of satisfaction follows in the next sentence which is a description of the church windows.

At the point the comas and full-stops assumed more than their grammatical values as they break the sentences into bits making the cadence of every word ring like the confessed tones of a mind searching for a spiritual anchor. The playwright must have scored the music in his head as he wrote the speech (as indeed all his other long speeches) because the next stage instruction says "Almost humbly". The seeming humility in Professor's tone carries him to the end of the speech until the last sentence which verbally asks a question but tonally pleads to be understood.

The other part of our interpretation in physical. The first thing we know about Professor is that some of the layabouts regard him as a madam (p. 4). He sleeps 'in the churchyard with all that dead body' says Samson. (p. 5). He is also 'too

clever' (p. 5). Later Samson refers to him as 'an artist' in recognition of his skill at forging driving licenses. These serve as auditory guides to the character of Professor before he appears on stage.

The playwright describes him as 'A tall figure in Victorian outfit - tails, top-hat etc., The bundles of newspapers, the chairstick and the roadsign carried by him on his first appearance are vivid, visual, as well as subtle psychological guides towards the realisation of his character.

We put Professor's height at about 1.85 m (6 ft). Not being that tall I decided to make up the deficiency in height by using long strides, keeping a straight (but not stiff) back and always looking straight ahead with a slight upward tilt of the chin. We also rehearsed cocking the head slightly to assume an attitude of condescension towards the drivers and layabouts in Professor's interaction with them. We affected large gestures with the hands. This, we did to fit in with the long strides.

Samson says of Professor, '... he get class, he get style'. (p. 15). We took pains to bring out in our physical realisation these two aspects of him. Both 'style' and 'class' were partially realised through the costume and hand props, however these were worked into his vocal gestures. Special attention was paid to particular facial movements, and hand gestures, as in the holding of certain items of props. The pen, pieces of paper, the pocket-watch and other props were picked up or touched to show a very finicking character.

The physical aspect of our interpretation was not imposed or it would have been an ill-fitting garment; rather it was allowed to emerge from within in order to achieve a synthesis of both the physical and psychological parts. **GR**

Editor's Note: All page reference to Soyinka Wole, *The Road*, London, Oxford University press, 1965. The play was recently produced in Ibadan, directed by Femi Osofisan, with Fatoba playing the role of 'Professor.'

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