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Who's Boss Here?: Professional Riptides on the Rehearsal Floor

Effiong Johnson

"I am afraid of falling into philosophy..."
Tortsov in Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*.

Preamble

The last theatrical season remains memorable. Not only did it record unprecedented successes on every side, such as plausible box office returns, massive and enthusiastic audiences, discovery of talents and expanded list of subscribers; but long before these successes, the rehearsal floor witnessed perhaps one of its most convulsing moments, as visions of the professional in a dramatic enactment, clashed wantonly, forcing a (re)definition of who is in charge of the 21st century theatre – especially on the issue of play production.

Prof. Bright's "Stonewalls" was the household talk all through the department. The assertively radical professor had taken time to inform every class of his students about his new 'baby' – his latest play, which was painstakingly constructed to deconstruct the current political regret, and that, through the microcosm of the university universe. And Dr Wisdom, a renowned director of creative guts and interpretative gem, was pitched to give "Stonewalls" a stunning performance at its premiership. The department anticipated no doubt about the outcome when the audience would be ultimately assembled.

Very typical of Wisdom, formal auditions were not run to choose the cast. In keeping with his belief that he "sees and hears" his cast when he "reads the script", those "lucky" folks whom the wisdom of Wisdom had identified in his mind's eye, were hand-picked for the roles in "Stonewalls". The assemblage was, to say the least, intimidating as all the known talents and stars the department could boast of were on parade for the play. Even fellow lecturers – a rare phenomenon – took

part as actors in the star-studded promising “episodic” drama.

The rehearsal schedule was followed to the latter. The staff on call had to show a conscious level of ethical and professional standard in strict obedience to call-time. Of course, the students in such circumstance had to cow-in absolutely. Being a rare forum, one in which practical lessons in acting were imminent, the department appealed to the director to compromise something unethical, namely, allowing students to sit in and watch the rehearsal, and learn. By this development, every rehearsal night was like a moot performance, with major elements of the theatrical in display.

Thursday Night – 9.15 pm

Thursday night rehearsal had an air about it. Warm-up exercises which usually lasted for about ten minutes, and were meant to tune-up the actor’s instrument (body and voice) to function properly, lasted a tiring thirty minutes. Punctuated by unvoiced and voiced complaints, the director remained adamant and ran its determined duration. Finally, he brought the session to an end, but, yet shocked the team as he demanded that “the night’s deal” will commence his script-free sessions! The news was greeted with loud displeasure by all, including the professional colleagues. And Dr Wisdom remained adamant.

A few folks on call approached the challenge with overstretched bravado while the prompter literally roved the stage dimension to render back-up prompting services. Then Dr Thomas was cued in — and worse for him, for his most lengthy lines. On the wings, he had spent the pre-entrant time in a rampaging ruffle with his script in a desperate attempt to “swallow” his lines. But all of it just would not sink in. Then came the cue, and Thomas had to do it, and do it well.

He started well, though courtesy of the ‘rehearsed’ time, then gasped out in his memory tank — Thomas stood blank! Colleagues giggled while students held their lips. The director panted but held his breath. “Take it again,” he said tolerably. Thomas seemed yanked off totally. “I said, take it again!” the director, this time, ordered. “I can’t!” Thomas replied. “Well, you must...” the director retorted while Thomas cut in, “...except I use my script.” “I’m sorry, you won’t. You must get your lines. You should have long before now, Thomas.” “Well, I didn’t. I haven’t; Mr Director. You’d better allow me use the script if you want to make progress,” Thomas emphatically maintained.

By now, the students had already known that Dr Thomas ought not

to have bandied words with the director. But what could he do in the circumstance? The drama within the drama had seized everyone’s attention such that no one noticed when Prof. Bright entered through the main door of the auditorium. He too was on time to watch the improvised (?) drama.

Prof. Bright: Get on with it, Thomas. Those are some of my best lines in the script. Get on with it! *(Everyone turned in the direction of Prof. Bright’s voice. The auditorium light merely gave him faded illumination. Those enveloped by the bright flood on the stage area and its spill on the apron, had to strain to locate his presence. The director jerked, his face wore an apparent resentment against this professional intruding.)* Or... rather, Dr Wisdom, why don’t you give them a last chance tonight with scripts, and from tomorrow, you can insist on their performing offhand? *(The team responded quickly in support of Prof’s seeming considerate suggestion. Or is it appeal?)*

Dr Wisdom: With due respect, Prof. Bright, this is embarrassing. Will you let me do my work on the stage, professionally? Thanks for the suggestion, but I am not taking it.

Prof. Bright: I know. *(Strolls towards him)* But what chance is there for professionalism without wisdom? Thomas is stuck, can’t you see it? He is exhausted. You must understand. Unless you want to force it down his throat, he just can’t swallow it.

Dr Wisdom: I still do not understand this unethical and unbrokered interference, Prof. At our level, this issue needed no reminding scruples. I’m conscious of who I am and what I’m doing. This is the performance floor, and if I may ask, who’s boss here?

Prof. Bright: As a professor of performance theory and practice, I can answer you, Wisdom. As the playwright of “Stonewalls”, I can tell you who’s boss on the performance floor ...

Dr Thomas: *(Cuts in)*... And between the creator and the director, nothing gets done on the stage floor without the actor. If anything, the actor tends to occupy an indispensable position on the performance floor. On that wise, Wisdom, who’s boss there?

(The students’ interest has at last been frontally represented. They constitute

authority, otherwise I wouldn't be here. Who's boss on the performance floor? I am declaring that the playwright is the boss. He is the convener of the event, the very reason for other professionals to assemble – from the director to the audience. Without the playwright acting on his own initiative to write a good play – when no one talked him into it – the director, the actors, the designers and the audience would not have had a forum for a performance-meeting. This is why the playwright rightly deserves the title of boss. And boss on the performance floor, he is. (*Applause*) That the playwright's handiwork had the sizzling pull that drew all the artistes to one place and detailed different responsibilities to them, responsibilities which they work assiduously to perform, qualifies the playwright to be the boss on the performance floor.

The playwright is the visionary. It would appear that he is the only seer, and "without vision, the people perish", The Good Book says. Without the playwright and his script, on what would the director and his cast and crew base their construct? Would they build castles in the air? (*The crowd answers No!*) Even in the country of the blind, the man with one eye rules as king. The playwright being the seer, rightly deserves the position of boss. William Shakespeare in "Macbeth" makes the world see the evil of ambition. Goethe in "Faust" shows the destructiveness and regret in partying with the devil. Wole Soyinka in "Kongi's Harvest" portrays a villainous dictator and the terror such leaders bring to bear on their citizenry. Effiong Johnson in "The Fight Has Just Begun" shows the apparent intoxication of our political leaders and their brazen reasons for second term in office. These visions by great visionaries, help point the way a society ought to go, or ought not go. Without the playwright, the world would seem to have lacked a bearing and a direction. For this exceptional quality which happens to be of immense value to societal existence, the playwright is rightly the boss on the performance floor. He simply dictates the pace for others.

In the short time I had to look up anything for this impromptu seminar, Providence directed me to a beautiful

and very decisive statement by John Fernald (1971, p. 69) It is interesting to note that Fernald is an authority in acting and he was actually theorizing on acting. Yet, he punctuated his exegesis with this profound acknowledgment of the author or playwright: "It is the authors, not actors that make theatre history. It is the authors who ultimately determine whether the theatre of a country is good or bad. The author must be put first at all times". In this university the first person is the Vice-Chancellor. In the country, the first person is the president. In either case, they can be described as being the bosses over the jurisdictions they control. In like manner, if no less an authority than Fernald declares that the playwright "must be put first at all times" while writing on acting, then he is boss at all times. (*Applause*)

Without mincing words, it is the playwright that chronicles the course of history. Without him, the past will be buried in oblivion. Can you imagine how theatre history of say, the Greek theatre, would have been without the imprints left for posterity by Sophocles in "Oedipus Rex", Aeschylus in "The Seven Against Thebes" and Euripides in "The Bacchae". Wait a minute, we have been told that Thespis was the first lone actor. He could not have been an actor if Aeschylus did not provide him the scenario to play on. Worse still, left for Thespis' acting alone, generations of Theatre students and scholars, would not have known the NATURE which characterised the Greek theatre. The playwright lends this understanding rather uniquely, and gives the world the structure with which ideas, philosophies, morality and other nuances, typical of every age, are phrased.

In the Nigerian setting, Wole Soyinka in "Death and the King's Horseman" portrays the beliefs and lore held dear in the ancient Oyo Kingdom, just as our own Effiong Johnson, in "Not Without Bones", details the sporadic activities of the women's riot of 1929 which compelled the colonial authority to compromise with the natives. Indeed, the place of the playwright on the performance floor is incontestable. By the very nature of his art and the function which that art should serve, the playwright creates his place for himself, namely the boss of the Theatre. (*There is applause*)

The playwright is the trumpet that warns the society. "Midnight Hotel", "The Chattering and the Song" and "Once Upon Four Robbers", are examples of plays which sound alarm about damaging and destructive tendencies whether of kings, their agents or traditions; that holding on to negative status quo will only spell doom for all.

The playwright is the moral preacher in this wayward world. Bassey Ubong's "Esemsem", Efua Southerland's "Edufa", Effiong Johnson's *Frogs at Noon*, Uwemedimo Atakpo's "Edisua", and many others, engage the society in brass tacks on morality. Evil destroys sooner or later. Good is rewarding no matter how long it tarries. The home videos in Nigeria often leave a moral code at the end of the movies. "Super Story" written by Wale Adenuga, does it so religiously in every episode – "We are pencils in the hand of the Creator..." – hence warning all who come into contact with the video that SOMEONE is actually in control and HE does reward everyone according to his/her deeds. It is in this regard that the playwright has been described as the conscience of the society. With a healthy conscience, peace, progress and productivity become automatic follow-ups. But when a people function without any listening to conscience, chaos, strife, destruction and death take the scene. With these positive indices, the playwright indeed attracts a vote of confidence as boss on the performance floor. (*There is resounding applause*).

Let me bring this discourse to a close by deliberating on a fascinating character of the playwright which singles him out among his contemporaries. He is the one who is ready to take the bull by the horn, defying risks, threats and sometimes death. He is the bold one who is ready to take up the arm of the pen against obvious wrongs by leaders, obas, kings, pastors, vice-chancellors, politicians ... That reminds me, "Stonewalls" is a formidable weapon I chose to take against the current political regime with the bold affront of deconstructing its regrettable constructs. By taking up arms, the playwright declares war against the powers that be. On that role he gains the title of General. And if a general is not a boss, then who is?

At the same time, the playwright is a generalist in terms of his intellectual capacity. When he writes, he actually pictures the form it would be on stage. Think of all the characters in the world that he brings on, in his scripts. Think of Femi Osofisan who has written about thirty plays(?) all with different shades of characters – politicians, professors, kings, madmen, robbers, beggars, preachers, house boys and girls, wives, husbands – the list is endless. Yet the playwright develops all of them judiciously within the contexts of their dramatic preoccupations. A man of this intellectual latitude, experiential base, profound knowledge and seasoned flair, has all it takes to dictate affairs on the performance floor as Boss. (*There is a thunderous ovation and the shout of "Prof, Prof, Prof!" can be heard at the background*) It was Bernard Shaw who wrote:

Life as it occurs is senseless ... For it is the business of (the playwright) to pick out the significant incidents from the chaos of daily happenings, and arrange them so that their relation to one another becomes significant thus changing us from bewildered spectators of a monstrous confusion to men intelligently conscious of the world and its destinies. This is the highest function that man can perform, the greatest work he can set himself to; and this is why (the playwrights) take their majestic and pontifical rank which seems so strangely above all the pretensions of mere strolling actors and theatrical authors (directors).

Ladies and gentlemen, in a very typical conventional situation such as our institutional setting, the need for systemisation, conventionalism, accepted traditions, ethical conducts and the general quality expected to form the aesthetics of this noble profession; that which we can proudly sell to our students, and remain rest assured that the future of the profession will not be jeopardized, is that worth stating; namely, in a performance situation, the playwright is first, because the script dictates for the director, the actor, the designers and the audience. For this frontal and first place signification, the playwright is Boss on the performance floor. Thank you. (*The applause is deafening. Prof. Bright removes the academic gown and keeps it on the rostrum, then walks back to shake an already extended hand of Prof. Emem. Doctors*

Wisdom and Thomas give the Professor a standing ovation)

Prof. Emem: Ladies and gentlemen, you will agree with me that this is very exciting. "The Playwright is Boss on the performance floor". And that is both scholarly and persuasively put. But is "Thomas de Doubter" persuaded?

Dr Thomas: No! (*The crowd again thunders*) I'm not persuaded and I'm right on the spot to tell you why. (*Goes to the rostrum and puts on the academic gown over his ¾ caftan*) I do pray that the 'ghost' of Prof. Bright will not haunt me as I stand to state my views. (*The audience is thrown into hysterical laughter*)

Perhaps, it was my position on the performance floor yesterday, which the HOD, our boss, heard among others, that the actor occupies an indispensable place on the performance floor, which cemented his decision to hold this seminar. I do hereby sustain that position. Why shouldn't I when E. T. Kirby (1969), John Fernald (1971), Judith Cook (1976) up to Philip Auslander (1997) share similar positions? The actor is the dominant figure among stage figures, on the performance floor. In fact, the playwright may be totally forgotten, and so is the director. Even many experimental theatre groups have decimated the essence of the playwright and the director in their conventional ropes for new collaborative conducts of performance. But the actor has remained unmoved. To move or even seemingly neglect the pronounced and profound position of the actor is to kill the theatre. If that is so, who is the most crucial force of anchor in the theatre? The actor, of course! (*There is a resounding applause.*)

We do know that Jerzy Grotowski, the next most popular acting theorist and practitioner after Stanislavski in his "Poor Theatre", has literally done away with so-called elements of the theatre. Yet while the theatre has been proved by him to stand and function successfully without them, Grotowski has regularly in a theoretical continuum, and envious praxis, maintained that the actor is the "main instrument of theatricality" And the world cannot dispute that. That is why I insist that the actor is boss.

Brian Hansen (1991, p. 178) agrees that "The play is ... truly in the hands of the actors. Once the curtain goes up, there is really little a playwright, a designer or director can do". A play being in the hands of the actor, speaks of firm control. To control is to boss, and that, on the performance floor. Hansen goes on to advance thus: "But it is the actor who ultimately steps out of the darkened wings onto the lighted stage and signs the performance contract with the audience".

If one who does the ultimate cannot be agreed upon to deserve to be boss, never mind, the man who "signs the performance contract", the only one to do so and be accepted as legitimate and his deed as binding, cannot be termed anything less than the boss of the performance. (*There is an explosive ovation especially of "Stonewalls" ensemble*)

I stand in absolute agreement with Hansen who asserts that "the playwright is an uncomfortable member of the company at best... (Since) the playwright's work is already completed when the company begins its work". The playwright completed his work long before the work reached the performance floor. Therefore, he is not even a physical participant there ... maybe his shadows. Being "uncomfortable" or discomfited, is being out of control - losing out. That couldn't be the boss. The boss is there and he takes charge; and that is what the actor does! Corroborating this shaky position of the playwright and his apparent insignificance of the director when it comes to performing on the stage, Jean Giraudoux (1882 - 1944) had stated:

From the first performance on it belongs to the actors. The author wandering in the wings is a kind of ghost whom the stagehands detest if he listens in or is indiscreet. After the hundredth performance, particularly if it is a good play, it belongs to the public.

When one owns a thing as the actor owns the stage, or when it is expected that a particular thing belongs to a person, then such a one is the boss over it. He can do as he likes without question. If the performance belongs to the actors, then those are the real and ideal bosses. A ghost, such as the playwright, (not to mention the director who is totally

forgotten about by Giraudoux) is perhaps a mere flash in the imagination or the subconscious. Few ghosts (if any) ever exert 'physical' presence on places, such as the performance floor, with any signification. The one visibly taking charge before heterogeneous witnesses, wins the case of authentic ownership. In this case the actor wins the case against his opponents. *(There is an applause)*

Ladies and gentlemen, the rehearsal of "Stonewalls" is ongoing. Never mind the stalemated experience of last night. However, if the author of "Stonewalls" should keep away from the venue of the rehearsal and even the performance when it will happen, nothing, absolutely nothing, can hinder the progress of the performance. Similarly, if the director for example, having been proved that he is not boss, should be frustrated out of the production, the performance can still go on. But guess what, should the actors boycott the performance, then the performance would have died prematurely. *(There is agreeable applause)*

It is on this note I would wish to conclude in the words of Thornton Wilder, that, "The theatre is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators... The chief of these collaborators are the actors" (1986, pp. 106-109). A chief is the boss over his chiefdom. So, an actor is the boss over the performance chiefdom. Thank you. *(The hall is nearly berserk with ovation, excitement and overcharged exhilaration. Students rush at Dr Thomas and carry him shoulder high. Then he is dropped and one carefully removes the academic gown from him and lays it back with awe on the rostrum, wiping his two hands. Everyone – Profs. Emem, Bright, Dr Wisdom other staff, stand to shake hands with Thomas)*

Prof. Emem: *(With obvious confidence and satisfaction)* If there was any doubt in the mind of anyone about the necessity of this impromptu seminar, I'm sure such a doubt would have been knocked out by now. Or if any sceptic thought that, given the exigency and the expediency of the setting, we would be sighing with failure, that kind too would have since changed his mind. Ladies and gentlemen, it is exciting, thought-provoking and intellectually charging so far. But it is not over yet. Neither has any final conclusion been reached.

The rostrum seems recharged with every new occupant that steps there. Let us hear Dr Wisdom: "The Director is Boss on the Performance Floor".

Dr Wisdom: I do agree with you, my Prof, without a moment's blush, that the issue needed no debate at all. The director is the boss, on the performance floor. Maybe when Thespis acted in Greece, he was boss. Or when James Barbage in England, Moliere in France or Europe's very best actor David Garrick, conducted the affairs of the stage, it couldn't be said that the director was the boss on the performance floor. But beginning from May 1, 1874, with the Berlina Ensemble, under the bossmanship of George II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, the performance floor relinquished the bossman position, hitherto wrongly held by actor managers (and achieving short-of-standard production successes) to the master craftsman of the theatre, the director. *(There is applause)* Since then, there has been no ousting of the undisputed bossman, the director, from the current contemporary stage position.

Permit me to acknowledge with familiarity that the undisputed position of the director as boss of the performance floor, has not been without challenge by other boss-minded stage professionals. Brian Hansen (1991, p. 1829) captures in such graphic detail some of the 'shakings' (such as the one we had last night) the stage floor can experience on the issue of control. Let's hear him:

The history of new plays in production is often a volatile one, it includes playwrights raging at directors and actors for destroying a promising script, directors furious at meddling writers who do not understand the Theatre and explosive scenes which end with the playwright walking out in high dudgeon or being excluded from rehearsals by a director or producer trying to salvage some semblance of calm working environment. The basic conflict always returns to a fundamental question: who is the creative artist and who is the interpretive artist?

Ladies and gentlemen, the above experience is near what we had last night. I said 'near' because ours was yet to assume a volatile nature but for the intervention of Prof. Emem.

However, the writer did meddle in the director's affairs by reason of nonunderstanding or lack of acceptance of the position of the director on the performance floor. At the end, the question also arose: 'who's boss on the performance floor?' A question I answer now, that the director is. A playwright does have a vision – on the text. But, according to John Fernald (1971), the director is the one who interprets the vision, while "it is the actor who alone can make clear the vision in which the author has seen" (p. 83). If the director does not interpret the playwright's vision, the best of it would remain moribund. If the director does not pick up the text and interpret the vision, the actor will have nothing to express clearly. Like Joseph became boss in Egypt through interpreting the dream of Pharaoh, the director becomes boss on the performance floor by interpreting the vision of the playwright. Guess what, none of the 'actors' in the farms of Egypt or those stacking the corn in warehouses against the envisioned seven years of famine, was qualified to be boss. Pharaoh could have been totally incapacitated without Joseph having the answer to the imbroglio holding the kingdom to ransom (*There is applause and "preach on, preach on" rendering by the crowd*).

It is the boss who often gets consulted about a problem. A doctor gets consulted by a patient. The doctor assumes bossmanship in that regard. A lawyer gets consulted by a client and that puts the wig of bossman on him. Dr Wisdom got consulted by Prof. Bright about the production of "Stonewalls". What did I become by that arrangement? (*The audience responds instantly "Bossman"*) You are good jurists! The director is the boss of the performance! (*There is applause*)

Like the managing director of a firm, he does not have to be seen presenting the company products to assembled scores of customers. He details those who do the job. That he is nearly invisible does not remove him from his position. Same for the theatre director. He does his bid and beat, then details the actors to act in a particular way, at particular positions, in particular postures. And they oblige him. So who is boss then? (*The crowd responds "The director"*) The designers get his impressions, and then go to work to realise his concepts. Who is boss in that circumstance? (*The crowd yells again "The director"*) Stage business actually centres

around the playwright, the director, the actors and the designers. But the man in control, coordinating every bit of the production indices, systemically fixing each segment in its right place for the right effect, is neither the playwright nor the actor. It is the master craftsman, the bossman, the director. (*There is an ovation. Many stand up to clap*)

Edward Wright (1972) corroborates this same view. According to him, it is the director who "through the script, the actors, and the technicians, speaks to the audience, for these four elements are the director's tools". A carpenter's tools, including the stand upon which every measurement, cutting, nailing and the likes, are done, can never, regardless of efficient utility, assume the position of the carpenter, the boss. A tailor's sewing machine, a doctor's stethoscope even a farmer's hoe – all tools in their own respects, cannot become bosses by virtue of their apparent importance. If Wright describes as "tools" the elements of playwright, actors and technician, as the director's tools, it thus becomes obvious who is boss on the performance floor. (*The audience again are on their feet*).

During auditions, it is the director who is the convener of the event. A text couldn't develop legs from the shelf that it was, to walk to the performance floor, and develop voice to convene a performance meeting, the way Prof. Bright wanted to make us believe. A director convenes the event. Quickly, he goes into action as he wishes to do. He interviews the actors for roles and those who meet his reckoned taste are picked. Those who don't, no matter their claim of stardom, and their wealth of experience, are thrown out. And they leave without much ado. Only one who is a boss can carry out such feats. After a successful audition, he brings out the cast list. He progresses from there to hold rehearsals where he tasks his ingenuity to make sense and give meaning using live and physical human entities and properties as opposed to the mere imaginary paper work of the playwright. It does go without any basis for contradiction that the director is boss on the performance floor. He is the "regisseur" – "artist-director".

Milly Barranger (1991, p. 98) corroborates the claim