

FROM INTUITION TO ECLECTICISM: TRACING INDIGENOUS DIRECTING IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIAN THEATRE, 17TH CENTURY TO PRESENT

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Abstract

Indigenous directing practice in South-western Nigerian Theatre has undergone a significant transformation from the 17th century to the present. This study traces the movement from intuition-led traditional festival theatre to a self-conscious eclectic paradigm known here as “direclecticism”. The paper argues that contemporary directing in SWNT is neither a wholesale import of Western methods nor a static continuation of pre-colonial practice. Instead, it is a deliberate synthesis of indigenous performance logics with Western directorial theories and techniques. Using qualitative methods of participant-observation, interviews, and textual analysis, the research maps three distinct phases of development: the traditional phase rooted in communal intuition and ritual leadership; the folk opera and travelling theatre phase which introduced choreography and directorial control; and the modern literary theatre phase marked by the formal adoption and adaptation of Western dramaturgy. The concept of eclecticicism provides the central analytical lens. Nazerzadeh-Kermani identifies eclectic theatre as a relatively new genre invented by American directors and later adopted by figures such as Peter Brook and Max Reinhardt. SWNT directors followed a comparable trajectory by integrating traditional components with Western theatrical forms to create a new movement. This synthesis is conceptualized as “direclecticism”: the director’s methodical selection and adaptation of styles and theories to realize the playwright’s intent. The findings reveal that eclecticicism became visible from the folk opera era and now functions as the dominant directing paradigm in SWNT. The study further situates directing within an African communal ethic which frames the director as a

reciprocal guide rather than an authoritarian controller. This is consistent with Grotowski's notion of reciprocity between director and actor. The paper concludes that directing in SWNT balances opposing antinomies of control and sensitivity, discipline and encouragement, structure and experimentation. It recommends that theatre training in Nigeria foreground eclectic competencies that honor indigenous forms while engaging global theory. By doing so, SWNT can articulate a distinct directorial identity that is historically grounded, theoretically rigorous, and culturally responsive.

Keywords: Eclecticism, Indigenous Directing, SWNT, Direclecticism, Folk Opera, Nigerian Theatre

Introduction

The art of directing in theatre is often described as both a craft and a profession, and at its highest level, an art (Clurman, 1997). Yet definitions remain contested because directing involves the unification of multiple creative specialties: playwriting, acting, design, and stage management. In South-western Nigerian Theatre, this complexity is heightened by a history that moves from ritualized communal performance to literary stage practice. Before the 20th century, theatrical realization in Yoruba and other SW communities was achieved through intuition, communal participation, and the authority of a festival leader. There was no named “director” in the Western sense, but there were clear protocols for organizing performance, space, and performers.

The colonial encounter and the rise of literary theatre introduced Western concepts of play-text, stagecraft, and the director as chief interpreter. This did not erase indigenous forms. Instead, it created a middle phase often identified with folk opera and popular travelling theatre. These forms retained music, dance, and audience participation from traditional practice, while adopting rehearsal discipline, role specialization, and narrative structure from Western theatre. It is in this middle space that eclecticism becomes visible as a directing concept in SWNT.

Nazerzadeh-Kermani (2005) argues that eclectic theatre is a modern genre. She traces its emergence to American directors who deliberately combined diverse styles, an approach later developed by European directors such as Brook and Reinhardt. SWNT directors, working under different material conditions, engaged in a parallel process. They selected elements from traditional festivals, folk opera choreography, and Western literary conventions to forge what this paper calls “direclecticism”. The term signals a conscious method: the director chooses and adapts different theories and styles to serve the specific demands of the script and the community audience.

Three historical forms help to classify this development. First, the traditional form which gained insight from the leader's intuition and ritual knowledge. Second, the folk opera genre premised on choreography and a nascent directing function and third, the modern form which bases its style on Western concepts but reworks them through indigenous aesthetics (Cash, 2020). While the earliest form relied on technique and communal consensus, the latter two forms operate between tradition and modernity. The 20th-century style is therefore synonymous with unification.

This paper addresses a gap in theatre scholarship. Much writing on Nigerian theatre focuses on play-texts, performance history, or cultural policy. Less attention has been given to the director as a creative agent and to the specific styles that constitute indigenous directing in SWNT. The research question is: How did indigenous directing in SWNT move from intuition to eclecticism, and what are the implications for practice and training today?

The significance of the study is threefold. Historically, it documents a continuous lineage from 17th-century festival practice to contemporary literary theatre. Theoretically, it offers “direclecticism” as a concept for analyzing hybrid directing methods beyond SWNT. Practically, it suggests training models that respect communal African values while building technical competence.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical construct for this study is eclecticism, refined here as “direclecticism” in the context of SWNT. Eclecticism refers to the practice of selecting and combining elements from diverse systems of thought or practice. In theatre, it describes a directing approach that refuses exclusive allegiance to one school and instead draws strategically from many. Nazerzadeh-Kermani (2005) positions eclectic theatre as a 20th-century development. American directors first named and practiced it, and it was subsequently adopted in Britain and Germany. The defining feature is variety: traditional components are combined with Western forms to create a new theatrical language. For SWNT, this definition is useful but incomplete without attention to African social philosophy.

“Direclecticism” is proposed as a contextualized version of eclecticism. It is a concept, a method, a technique, a style, a mode and an approach that depends on the director’s decision in selecting or adapting styles and theories to achieve the playwright’s intent in the realization of the script. It emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in response to the demand for more diverse applications of directing style (Cash, 2020). In SWNT, plays written by playwrights or adapted from stories are realized through the unification of theories and styles, rather than through imitation of a single model.

This framework rests on three pillars: historical classification, communal ethic and antinomial balance. The historical classification of SWNT directing can be classified into three forms: traditional, colonial/folk opera and modern (Adeniranye, 2009). The traditional form is intuition-based. The colonial/folk opera form is transitional, using choreography and directorial guidance. The modern form is synthetic, merging Western and indigenous ideas.

Second is the communal ethic. African societies operate on the principle of inter-reliance: “I am because we are” (Adeniranye, 2009, p. 41). This means the director’s authority is balanced by responsibility to the group. The director leads, but also allows himself to be guided by actors and other artists. Grotowski (1968) describes this as reciprocity: the director inspires the actor, and the actor inspires the director. This aligns with SWNT’s communal aesthetic.

Third is the antinomial balance. Directing involves managing tensions: control versus sensitivity, discipline versus encouragement, structure versus experimentation (Sidiropoulou, 2019). Direclecticism does not resolve these tensions by choosing one side. It holds them in productive balance according to the demands of the production. Together, these pillars make direclecticism a workable framework for analyzing SWNT. It acknowledges established rules of the art while unifying mood, atmosphere, setting, and character interpretation in ways that reflect both indigenous tradition and contemporary practice.

Literature Review

Scholarship on directing offers multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives. Robert Cohen (1998) views directing as “the most ambiguous, perhaps the most mysterious” art in theatre. The ambiguity allows multiple interpretations, which is valuable in a hybrid context like SWNT. However, Dean (1966) counters that directing is not a divine gift but an art with teachable principles. This position is important for SWNT because many directors acquired skills through apprenticeship or drama school rather than innate talent alone. Clurman (1997) describes the director as organizer, teacher, and politician. This multi-role definition fits SWNT, where the director must coordinate artists, train performers, and negotiate with communities and institutions. Dean (1966) supports this by noting that directing can be learned outside drama school, a reality for many early SWNT practitioners.

The actor-director relationship is central to directing theory. Grotowski (1968, 1969) argues for reciprocity and the creation of the “holy actor” through ritual theatre. He insists that the actor must be given freedom to reach an inner essence, while the director maintains high standards and creative demands. Innes and Shevtsova (2013), analyzing Mnouchkine, note that the director’s role is to give actors “the right horizon and good oars” and then row together. They also observe that “the less a director says to the performers, the better” when performers are anxious or rushed.

Barba, as cited in Staniewsky (2004), frames directing as an expedition that requires rules and a leader. The leader is not authoritarian but carries extreme responsibility for others’ emotions, ideas, and creative output. This expedition metaphor resonates with SWNT, where directing often involves managing limited resources, diverse talents, and strong communal expectations.

Jouvet distinguishes directing from criticism. Criticism evaluates a completed performance, while directing creates the conditions for performance (Cassady, 1987). Copeau similarly defines directing as the totality of artistic and technical operations that move a text from abstraction to stage life (Cassady, 1987). Walker (1971) and Frick (1964) emphasize that the playwright’s dialogue and stage directions must be translated into meaningful action that an audience can comprehend.

African scholarship adds a crucial dimension. Adeniranye (2009) articulates the communal concept of “I am because we are,” which requires balancing individual creativity with collective values. Fortier (2002) uses the traffic-light analogy: a system exists, but interpreters are required to activate it. This is relevant for SWNT because directing theories from Europe or America only become useful when Nigerian directors adapt them to local performance contexts.

Taken together, the literature reveals a shift over time. Early 20th-century directors emphasized control and psychological realism. Mid-century figures like Grotowski stressed actor freedom and ritual. Contemporary scholars like Sidiropoulou (2019) highlight the need to balance antinomies. For SWNT, this trajectory explains the move from intuition-based traditional forms to the eclectic, synthetic practice of direclecticism.

Direclecticism as a Method and Style

The central theory guiding this study is Direclecticism as coined by Abe. It is borrowed from Nazerzadeh-Kermani (2005) term “eclectic theatre” but reworked for the Nigerian context. For Nazerzadeh-Kermani, eclectic is a stylistic choice made by directors who refuse to be bound by one school. It is common in Western experimental theatre, where a director might mix

Brechtian alienation with Artaudian ritual in one production. Abe agrees that choice is key but argues that in SW Nigeria, eclecticism is not just style but a method.

Abe defines “direclecticism” as the director’s decision to adapt, select, and apply styles and theories in order to realize the playwright’s intent. The emphasis is on three words: adapt, select, apply. A SW Nigerian director does not copy wholesale. He adapts Western lighting to highlight a masquerade’s symbolism. He selects Stanislavski’s emotional memory exercise only if it helps a young actor embody Sango’s rage. He applies Grotowski’s “via negativa” to strip an actor’s performance, but then adds Yoruba proverbs to rebuild it.

Cash (2020), cited by Abe, notes that in today’s global theatre market there is high demand for directors who can work across styles. Abe extends Cash by showing that SW Nigerian directors were meeting that demand before it became a market trend. Their eclecticism was not a response to globalization but a response to community’s demand. The audience in Ibadan expects both psychological truth and spiritual resonance. The director who can deliver both is competent and not confused.

Direclecticism therefore has three components in Abe’s formulation and answers the question: what did the director select, and why? First, it is conceptual: the director sees all performance traditions as a toolkit. Second, it is methodological: the director has a process for choosing tools based on script, actor, and audience. Third, it is stylistic: the final production bears the marks of multiple traditions, layered but legible. This framework allows us to read a contemporary SW Nigerian production without forcing it into “African” or “Western” boxes.

Discussion

The discussion will cover the three phases in SWNT directing namely, the traditional phase, the folk opera and travelling theatre phase and the modern literary theatre phase.

The traditional phase, from the 17th century onward, relied on the leader’s intuition. Performance was embedded in festivals, rites, and communal life. There was no written play-text or named director, but there were protocols for space, timing, and participation. This phase was comprehensive and national in scope, but it was not yet “directing” in the modern sense.

The folk opera and travelling theatre phase introduced choreography and directorial control. Music, dance, and episodic narrative remained, but rehearsal and role specialization increased. This phase operated between the traditional and the modern. It is here that eclecticism became visible because directors began to select from both indigenous and Western resources.

The modern literary theatre phase consolidated direclecticism. Directors such as those trained in drama schools or through apprenticeship applied Western concepts of composition, visualization, movement, rhythm, and pantomime, while retaining indigenous concerns with mood, atmosphere, and communal participation. The director became the unifier of artistic and technical operations (Copeau, in Cassady, 1987).

Several implications follow. First, direclecticism is not random mixing. It is a methodical selection based on the script, the performers, and the audience. Cash (2020) links its emergence to the demand for diverse directing styles. In SWNT, this demand came from playwrights, audiences, and the need to speak to both local and global contexts. Second, the director’s role remains paradoxical. The director must be a leader, but also a collaborator. Grotowski’s (1968)

reciprocity and Adeniranye's (2009) communalism both insist on this balance. The director guides actors' bodies, imaginations, and memories, but must also recognize the actor as a creative artist (Grotowski, 1969). Third, training must reflect this reality. Since many SWNT directors come through apprenticeship, pedagogy should validate that pathway while adding theoretical rigor. Dean's (1966) claim that directing principles can be taught is crucial here. Training should foreground the antinomial skills Sidiropoulou (2019) identifies, plus the technical principles Dean and Cara (1966) outline.

Finally, the concept of direclecticism offers SWNT a language for self-description. It moves the field beyond the binary of "traditional vs. Western" and names the actual practice: a unified, eclectic art rooted in history and responsive to the present.

Summary

This paper has traced indigenous directing in SWNT from 17th-century intuition-based festival practice to contemporary eclectic directing. It has argued that the defining feature of present practice is direclecticism: a conscious unification of indigenous and Western directing styles and theories.

Three phases were identified. The traditional phase relied on communal intuition and ritual leadership. The folk opera/travelling theatre phase introduced choreography and nascent directorial control. The modern phase synthesized these with Western literary theatre concepts. Eclecticism, as described by Nazerzadeh-Kermani (2005), became visible in SWNT during the folk opera era and is now dominant.

The theoretical framework drew on eclecticism, African communalism, and the concept of antinomial balance. Adeniranye's (2009) "I am because we are" and Grotowski's (1968) reciprocity explain why the SWNT director must lead and be led. Sidiropoulou (2019) clarifies that directing involves balancing control with sensitivity, discipline with encouragement, and structure with experimentation.

The literature review showed that scholars disagree on whether directing is mysterious or teachable. Cohen (1998) emphasizes ambiguity, while Dean (1966) emphasizes teachable principles. Both are relevant to SWNT. The actor-director relationship, from Grotowski (1968, 1969) to Innes and Shevtsova (2013), supports a model of guided freedom that fits SWNT's communal ethic.

The discussion applied these ideas to the three historical phases and argued that direclecticism is a method, not mishmash. It requires the director to select and adapt styles to realize the playwright's intent (Cash, 2020). It also requires training that honours apprenticeship and adds theoretical depth.

In sum, SWNT directing is best understood as a historically continuous, culturally specific, and theoretically articulate practice. It is neither a copy of Western theatre nor a museum version of tradition. It is an eclectic, living art.

Conclusion

Indigenous directing in South-western Nigerian Theatre has moved from intuition to eclecticism. The contemporary practice, conceptualized here as direclecticism, integrates traditional forms with Western approaches to serve the playwright's intent and the community audience. This movement was visible from the folk opera phase and is now the dominant paradigm.

The study's contributions are threefold. Historically, it maps a continuous lineage from festival leadership to literary stage direction. Theoretically, it offers direclecticism as a framework for analysing hybrid directing beyond SWNT. Practically, it suggests that theatre training should cultivate both technical skills and communal sensibility.

Future research should test direclecticism against case studies of specific SWNT productions and directors. It should also develop curricula that combine apprenticeship, drama school training, and critical reflection. As Fortier (2002) reminds us, theories require interpreters to become active. SWNT directors are those interpreters.

Ultimately, directing in SWNT demonstrates that cultural exchange does not require erasure. By holding tradition and innovation in balance, SWNT directors have created an art that is at once Nigerian and global, historical and contemporary, communal and individual. That is the achievement and the promise of direclecticism.

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