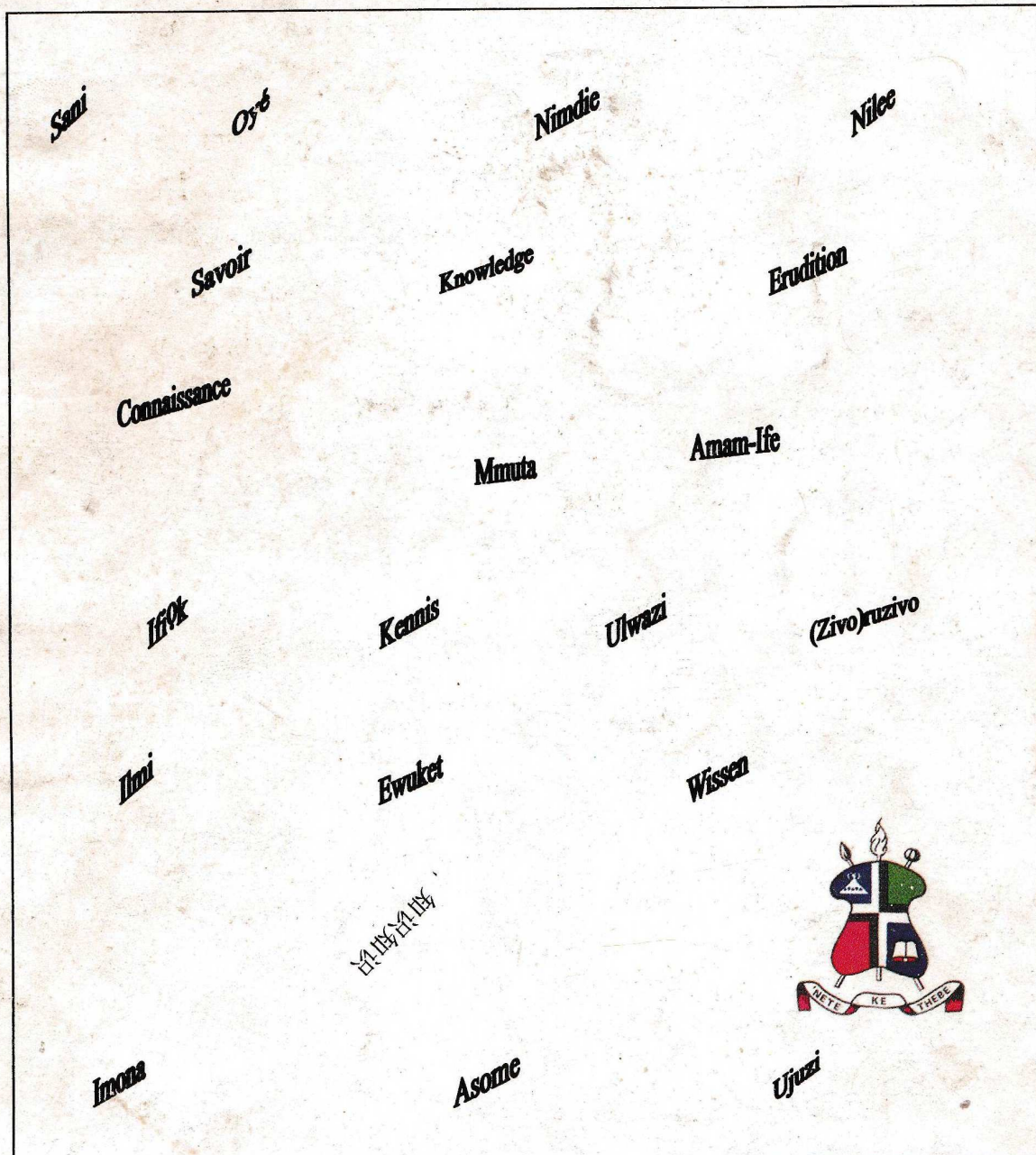


TSEBO

journal of research and creative writing

ISSN 1991-2307 Vol.1 No.1 2006



Write that play

**Effiong Johnson
Theatre Arts Department:
University of Uyo, Nigeria.**

If I don't think that creative writing can be taught, I'm either a charlatan or an idiot. Now it is quite likely that persons (perhaps even academics) exist who believe me to be either or both but I would here like to explain that...it could be taught. Ruth Wiebe 1986:134.

The construction of a play is a difficult and specialised craft, But it can be learnt. Stuart Griffiths 1984:9.

Perhaps the reason playwriting is not vigorously studied as other courses are, makes much to be assumed about it. Effiong Johnson 2000:12.

The paper postulates that playwrights are not made in and delivered from heaven and that the art of playwriting can be learnt. It calls on the creatively oriented to be confident, read other literary works, climb on the band wagon and write according to the prescribed and helpful playwriting means. It concludes with an admonitory remark to the creative writer not to be put off by what the critic might say and a call to write that play.

Preliminary thought

How very simple is a work of art of which playwriting is one? How simple is it to create something, and in the process, wittingly or unwittingly bestow (as it were) upon that creation a compelling force of appeal? If art is a piece of beauty and beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, what would it take to create a play that a reader of such play text would be arrested by its magnetic force of passion from the cover to the blurb? How can one play-create for a performance which presentation will hook the audience in a rapturous-bound, from curtains up to the final black out? How really simply can you teach someone curious enough to learn the art of play making or playwriting?

Drop the notion(s)

A few years ago, the idea of synthesising the art of play writing into literary or verbal discourse would have been inconceivable. The belief that the art came from God, and that, at His divine and distributive discretion, held so much sway that to propose learning or teaching the art seemed like taboo, or at least, like violating sacred arrangements.

Many first generation writers in our continent – albeit those who were looked upon as the literary authorities, who had the final say as the literati of literatures – passed the notion down the academic lineage that except God endowed one to write, any attempt by the ordinary being wanting to learn (what was not to be learnt) would be like embarking on a voyage in futility. Many would-be writers bubbling with genuine interest to learn-write, swallowed this uncouth statement of the judgment of the supreme court of African literature, without the critical

and deviant muscle to seek for "appeal" elsewhere. This probably explains why only very few people then could be identified as playwrights with evidence of published texts in circulation.

Now we know better. Playwrights are not made in heaven. In fact, it would rather appear that none of them alive has been there! Playwriting can be learnt by the averagely-educated and provenly-talented. Playwriting should be learnt by the creatively oriented. Playwriting must be learnt by the drama student at any level. Therefore, any notion(s) to the contrary, must be lowered six feet below the foot into the open grave of infamy and ignoramus. If you like, you can put an ugly wreath on the grave before you walk away.

Having done so, let us get going.

Recognise this bubbling market

All this time, you have been living in a bubbling market which had every theme, every character, every idea, every genre and indeed every style on the many-fancied shops. "The world is a stage..." had since been stated by Shakespeare. The statement means more than every one being a role-player. It means too that the world is a market which trades on every iota of item you need for play-creation. The problem is that ignorance had temporarily blinded you from seeing these sources from which you could have been moulding or constructing your plays. There is nothing a would-be writer needed to write on which could not be drawn from a life-time experience of people around him, stories around him, experiences by him and shared with him. From this realisation, you can imagine how totally ridiculous and unacceptable it would sound for one to ask rather bewilderingly "what do I write on?"

Have confidence in yourself

The thing called confidence is a block-bursting propeller which accelerates across jagged-edge surfaces to smooth-success. It is dynamite which merely proves too unstoppable by seemingly impregnable blocs of human fears. A playwright could not need anything less than a good dose of confidence in himself or herself that **this** play can be written. Many people obviously fail before they start writing the first scene because of the deterring force of cowardiceness – lack of confidence.

Perhaps having read William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa thiongo, Femi Osofisan, Effiong Johnson, Ola Rotimi, Bode Sowande, Ojo Bakare and others, and seen the compact plot structure, the loftiness of dialogue manipulation, the comeliness of character-portrayal, and the dynamics of action-rendition; they reassessed themselves in comparative pedestals, passed the judgment on themselves as creative-nobodies, and then slumped into irrevocable self-defeatism. They failed to discover that all the "super" names in the profession actually started out "small". They would not reason that these ones also had their draw-backs in their preliminary years, but were undaunted, smart and bold enough to forge ahead beyond the trappings of deterrence.

Pick up your confidence-level, brother or sister. You too can become a somebody of cherished reference (if not reverence). You have all that it takes to plunge into this flowing river, and swim safely to the shore. With confidence, dive in and swim as if your life depended on it, and before you realised it you would be safely there at target. Listen to this: if you do not have confidence in yourself, no one else can have confidence for you; or worse still, in you!

Tour the dramatic literature terrain (theory)

Pioneering an effort is comparable with finding a way home unscathed from a virgin forest of a thousand demons. Luckily, the art of playwriting has already been "violated". Clear passages, footprints and footpaths are visible and traceable. For one serious with the determination to learn the art, a tour of dramatic-texts by renowned writers, is inevitable. Lay hands on existing dramatic texts from Nigeria, Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and America. If you do not have them, borrow from those who have. Visit the library for them. Read them voraciously till the elements that constitute the chemistry of playwriting would have become integral in

and common place to you. You cannot afford to be a lazy-slot in reading if you want to be fleet-footed in writing.

The advantages of wide-reading will include, but not limited to the following:

- * The provision of sufficient challenge(s) to face up to any demands in any theme of choice-writing.
- * Exposition to techniques and styles in story-development, character-portrayal, language-patterning, crowd-construction, aesthetic-masoning and scenic breakdown.
- * Application of dramatic devices to engender aesthetic baits for the attraction of the drama. Flash backs, flash forwards, story-telling, narrations, superimposition of the prosaic, the folk-media, the electronic media, and the interjection of genres other than the dramatic, into the plot-construct, for effect.

Indeed availing oneself of the advantage of good writing by others cannot be over emphasised. For a testimony, I probably would not have started writing when I did, if I did not read Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The Black Hermit*. For the simplistic work to have been credited to no less a super-international literati than Ngugi, was all the challenge I needed to pick up my pen and search for a theme. Reading the works of others, helps in unquantified dimensions as far as brokering the right spirit for writing is concerned.

Join the performance train (practice)

One of the bullet-points for the persistent call for the establishment of a drama school (a post-graduate or professional outfit of the Law School equivalence) studded with possibilities of praxis, to complement the University theoretic(s), is to garnish the artists of the theatre with every practical experience requisite for sound professionalism. A playwright is a member of the performing team directly or indirectly. Ultimately, the playwright's work becomes the chosen script which must be made to undergo baptism (as it were) for public performance. A playwright must know that. Brain Hansen (1991:190) supports this position, and he is here quoted elaborately for emphasis.

A script is necessarily incomplete. It is often no more than an outline for a play. True, it contains all the dialogue, but it gives only the barest idea of how dialogue might be delivered. It may have a verbal description of the stage setting, but the finished setting will convey a great deal more information to the audience than the written description. The power of a good script is the power to inspire a good company to produce a great performance. It may not seem fair – and many writers have raged against the pattern – but the truth remains: playwrights live most authentically through the works of others. They deal with the audience only through intermediaries. To be great, a playwright must first inspire other artists to be great.

Plays are primarily made for performances. Only ignorance cajoles anyone to advance any contrary reason. They may end up being read as literature because they have been published and circulated. Similarly play texts get read in printed form since everyone cannot be opportuned to watch the live performances on the living stage. But no matter how excited the reader gets by reading the text, it cannot be compared with the consummate excitement and satisfaction the audience derives from watching the performance.

A would-be writer could not be in a better enabling environment than as a participant in a performance train. The advantages are enormous:

- * The qualities a script must possess to accelerate its way to the performance floor will be experienced at practical range by the would-be writer; and an easier and quicker consciousness of writing to suit the limitations of the stage would have been developed.
- * The satisfaction a playwright gets when his or her work gets performed will not only spur him or her to write, but beyond that, to write to get the directors acceptance and to gain production possibilities.
- * The whole paraphernalia of the production, namely, directing, acting, designing, the other behind-the-scene activities of backstage; and the FOH duties for the audience, as experienced by the would-be writer,

will broaden his horizon and remain stuck to his psyche as a necessary picturesque and aesthetic guard for creative-creating of professional standards. Remaining conscious of the theatrical parlance, while writing, helps push the work beyond the realms of amateurishness.

- * The art of improvisation which is often a predictable regular in rehearsals as an imagination-quickenning device, is a huge resource for the playwright's creation as well.
- * The opportunity to watch individual talents and professionals in their arts toward a unified aesthetics does not only define the boundaries of jurisdictions between the artists, but also gives respect to all in the team. It is most unlikely that with this level of rounded orientation, a playwright can in the future quarrel with the director (for instance) for the reason of misinterpretation of the play's vision or mutilation of the script.

[Note: A director is an interpretative and creative artiste in his own right too. Editors].

What a gym for fitness a would-be playwright would have found in a performance-team, and what a gymnast he stood prospect to become in the circus of playwriting.

Choose what to write on

Having buried all the obnoxious notions; generated sufficient confidence-stream; devoured uncountable pages of play texts in order to come to terms with the wherewithal about plays and their making; participated in performances and established contact-acquaintance with the team of experts; nothing remained any more which any sane seeker for proper orientation to playwriting needed to do except to write. Yes, write. This is where we have been coming to since we began. The writer alone has to do this – to discover, to invent, to create and to accomplish. He has to seat himself up (or down) to write, no one can do this for him. Two scholars, Brain Hansen and Stuart Griffiths, attest to this. Respectively, they state:

How a playwright begins to transform a dramatic idea into a potential theatre piece is highly personal. At the very least it depends upon the form of play the playwright has adopted as a possible model...Each writer probably employs a different method of getting started. (1991:197-198)

As above, Hansen makes the point that writing is a highly personal affair. Griffiths, as below, supports that notion:

No one can teach an aspiring playwright how to create living, breathing characters, who deeply engage an audience's sympathies. No one can teach him to write vital dialogue charged with tension and humour.... (1984:9)

The issue of writing, and that, by the writer, cannot be over-stressed. And in writing, a world of choices abounds as to what can be written (on). The mere preponderance of choices staring the writer in the face can awe-strike him with confusion. Here is a simple way out:

Start With the Familiar

Starting with the familiar spectacular dream, or the startling experience, or the incredible story, has its advantages, the immediate one is that of **freshness**. Freshness will not task the writer with difficulty in recollection as the matter is still very vivid in his vista of imagination. Right now, he can still feel its reverberation, watch the swaying crowd, see the pandemonium, hear the cries and comments from the awe-struck crowd, the yells of empathy and read the faces of sympathy.

Depending on the temperament of the writer, he can be so subsumed into the milieu of the experience that, he becomes like a mere "recorder" receiving "dictations" from the experience automatically or as Ola Rotimi puts it 'instamatically.'. The experience provides its unique title, parades its characters whose lines he can hear them dictate accurately; and even the responses and reactions of the audience. Starting with the familiar indeed eases the task of writing to a warming-encouraging dimension. It carries with it the alluring interest towards

completion. Unlike very tasking jobs which often force their executors to abandon them midstream, starting to write from familiar events gives sustainable gems of interest which see the task through its rising action, point of collision, the climax and to its denouement.

Step One

Whatever the choice is, upon which to locate or base the play, be it history, a dream, a story told by someone, an experience encountered, whatever source forms the basis for the plot-construct, take time to reduce it to a clearly and cleverly told story. It helps in no small way to have the drama-story or story line or the synopsis. The story enables the beginner-playwright to remain focused. He has a definite direction he is steering towards. Even when he chooses to add more flesh to the story (to thicken the plot may be), or take away some fat from chummy sectors (to remain trendy may be), he would still have remained within an already identifiable course for his play-synergy.

Step Two

True, every story is about something. The playwright's story must be arranged and managed to be about a definite subject or definite subjects. For psychological attachment, the subject should be the one that truly matters to the playwright. That is why a theme is said to be a subject-matter. If the subject, such as politics, love, marriage, hatred, HIV/AIDS, indifference, to identify some, is the one that genuinely matters to the playwright, it needs to be handled with apparent verve. Do not carry too many or complex subjects in one story. Being a beginner, you may not be able to handle them with equal critical penetrations. As much as one subject is recommended for the beginner. This is to facilitate that the issues of this one story are proven, properly and creditably developed to taste. Handle one story and dwell therein extensively, exploit it delicately and saturate it sufficiently. Bestow upon that dramatic creation the ultimate and optimal quantum of creativity that will not but compel the worst critic to sight obvious plausibility.

As you work on the story, the stories of great authors you encountered during "the tour of the dramatic terrain" will come flashing into your mind. Decide on how you want to handle the story, that is, the sequence you want the story to unfold, you could choose to tell it from the center to the end, before you dovetail onto how the beginning was and the effects that beginning generated in the middle of the story. In whatever style you want to present the story, a guiding principle is that, it must not deprive the work of its basic comprehensibility. Accessibility, as opposed to obscurantism, must be ensured for the sake of the audience and the theatrical essence.

Step Three

Identify the characters involved in the story. Be sure that the characters are ideal and absolutely necessary. Check through the list of characters and extricate from the story the ones the story can afford to do without. Aim at a water-tight and compact play where everything is nearly perfect in its place. A play with few well-rounded characters might attract production possibilities more than a play with very many characters lacking normal well-rounded lives. Role development comes easier with a few characters who share and anchor responsibilities of the play than with many. Beware of creating characters from the animal world except the human world. Granted that dogs and cats, in particular, have enjoyed domestic petting from man and have actually been known to be nearly closer to some characters than humans, a playwright needs to be wary of or have some reservations about them. My earlier position from Johnson (2000:50) still holds, namely:

The playwright must come to accept the stage medium as one in which certain desired creations may not be realisable possible. If animals have to be introduced on the set, they may have to be limited to that of appendage to a particular character's composite personalities – and the animal must play a justifiable role on set to deserve its presence. If this cannot be handled, it should be dropped. Directors are usually thrown into trouble in scenes of this sort.

Choose an appropriate length within which the story leaves off the audience with a yawning appetite for

more, rather than a laborious course with a distasteful belch halfway through.

Step Four

Be conscious of building into the scheme fascinating elements of appeal. For instance, what volume of actions looms in the play? Are they enough to carry sufficient weight to make the drama thrill-filled? Aristotle defines drama as "action" hence inferring that from start to finish, action sprawls the entire circumference of the drama. Without action, there is the tendency of drab; and drab in drama spells doom. The writer has to be action-conscious in drama creation. A story may not necessarily be followed in the manner it originally and naturally occurred. The story happens now to be called drama – having undergone genetic metabolism to become another genre called drama. With this genre, dramatic action happens to be so crucial to its existence that the playwright just must create it adequately. Griffiths (1984:12) has a word in honour of "action" in drama:

Action is drama's most mysterious element. Formidable thinkers on the subject throughout history concur that it is also the most important. Indeed, drama is action...

Drama is a determined project on a mission which gets caught in the crossfires of prevailing obstruent circumstances. Drama meanders through risky courses in a bid to find a way of escape. Sometimes it succeeds. At other times, it fails. Essentially, conflict recognised as the backbone of drama, must make the team in drama if victory is desired. Without conflict, drama struts along dappishly in a wheelchair, helpless and incapable of impact.

A playwright must inject good and creati-qualitative conflicts into drama, be they physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and so on. With conflict, dramatic-tantrums will doubtlessly propel the dramatic sequence to action. With an upsurge of actions and counter-actions building up to an uncertain crescendo, tension is guaranteed in the drama, while in the consequence, suspense (suspense of uncertainties as to what is going to happen next) would literally have shifted the buttocks of the audience members to the very edge of their seats. Action is necessarily and uncompromisingly a must ingredient to spice the drama-menu for its consummate delectation.

Beat Them To It

Currently, my major grouse with the home videos (most of them) is not the mad proliferation of titles in the stores. Neither is it the uncanny conduct of sacrificing art on the altar of commercialism. What gets me turned off is the ever predictable storyline in dramatisation. Why bear to watch for one hour what you have already known how it will end within minutes in the first scene?

A playwright of worth orchestrates his structure in a manner that defies "intelligent" prediction. He manoeuvres his idolised plot in an adventurous and discovery spell. He beats them silly and confounds stakers and betters with slippery and curiously-revealing intriguing scenes, which total up to their losing their gambles. The element of surprise rather than prediction, ennobles the drama into an appreciable and respectable construct. By extension, the playwright behind this beautiful facetiae receives respect as an artiste of renown. Do permit this obvious repetition by way of re-emphasis on this crux of a matter: it is expedient that the playwright scrutinises his story and re-writes his script to void-off predictabilities, and zero-in surprises which will astound the audience with delightful appeal.

An Afterword on Criticism

A beginner dearly needs some measure of empowerment to square up against the almighty sizzler called criticism, especially the seeming damaging type. Criticism has every potential to terminate the zeal to write at the starting block. These positions have been made clear in two of my books:

Many people get easily put off by unfavourable comments made about their creative attempts. They blank out every other effort thereafter because they never want to be criticised. This is a wrong posture. Critics are professionals whose job is to criticise. No matter the work; whether a Nobel laureate in drama is the playwright, critics will still make comments on it. No one is perfect. Everyone has a different opinion and is entitled to such. One cannot possibly get subsumed into every mind and write a perfect reflection of all opinions... Writing must be made for critics to remain in trade... Criticism has a place in the creative scheme. Apart from uncouth persons who masquerade as critics and tear people's effort apart, criticism, constructive criticism, is necessary for the arts... (Johnson 2002:22).

The critic is doing his work when he criticises. The writer should do his work by writing and writing well. There has to be a mind-set in the writer to pursue his dream regardless of crushing weights of criticisms. In the other book, I stated that:

Essentially, the presence of the critic in the performance scheme is a plus to the quality of the art. The tear of the critic is the beginning of quality performance... This goes to confirm that there is no art work which cannot be faulted. This should not stop us from striving to have a near-perfect show. (Johnson 2001:172).

The position of this chapter is that nothing, absolutely nothing, should be permitted by the playwright to hinder the zeal with which to write. Criticism has to be recognised as quoted above and rather than be deterred by it and withdraw through its spell into premature extinction it should rather be seen as a facility which spurs the writer into a qualitative conception. There is no perfect script on earth, and even the attempts by geniuses often get nearly bastardised by sharp forays of brandished criticism.

Therefore when you write, form the habit of insisting that a third eye (such an eye of a thorough-bred professional with honesty and encouragement) sees the work and makes constructive comments. Where logic prevails let the course of the work be re-steered towards addressing those grounds of illogicalities. Drive your case to that point of self-satisfaction that the very best there is to be done, has been done, and having done so, rest your case.

Final word, write that play!

References

- Griffiths, Stuart. 1984. *How Plays Are Made*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Hanson, Brian. 1991. *Theatre: The Dynamics of the Art*. Second Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc..
- Johnson, Effiong. 2001. *Play Production Processes*. Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- Johnson, Effiong. 2000. *Playwriting: The Fundamentals*. Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- Wiebe, Ruth. 1986. "Creative Writing: Can it Be Taught?" in Demers, P. (ed) *The Creating Word*. Hound Mill: The Macmillan Press Ltd.