Ben Tomoloju's Theatre and His "Complete Phono-Mimetic Dramatization' Directorial Style

By

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Introduction

The term 'directing' in the theatre connotes a process by which the application of a mentally developed idea and concept is translated into a physicalized interpretation of a creative work of art by an individual that is responsible for giving life to a performing art aesthetically. The term is said to be a 19th century innovation to the theatre, though its presence has always been subsumed in the works of the classical eras of the Greek, Roman, Medieval and Renaissance. It was said to have been bequeathed to the theatre community by George II, Duke of Saxe Meiningen through his steady rehearsals of actors. This is to imply that the director gives creative interpretations to an artistic piece merely by moving his actors through his blocking to interact with other actors, the props and set as well as the audience while observing his stage business. This makes directing an art due to the fact that it allows for creative expressions portrayed in different patterns. Hence, depending on a range of factors, a director may direct a play in a manner different from that of other directors, yet maintaining a bench mark of standardization in artistry, aesthetics and social reformation works.

Due to this dynamism such an act is imbued with, it is only proper to understand whatever approach used by each director in arriving at their desired performance styles, for style according to Babafemi (2017, p.276) is said to imply the 'process, manner, method and technique of achieving something, it is peculiar to an individual; it is what distinquishes him/her from others'. For instance, to arrive at an individuals style, one must know what exactly was the person's ideology and philosophy in life, their work ethics, personal discipline, cultural and gender sensitivity, sensitivity to stage craft, education and other noticeable influences in his life, amongst others. So, both the art (directing) and the director (as the creative

artiste) deserves in this case to be put up for examination, interpretation and evaluation in order to mark their contributions to the creative industry for posterity to acknowledge and learn from. This paper acknowledges that most productions come with a brochure to illuminate the contributions of the cast and crew as well as acknowledge the chain of producers and details of production fee, place, and time. The writer is also aware of the several academic works done as dissertation to highlight the style techniques employed by a director in the handling or a production or two. However, the theatre in Nigeria and by extension in Africa needs a compendium of directors, their innovations to the world of theatre, their style, technique of operation, ideology, philosophy all in the name of their performance poetics such as this paper attempts to cover.

Biography

Ben Omowafola Tomoloju fondly called 'Pappy Ben' is a native of Ilaje Mahin in Ondo State, Nigeria where he was born on the 18th of December, 1954. He is a man of many parts as he has been a seasoned theatre practitioner, playwright, actor, journalist, teacher, musician, director, designer, activist and consultant amongst others. Tomoloju's early education took place in several parts of the Western region in Nigeria between 1960 to 1967 before proceeding to Christ School Ade Ekiti between 1968 to 1974 for his secondary school certificate. Apart from his formal education at this early stage of his life, the young Tomoloju was vast in the cultural practices and worldviews of his people that at the age of eight, he succeeded in creating his own itinerant masquerade. In 1974, Tomoloju worked briefly before moving to Ibadan.

At the University of Ibadan, Tomoloju bagged a degree in English and Literary studies while also going through a full time training in Theatre department in 1978. upon graduation, he produced for Makurdi Television Station (MTV) briefly before returning to Lagos to become an independent producer as well as a secondary school teacher at Agege, Lagos. Between 1992-1993 he dabbled into journalism and thereafter went into it fully until he rose to become the deputy editor of the Guardian Newspaper in Lagos.

He has been and remain a board member of several organizations, agencies and associations including the national commission of museum and monument (1991-

1993). He established the popular 'Kakaaki' troupe and was the chairman of ad-hoc committee that saw to the birthing of the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP). He has participated in numerous capacities in the evolution of national programmes on culture, such as the management of National Arts Theatre, the National Troupe of Nigeria as well as the National cultural policy and copyright implementation. Tomoloju has written and directed several plays both locally and internationally.

Major Works by Ben Tomoloju

During hi s secondary school days, Tomoloju wrote a couple of plays which were not performed. His considered first major work was between 1975 and 1976 title "Flower Introspect" and it was directed by his bossome friend Jide Ogungbade while he acted in the play. He thereafter wrote and directed "Sacriledge on the Broadway". Other works of his are: "Jankariwo", "Mujumuju", "Askari" (commissioned by the international committee of the Red Cross), "Amona", "Iphigenia finds Aiyelala" (An adaptation of Iphigenia in Tauris - produced by Geothe Institute), "Aminatu: a legendary queen of Zauzau", "Atunbi" and many other improvisational plays and scripts for Theatre for Development (TfD).

Apart from directing most of his plays, Tomoloju has been known to have equally directed other works by other playwrights. Some of such works include Amayo Philip's "Amaniba", Wole Soyinka's *Kongi Harvest* and *Trials of Brother Jero,* Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi,* "Assylun Seeker", and "Long Walk to a Dream", to mention a few.

Artistic Influences

Ben 'T' (being another popular way by which he is known) has been influenced by too many scholars and dramatists within and outside Nigeria who are internationally acclaimed playwrights, designers, and theorists. The likes of Wole Soyinka, Joel Adedeji, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Dapo Adelugba, Hubert Ogunde, Ziky Kofoworola, Zulu Sofola, etc, as well as his friend, Jide Ogungbade and the likes of Stanislavski, Peter Brook, Bertolt Brecht.

Stanisvlaski influenced his round the table discussion technique that is prominent in all his productions while Peter Brook's 'Empty Space' mantra influences his

idea of seeing and using any part of the auditorium as an extension of the performance area. Besides, Tomoloju hates to be limited by rules hence he constantly re-structures for his convenience and to accommodate the demands of each production. Also, haven imbibed a great deal of traditional African experiences like the story telling form of theatre, masquerading and ritual practices, Ben 'T' saw and adopted aspects of Brecht's alienation approach which greatly aids his writing style and play directing technique. He infact noted that:

> I intend to take after the likes of Bertolt Bretch, not in terms of histrionic theories but in terms of participation in the theatre. Bertolt Bretch was a directing playwright, Osofisan is a directing playwright and we are inspired to also to be directing playwrights. (Tomoloju, 2014).

He equally borrowed the opening and closing glee as well as the culture of intermission from the folk theatre tradition as he noted that the classics propels his dramaturgical sense. The folk theatre tradition and his rich insight into the cultural practices of his people accounts for his eclectic or fussionistic approach in form of total theatre while upholding the rituals, festivals ans such other African practices by which they identify with their deities like Osun Osogbo, Ayelala, Ogun, Sango, Oya Oriri etc, all in the bid to achieve desired poetic justice in most of his plays.

Been a journalist, playwright, actor, music composer, musician, technical designer, voice trainer and many more, rolled into one, Ben 'T' has allowed this have a strong impact of the way he delivers or train actors to deliver lines that are mostly poetic and flowery in nature. The line delivery is often laced with well composed songs to create necessary ambience. The songs in lyrics and singing patterns are often a reflection of his Ilaje dialect which gives a unique flavour and originality to his plays. Tomoloju has composed hundreds of folk songs and have had some recorded in his album "Kakaaki Mabo" since 1992, while also building a set of theatre singer-actors, like Salome Eketunde, Tomi Egbonwon, Yinka Davies etc, whose range of 'sopranic' voices as well as the cadences they float in and out of with ease held the theatre and her audience in awe for more that two to three decades.

Performance and Directorial Style

Over the years, Ben 'T' has devised and perfected his own directorial Style which he called "the complete phono-mimetic dramatization' style which is a situation where one does not rely only on the spoken word but compliments such with body movements and actions. The term 'phono' as used is derived from the linguistic term 'phonology' which implies the system of relationship among the speech sound that constitutes the fundamental components of a language or simply as the sound system of a given language. It has to do with the systematization and organization of sounds in language covering all forms of rhymes, sign languages and articulatory gestures. Mimetic on the other hand, relates to the art of coping or imitating a certain thing, scenario, action or even events from the society. In his defence, Tomoloju remarked that, "It is complete in the sense that the phonic elements and the mimetic move together as they complement each other" (Tomoloju, 2024).

This style allows the audience to have a vivid picture of what they saw on stage years after such a play must have been staged. He devoted and deployed most of his plays to social and political commentary while eulogizing the cultural heritage therein. He always opt to thematically speak for the voiceless and hopeless ranging from the oppressed women in "Iphigenia finds Ayelala", the down trodden community in "Mujemuje", "Askari" and "Jankariwo", the abandoned and abused child in "Jankariwo", and the victims of war in "Askari", etc.

Technique

To achieve his plays, Ben 'T' believes in having adequate rehearsals before allowing it for production as he never gives anything to chances. During such rehearsals, he sets out time for a round table discussion of the play and solicits responses from every members of the cast and crew.

Research is paramount in his theatre as he devotes time for thorough understanding of the historical background, the ethno-anthropological dissection of the place the play is set in, the language, beliefs, other correlating myths of the people, adage, proverbs, songs and music patterns, dance and costume patterns that is associated with them and many more.

He believes in the merger of voice and body movements to effectively communicate his dialogue and intentions as there is more clarity in the combination in a way that is long lasting apart from the aesthetic appeal such an audio-visual approach can afford.

Directorial dialogue is introduced from time to time by which way he monitors and motivates his actor's psychological, emotional, physical, and health stabilities to gauge their readiness or not for a production. This perhaps explains why he is known for reserving the blocking of his last scene till the last week of the play because he allows the play to mature before deciding where it is headed.

His plays are laden with various songs that are often from the language of the people whose history is being told in the play for aesthetic and functional reasons.

Philosophy and ideology

Tomoloju practices altruistic philosophy which entails that 'his own progress in life is hinged on the next man's progress', hence, the idea of happiness for others around him is of a matter of compulsion to himself. Every one who knows him will attest to this and this is also confirmed in all his works as well as the number of people he has impacted their lives positively. Ideologically, Tomoloju believes that a man, society or people with identity crises are better dead and of no use to the society and that the theatre is a strong weapon to heal the society of whatever vices it plagues itself with.

Challenges Faced as a Theatre Director

Directing is a personal art wherein the director is squarely responsible for how the production must come to life against all and any odds. This implies that the director is always trying to solve logical and illogical problems that are remotely associated with the production or the cast and crew respectively. To Tomoloju therefore, here are what he perceived to be problems ranges from indiscipline on the part of artistes, director's lack of ingenuity, bad economy, lack of adequate theatre infrastructures, inability of the theatre to sustain the interest of the civil society in patronizing the theatre, political unwillingness to support the theatre beyond lip services of politicians, inability to secure necessary funds to make quality theatre happen, the inability to retain promising theatre artistes due to

economic hardship where they hitherto would have been more relevant and creative, and most importantly inadequate documentation of the many brilliant artistic projects and the artistes themselves that this country have witnessed.

Recommendations

Nigerian theatre practice needs to be revived and more cottage theatres built to encourage a rekindling of the active and booming theatre performance and audience culture of the 80s and '90s in Nigeria. To achieve this, the government at various levels of the federal, state and local councils need to do better, infact he proposes in his advocacy that the government and NGOs and corporate organizations should endeavour to;

> ...build cottage theatres in the neighborhood, …build a cottage in every area, build a cottage seeting maybe 250 people, you might even start with the 57 local governments and local councils for development areas (LCDA) in Lagos State. That way, it wont be too ex[pensive for anyone to stroll in to watch a show. And if there are 57 cottage theatres in Lagos, the National Theatre and Muson Centre will be for the 'A' productions. The cottage theatre will guarantee a play to move around in 1 year, that way, you wont need to produce 20 plays … you just have to produce a fantastic play that will move… (Tomoloju, 2004)

Beyond building these cottage theatres, he suggested that the government should also ensure they employ trained managers to see to the day to day management of these theatres and conceptualise programmes. These theatre managers will as part of their responsibility produce performance calender that will run for a year which will be centrally advertised. This is one sure way to ensure the theatre is rejuvenated to the benefit of all concerned.

Conclusion

No doubt, the introduction of Ben Tomoloju as a theatre director as well as navigating the perceived influences to his creative muse, scaling the fence of his performance conventions and directorial techniques to see the huge contributions he has bequeathed and is still inspiring in the theatre industry, the nation and the international community as well as humanity is enormous. By engaging in this

paper, I am sure, I would have helped to solve one of Tomoloju's concerns about poor or paucity of documentation on both the creative Artistes this country has ever produced and their Creative works.

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Interview between the writer and Ben Tomoloju at the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos - April 2024.

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