

BOOK REVIEW

THE PATH TO RECOGNITION: A HISTORICAL CRITICAL STUDY OF INDIGENOUS DIRECTING PRACTICE IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIAN THEATRE (SWNT)

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Introduction

Directing is indigenous to Africa. Our traditional festivals were directed and coordinated by Africans before our independence in 1960. The Egugun festival and our traditional theatre (Hubert Ogunde Theatre) were directed by Africans long before the establishment of the University of Ibadan, School of Drama 1962. Although in Europe, Stanislavski and Brecht have been accepted as reputable directors, their impact was not felt in our traditional theatre.

This book is a historical investigation and critical analysis of indigenous directing in South-Western Nigerian Theatre from 17th Century to today (Abe, 2006). The author's main argument is that directing is indigenous to south west theatre and was never imported from the west. The difference is that our directing is based on orderliness, collaboration, and selection leading to his coining a new name "direlecticism" which is derived from directing and eclecticism.

The book is made up of six chapters with each chapter dealing on different aspect of play production to prove his assertions that play directing is indigenous to SWT. Chapter 1: The Art of Directing, Chapter 2: Perspectives on the Art of Directing, Chapter 3: Directing in the Nigerian Theatre, Chapter 4: From the Kings' Courtyards to the Conventional Stage, The Fulcrum of Directing Practices in South-Western Nigeria Theatre, Chapter 6 Summary: The Theatre Director and His Audience. The chapters will be summarized in detail, analyze the strengths and gaps, and explain why every theatre student and scholar in Nigeria must read it.

Chapter 1: The Art of Directing

This is the foundational chapter of the book. For clarity purposes, the author defined director from western perspectives as a "creative artist with artistic vision that unifies all elements" Cohen (1988), audience of one" Guthrie, and Craig (1930) who argues that director must disregard stage direction and find the "color, tone, movement, rhythm" of play. Not satisfied with the above definitions, he juxtaposes them with what a director is in SWT as a leader (who leads a group of artists), unifier (who joins the arts of the theatre: acting, dancing, music, costuming, into a unified production), an interpreter (who translates the playwright's intent to stage), coordinator (who controls, arranges, manages and directs all theatrical activities from scratch to finish), and a teacher (who teaches, trains, educates especially in our theatre apprenticeship system

The Chapter exposes the directing spirit in festival anchormen who strive to see that events are run well and relates it to the Yoruba value of orderliness. He further accepts that directing is an individual art where the director must create order where others see chaos (Downs, Wright, & Ramsey, 2013), hence his strive to maintain order.

The chapter also acknowledged that the script is the blueprint for directors but explains that in SWT, the blueprint is usually an oral story, myth, or festival ritual - not just written play which the director remodels into a unified stage production. To do this effectively, SWT understand the arts of the theatre (acting, dance, music, design), he may not be an expert for all, but must have the ability to "recognize good steps" (Morrison, 1984) and maintain "order where others see chaos" (Downs, Wright, & Ramsey, 2013).

Chapter 2: Perspectives on the Art Of Directing -

This is the "meat" of the book and the most important chapter. It has four sections:

Section A: Historical Roots - Africa vs West

The author argues that African ritual drama existed before the Greek Diaonysia which is widely accepted as the origin of theatre. Citing the Egyptian Abydos Passion Play 2500 BCE, he forthrightly challenged Eurocentric history and proved that theatre existed in Africa before Greece (Roberts, 1974; Devlin, 1989) and wondered why Nigerian students should know Greek Dionysia more than their own Oro festival (Cassady, 1987).

The author acknowledged scholars such as Adedeji (1971, 1978), Jeyifo (1984), Clark (1979), Kerr (1995), Ogunba (1978) who fought this battle before but cleverly stated that they concentrated on festivals without talking about Directing and the festivals were directed or directing as an art.. According to Nwosu (2014) African theatre is our life as it visible in our religion, politics and agriculture. He further cited Soyinka (1976) and who acknowledged that festival is the arena where man comes to terms with his being Concluding this section, he boldly affirms that since there is festival, then there is coordination and there must be directing.

Section B: The Five Traditions of Indigenous Directing

This is the heart of the book. Here, the author identified 5 traditions:

1. Traditional/Festival Tradition

The Pre-colonial era was anchored by traditional leaders and anchormen who no formal training. Their actions were based on intuition and desire for order. Example: Egungun, Oro, Osun festival

organizers. He observed that in all these festivals, the director role is inside communal responsibility.

2. Masque-Dramaturge Tradition

The 17th Century Esa Ogbin described by the author as haphazard approach but powerful. Members of Egungun cult acted spontaneously. Though there was no script, but there was structure. This was the earliest form of "actor-director".

3. Folk-Opera Tradition

The early 20th Century was Syncretic. It witnessed a mixture church music, traditional dance, and drama which Ulli Beier called "folk opera", Akin Euba called it "music drama" (Sowande, 2008). Here, directors were "actor-choreographers". They lead with song and movement.

4. Popular Travelling Theatre Tradition (PTTT)

The 1944-1980s was when indigenous directing matured. Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Ishola Ogunsola made waves. The author notes that they broke the Esa Ogbin style into three and created the Opening Glee - Drama - Closing Glee. In all these, he director was also an actor-manager, composer, and producer. Scholars like Clark (1979) and Jeyifo (1984) also recorded this feat but did not focus on directing which is the focal point of this book.

5. Literary Theatre Tradition

The Post-1960 witnessed the establishment of University of Ibadan School of Drama 1962, Ife 1970 which ushered in Western training. Directors started reading Stanislavski, Brecht, Esslin. The author observed that they did not drop traditional theatre practice for the western style but blended to suit their purpose.

Section C: The Concept of Direlecticism

This is the authors contribution to knowledge where he coined Direlecticism = Directing + Eclecticism. He compared SWT director to a cook who picks various ingredients to cook his dishes and conclude that SWT director have an avalanche of ingredients like small masque costuming, small Brecht alienation, small traditional proverb, small Western lighting to pick for their productions.

Direlecticism 2 has concepts: Artistic Syncretism and Selective Realism and 5 Styles: 1. Opening glee-drama-closing glee, 2. Fusion of glee with drama, 3. Adaptation and improvisation, 4. Repetition, 5. Stock and incongruous casting. This concept important because it gives Nigerian directing its own original theory that is not copied from the West but gives them opportunity to choose what works for them.

Section D: Collaboration vs Individual Genius

Using Yoruba proverb "àgbájo owó lá fí n sò àyà" (many hands lift the roof), the author asserts that directing in SWNT is a collaborative venture where the founder-manager, actor-director, choreographer all share credit which is different from the western theatre where the director takes all credit through the "auteur director" idea/ theory. Concluding the chapter, the author affirms that the SWNT "accommodates both traditional and formal idea" (Abe, 2026).

Chapter 3: Directing in the Nigerian Theatre

This chapter traces the origin of "directing" in Nigerian theatre, especially South-Western Nigeria, and argues that we have our own indigenous way of directing before Western influence.

The Key Points of the chapter include:

1. Western Inheritance vs Indigenous Identity

The chapter admits that though theatre had existed in SW Nigeria before Western education through rituals and festivals, most of our current directing principles come from the West and insists that Nigeria inherited Western idea of directing which must be adapted to suit our culture. (Nwoko, 1981a). and call that we fathom our own concept, approach, technique and style" that will make sense to our actors, audience and traditions.

2. Origin of Theatre: Ritual vs Other Views

The origin of theatre is still in contention. Africans believe that theatre originated from rituals, specifically Nigerians traces the origin to masquerade festivals while the Europeans believe it originated from Dionysia. Some Cambridge Anthropologists" like Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison, and Francis Cornford argue that theatre started from different sources like complex mix of mimicry, play, imagination (Kapferer, 1984; Zarilli, 2010). However, the author rejects their suggestion because they did not offer concrete or alternative source.

3. Early Evidence of Directing: Esa Ogbin & Masque Dramaturgy

The chapter identified the Esa Ogbin masquerade tradition of 17th Century as the first theatre tradition for SW Nigeria. Drewal & Drewal (1992) the use of improvisation ritual in Yoruba "plays". The example of Kujenyo's oracular chant and the story of Olugbere Agan - half human, half ape son of Ologbin - show how masquerade was used to disguise and perform (Adediji, 2014; Rotimi, 1971).

Ologbojo of Oyo, around 1590 during Alaafin Ogbolu reign, is presented as the first "masque-dramaturge" who coordinates the 'Ghost Catchers' performance with 6 Egungun characters. He played role of leader, manager, costumier and supervisor - functions close to modern director (Kerr, 1995; Adediji, 1981). So Abe (2007) acknowledges him as the first indigenous theatre director because of his roles.

4. Directing as Versatility

As already stated, a good director must know all aspects of theatre - tragedy, comedy, dance, choreographer, actor-manager, composer, and producer etc (Gladkov, 1997). He cited examples of literary theatre directors like Dapo Adelugba, Ola Rotimi, and Bayo Oduneye to proof his point. He explained that excelled because they are grounded in all departments. The chapter also reiterated that many SW Nigerian directors succeeded because they exchange roles - today you direct, tomorrow you will be a stage manager.

5. Cultural Base

Yoruba life itself is full of ritual and ceremonial civilisation" Osofisan (2001) and Jeyifo (1984 as" every community has a festival that involves theatrical elements. So directing was readily available ensuring orderliness and coordination. In conclusion, the author asserts that directing in

Nigeria did not start with university but with festival organisers, masque leaders like Ologbojo, and communal supervisors who ensure "orderliness".

Chapter 4: From the Kings' Courtyards to the Conventional Stage

This chapter traces how directing evolved from traditional setting to university-trained literary theatre.

1. Early Overlap of Roles

Initially, the role of the director in SWT was mixed as he played different role as occasion demands, as an actor, playwright, choreographer, manager. Kerr, (1995) agrees that the early theatre was led by "star actor-founders"

2. Popular Travelling Theatre & University Theatre

Two traditions, the Popular Travelling Theatre and the University Theatre run side by side Popular Travelling Theatre of Ogunde started touring before 1948. (Kerr, 1995); Umukoro, (2010) affirm that Scoundrel Suberu was influenced by Yoruba Opera touring technique. Again, the University College Ibadan set up in 1948 witnessed a landmark performance at the University Theatre in 1959 with Soyinka's "The Swamp Dwellers" and "Lion and the Jewel" directed by Godfrey Axworthy and Kenneth Post (Yerima, 2005). The School of Drama started in 1962 and became Department of Theatre Arts in 1970 thus bringing formal training.

3. Key Figures

Key figures that played roles like Dapo Adelugba, Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi were recognized as early university directors and Playwright-Directors. Soyinka directed "The Fanatic" (Yerima, 2005) while Ola Rotimi founded the Ori Olokun Theatre, Ile-Ife in 1968 (Ogunleye, 2012).

4. Town and Gown Meeting

The School of Drama invited popular theatre actor-directors like Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola to learn the basics. This exchange sharpened both sides. Rasaki Bakare notes that literary theatre also learnt from popular theatre (Bakare, 2019).

5. Two Approaches to Evolution

The chapter concludes that directing evolved through 2 paths:

1. Traditional Approach: From festival anchormen and masque dramaturge of Esa Ogbin.
2. Conventional Approach: From formal training at Ibadan School of Drama and Ife.

Concluding the chapter, the author agreed that the Ibadan School of Drama established in 1962 was the turning point of directing as the modern Nigerian theatre director emerged from the collision of the traditional communal leadership and the Western-style university training.

Chapter 5: The Fulcrum of Directing Practices in South-Western Nigeria Theatre

This chapter defines what "indigenous directing" really means and identified the core principles behind it. According to the author, indigenous directing has triple heritage rooted in 3 periods: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial (Nwosu, 2014) with its foundation from the traditional festival organisers who see their role as "communal obligation". He reiterates that Indigenous Directing is a "creation of orderliness in the unification of well-organised and well-supervised communal obligations" (Abe 2007) without theory but with intuition and tradition. Here, chief priests acted as directors who control movements and ensure rites take place at the right place/time (Nwosu, 2014:110). Example: Clark (1981) describes Obatala Ritual of Imprisonment and Ododo (2001) describes Ekuechi Masquerade with 3-stage rehearsal processes.

The key concepts of the chapter include:

Orderliness: The main drive. People want peaceful, well-arranged festival. This makes leaders emerge as coordinators (Lasisi, 1995).

Intuition: Although early directors did not go to school, they relied on intuition which later became "conscious attitude" (Barba, 2009; Bakare, 2019). As Bakare (2019) intoned "You don't learn football before you play"

Ancestral Worship: Nwabueze (2011) and Frazer link theatre origin to ancestor worship. Orunmila myth is used - Awi (2016) presents Orunmila as the first "director" because he coordinated and named all deities during migration to earth.

Transmission of Codes: Each tradition carries fragments of the previous one as Masque-dramaturge has a haphazard approach; Folk-opera has choreographic approach while Popular theatre divided performance into Opening Glee - Drama - Closing Glee. All these codes make up the literary theatre.

Versatility & Incorporation: The author affirms that SW Nigerian directors are versatile and readily incorporates all art forms in their productions. This is in line with the admonitions of Nwoko (1981) that director must be a dancer with knowledge of music, shape, and space.

In summary, the author submits that the fulcrum of directing for SW Nigeria are intuition, orderliness and communal responsibility and restated that Indigenous directing which started from unconscious leadership at festivals later became conscious art through practice and adapted theory but, not the other way round.

Chapter 6 Summary: The Theatre Director and His Audience

This chapter emphatically restates the importance of the audience in the theatre, especially, especially in South-Western Nigeria. He emphasizes that theatre is not complete without the audience. This assertion is illustrated by the author in the following:

1. SW Nigeria, theatre directors accepts that audience is the boss in Theatre. The director must consider him first before choosing a play. This is because he understands that theatre is business and must choose a play that will attract audience to watch the performance. If the audience do not like the play, they would buy tickets and the box office will not make any returns (Malomo, 2002:1).

Again, the SW director understands that audience is the play and the play is the audience. Therefore, so actors must speak in a language that the audience understands as Brook (1969) enthused that actors must bring their "world of imagination" to meet audience. This has necessitated directors of popular travelling theatre to use familiar stories in their productions which allow them to follow the scenario to end. However, for it is different in literary theatre where the audience struggle to understand what the actors are saying. In most cases, they translate their speech into Yoruba before fully grasping what is being said.

2. Theatre is Live Inside Audience Imagination as art is not complete until it is imagined by the audience (Cole & Chinoy, 2013) since theatre becomes real when actor and audience meet that moment (Brook, 1987). As noted by Roberts (1971) who asserts that theatre starts when the actor and the crowd share experience together. Brockett and Ball (2004) also added that the last stage of any play is inside the audience mind. This implies that the director must direct in a way the audience will use their own imagination fill any gap.

3. The author recognizes that Nigerian Audience particularly SW Nigerian audience "Talk Back" during productions as they are active spectators. Ola Rotimi calls them "Polaroid Audience" (Uwatt, 1990) If you perform well, they will shout, clap, praise you immediately but If you perform badly, will hiss, throw paper, talk back. This is "participatory criticism". Cassady (1987) intones that that the performance changes every night play because audience changes as Wilson (2004) inputs that even when the audience do not understand everything, they still react as they laugh, cry, fear, judge. In support of the behaviours of the audience, Devlin (1989) compares theatre to dream as he observes that when you enter theatre, you enter into another world and after the play, you return to your real life.

4. The Meaning between Play and Audience

It must be made clear that the meaning of the play should not be left for the director alone. The meaning is created when the play comes before the audience (Brockett & Ball, 2004). This is because the audience interpretation and understanding of any play differs as they have the right to decide what each play means to them. In other words, two persons are bound to interpret or make different meanings from the same performance after watching it, thus given the audience the freedom to conclude what each production mean to them.

The chapter concludes that Foundation or root of theatrical activities in the SWNT is culture and that it controls everything in SW Nigerian theatre. As Mark Fortier cultural theory (2002) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972) adduced, culture the way of life - beliefs, songs, dance, rituals. Theatre and it is the vehicle that carries that culture from one generation to another (Eziajugh, 2004; Gowon, 2004). That is the reason for the success of indigenous directing which allows a director to use his intuition, memory, and knowledge of culture to coordinate play. No wonder Yerima (2002) agrees that directing popular theatre is easier because actors and audience share same language, culture, and sensibility. This is not so for an English director

The book made three notable theoretical contributions to academic debates

The coinage of "direlecticism" to Beier's "folk opera" and Euba's "music drama" (Sowande, 2008) has lifted African Aesthetics. Again, in the book has shown that in performance studies, theory can be come from practice and not only from books while festival directors can get funding from government and agencies if the National Council for Arts and Culture recognizes them. This will lead to amendment of the cultural policy.

The book is recommended for Theatre students, PhD researchers, practicing directors, and cultural policy makers. Also it is recommended that any Nigerian who desires to understand the origin of directing in Nigeria should grap a copy of this book.

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