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PERM 3 FROM 5: ASSESSING THE WORKS OF THREE DIRECTORS ON THE LITTLE PLAY HOUSE STAGE:

By

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"It is clear... that all directors work in their own way. They focus on different aspects of theatre, and they have a wide range of experience in directing different companies and styles of theatre..." Sally Mackey (1997:98)

INTRODUCTION

By the Theatre Arts curriculum, the first semester of every session is usually when there is a season of performances. Often, not less than three performances would be on parade, one closely following the other. The reason for at least three performances being that, THA 100-300 classes (first semester courses), must have their production workshops under the

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director-guide of staff. For the 2004/2005 season, five performances were on course. THA 100-300 classes, a Departmental production which drew cast across the rank and file; and Directing Majors' practical examination. While Uwemedimo Atakpo was in charge of the Departmental production; with *If* by Ola Rotimi as the chosen play, Ofonime Inyang was in charge of THA 100 Production Participation and he opted to give his "After the War" a premiere. "Itiaba" written by Effiong Johnson, was the THA 200 show, directed by him also, while Etop Akwang directed *The Prisoners*, a play written by Chris Nwamuo, for THA 300 production participation. Enobong Umoh teaming up with Alphonsus Udoh, directing majors, chose Effiong Johnson's "Trapped", to exemplify their practical skills in directing. These five productions were designed and billed by the Department to come in quick succession, to give the season one with a sprawling vista of attractions thematically, directorially, aesthetically, with spices of varieties in keeping with the uniqueness and loftiness associated with live theatre experiences.

However, not the five productions will be assessed in this paper. We shall perm three from five; for the simple reason that shall be forthwith revealed: Two of the productions were associated with the name of this author, and it would not be ideal for an author or a director to assess his own work. The psychological distance and creative detachment theories, may not be acceptable justification to cover for the allegation of suspicion or "Sentiments". Therefore, three productions, namely, Ofonime Inyang's "After the War", directed by its author. *If* by Ola Rotimi directed by Uwemedimo Atakpo and *The Prisoners* by Chris Nwamuo, directed by Etop Akawang will be given discourses, from their production perspectives, in this paper.

Play Directing and Production: A Theoretical Discourse

In Johnson (2001:27) Inih Ebong identifies and as well differentiates between play directing and play producing. While directing is

a behind - the scene activity between the director and his team to create in the "private" seclusion of the theatre, away from the prying eyes of the public, the three-dimensional beauty that is seen on stage in production. **Play production** on the other hand, is the **consummate product** of directing. Put differently, it is the public performance, and affirmation of the "personal vision" inherent in directing. Most importantly, it marks the consummation of the social contract between theatre practitioners and the community...

This difference is instructive because many people have the wrong notion that the two terms are synonymous. Directing is the art of one expert, collaborating with other artists to realize a performance. A production on the other hand, often referring to the finished product, having been packaged for delivery, is the outcome (or finished product) of the directing effort. A production is that which had been structured or engineered by the art of directing. Whereas the audience only sees a production, they do not see directing or rather, the process of directing. It is not even ethical for any audience member to see the director at work, for the simple reason that the fabrication (process) is an "unready" and "unfinished" material. It is raw - not yet completely cooked, and invariably not ready to be served. An extended reason why the process of directing should not be open to public view is that, a product in its raw material level, or the packaging process, may not be

palatable to consume. It can even put off a potential patron from garnering interest for the finished product.

Directing Plays: Any Acceptable Ways

Sally Mackey (1997:98) had answered this question at the beginning, namely ... "all directors work in their own way..." Even in the rigid conventional epochs of theatre, what obtained was keeping to prescribed rules about the play, such as "only male actors", "five acts", "unity of place, time and action" etc. The choregus or actor managers and all those great grand fathers of the theatre, with their individual temperaments, had their different ways of going about productions. Definitely, styles, approaches, even schedules differed. Let's see some contemporary examples:

Max Stafford - Clark (1997:71). "I do tend to run through a play very late in the day, and probably not nearly as much as the actors would like". Phyllida Lloyd (1997:73) on the other hand, starts thus: "I will read the text over and over, sometimes aloud. I will break it down into units of action, and make all sorts of lists ..." Denise Wong (1997:76) on the other hand, confesses: "we tend to spend the first couple of weeks in the rehearsal process playing, and also exploring movement vocabulary..." John Wright admits:

I don't have any hard-and fast processes or methods. Because I spend so much time devising ... my job as a director is to try to work out with the actors what happens in the bass clef: what harmonies can we find to bring the melody alive.

Jude Kelly (1997:86) on her own, does this: "I try to ensure actors learn the text as quickly as possible, so we have more time playing and

looking at the real shape of the text". Jatinder Verma (1997:90) begins his directing this way: "for the first hour, we would do physical exercises that I always do. It would be a way of judging who is good at movement, who is physically open, who has problems, so getting some sense from that". Marcello Magni (1997:92) is rather exciting with his formula. According to him, it is not like a kind of chemical formula that shows that you have success; "it is like cooking-you put things together and then you taste it until you are happy".

On the question do you have a methodology? Annie Castledine (1997:96) had answered "I do have a methodology, but that methodology doesn't mean that I use the same exercises or the same methods all the time ... I am always interested in how to push forward, with what is the nature of theatre - what is the making of a piece of theatre.

On and on, we can talk about Stanislavski (1936) Don Taylor (1997) Oscar Brockett (1992) Milly Zarrilli (1995) Robert Wills (1976) Barbara Eugene (1991) Brian Hansen (1991) Richard Schechner (1970) Jon Whitmore (1994) etc. Only **One** conclusion would be reached, and that is, every director has his method, his choices, preferences, emphasis, in the process of play production.

With this at the back of our minds, we are ready to see the directing differentials in the three productions of our discourse.

OFONIME INYANG'S "AFTER THE WAR": PRODUCED BETWEEN

WEDNESDAY 9TH AND FRIDAY 11TH MARCH, 2005

The Play's Synopsis

This play dramatizes the dislocation of people and human relationships occasioned by the event of war. To justify this theme, the playwright enacts a scenario, where a brother, oblivious of an affair his father had with another woman, which re-sulted in the birth of a daughter, meets and unwittingly falls in love with his step sister, in a distant location far removed from home. However, what was planned to be a happy home coming with the showing of the lucky girl who had caught his fancy for marriage to his mother, turns sour as the very girl is revealed to be the sister! Shocked by the revelation and crushed by the guilty feeling of pre-visit incestuous affairs, coupled with the traditional belief in this act as abominable, the young rather "innocent" victims of the carnage and dislocation of war, end their lives.

The Discourse

In realizing this story with the year one class-people who had never had real experience of acting on the living stage-Inyang indeed had a big task at hand. Worse for him, the play itself had a large scale of cast which was made worst by Inyang's ambitious extension of the already extended latitude of the play. Visibly, therefore, at first sight, was a weight of a performance too heavy for the Little Play House's constricted space. Immediately, structures of composition, picturization and communicative meaning from balance, rhythm and aesthetics, were diminished, if not drowned by the mammoth crowd.

Similarly, with an inexplicable craze for Greek-like chorus in performance, Inyang wasted precious lines by reason of 'chorusing' which the audience could neither decipher their meaning nor their essence.

On Casting

Be that as it may, Inyang showed his bravado as a director to watch out for, in casting. The roles of Uwemedimo, (Snr), played by Ubong George, Efiowan (Idaresit Asa), Uto (Ubani Chibuzo), and Mama (Laura Edwin) were excellently chosen. The elders, namely Japhet Mbuotidem, Sunday Bassey, Paul James and Obong (Efosa Ese) also showed interpretative acumen.

On Directorial Styles

The directing styles were predominately, a juxtaposition of the African-oriented total theatre aesthetics and Harold Clurman's the spine. With total theatre aesthetics, the production's vista was dotted with songs, drummings, dances, acrobatic displays crowds and community blocs. The setting was undoubtedly, very typically African, with 'africanness' propping up itself in language registers, namely, proverbs. The mannerisms, fears and behavioural nuances were very African, which drummed the play's essence in close proximity of relevance. By deploying the spine, he identified the main action of the play as the aftermath of a war with its attendant dislocations. He pursued this objective rigorously to the end using mini-objective dramatic actions to strengthen the spine.

The acting was realistic and close enough to capturing the 'dramaticness' of typical behaviour at village / town meetings. On this note, there was also a deliberate toning and colouring of the patterns to suit the Ibibio community, which of course had been deliberately betrayed through names and characterizations.

On the Technical Elements

The stage props were suitable for the play's thematic pursuit and setting. In Mma Ine's hut, befitting props like old low kitchen-like stools, brooms etc, were visible to add value to the claims on the

'traditionalness' and poverty of a post-war wretchedness. At the community meeting, intrigues typical of the gossips and bigotry among villagers, were glaring. Even 'real' palm wine was served to the elders only, to showcase the selfishness(?) and indifference at the level of the community(?)

Quite innovative was the creative use of the entire auditorium space as complementary to the stage area in locating actions. With this, Inyang showed bold experimentalism in a confronting charisma. The audience were treated to a close-rubbing and smelling contact experience that yielded participation even from the ordinarily conservative member. The space beyond the last pew of seats and the auditorium back wall, the isles, the wings were all maximally put to use. If Inyang could drop events from the catwalk, he would have done so in a brass tack cum creative deconstruction.

Lighting and sound-given the available technical support in the Department, were quite above average. Only the mass of people too occupying for the space limits, masked the aesthetics of the light from becoming very apparent. Costume and make up were understandably average. But credence should go to the warriors' outfits and even their make-up which cast-made them vicious and intimidating in looks for their characters.

The nearly one hundred cast drama, by any standard, must have been a difficult one to handle. For Inyang to brave it and score well in the production departments so enumerated, he undoubtedly did a good job. For his position and experience, he could be pardoned for not taming the magnitude or scale of the production. Again, being a playwright-director, his attachment to the drama at a passionate level, disallowed for any objective distancing for creati-critical (re) assessment of issues.

The audience, the very people to whom the performance was meant, enjoyed the drama. The language was simple enough, the theme was drawing enough and the characters were such that they could identify with. The songs, dances, acrobatic jumps and drummings, were on their own spicy elements which attracted interest for the drama. The students whose orientation to the theatre this experiment was meant to serve, indeed had 'scars' to show about what was a coming their way in the "misunderstood" theatre.

When on the last night of the performance and "After the War" was over, it was like an incidence in history when "Warsaw saw War, and saw it no more". Inyang saw "War" and would not want to see it again(?) Congratulations!

OLA ROTIM'S *IF* BY UWEMEDIMO ATAKPO PRODUCED BETWEEN APRIL 7TH AND 9TH, 2005

Preamble

The eventual performance of *If* in the Little Play House, was a dream come true. For over one year, the dream to produce *If* was consistently botched by oppositional frustrations. The out gone class had *If* hung on their necks from THA 300 till they moved to the 400 level and eventual graduation - through the mercy and amnesty of the Departmental Board - without *If* seeing the light of day. *If* was always shrouded with "if only this or if only that were compliant for *If* to be realizable". But Atakpo's passion to see *If* on stage was undeterred. Somewhere in his mind, there was a reservation accommodating *If* till its moment of showing forth. And that came between Thursday, April 7 and Saturday, April 9, 2005 in the Little Play House, Uyo.

***If*, Its Synopsis**

If by Ola Rotimi, a provocative play, dramatizes the struggles of a down-

trodden lot, caged up in a multi-tenanted rickety building in Diobu; Port Harcourt. Exploited already as even the tap had since stopped running, the inmates are threatened with quit notices as a ploy to intimidate them to vote for their uncaring and unfeeling landlord who bids for a senatorial seat in the Federal Republic. This ploy is determinedly resisted by the tenants under the strategizing mentoring of Papa, a retired headmaster. Perhaps, the venom borne by the oppressed could best be expressed against their oppressors when Garuba, the deaf and dumb (courtesy of a boxing tournament to eke a living) literally throws the landlord and his gift out from Mama's birthday gathering. Metaphorically, Rotimi in a subtle camouflage, highlights the exploitation of the Niger Delta by "capitalist paper Tiger". With the tongues and tribes in an insecure-like, unworkable and exploited domain, the image of Nigeria, especially of the Niger Delta, comes strikingly grimly. At the end, there doesn't seem to be any hope for the battered people even as their hopes for tomorrow, represented by Onyeama, are prematurely dashed by an unfeeling system.

The Production Essence

If's production in the Little Play House, University of Uyo, indeed gripped the enthusiastic audience with the essence for liberation of the Nigerian peoples from orchestrated clutches of oppressions. On another count, *If* confronted the audience with little hope in democracy, especially if the likes of the landlord are strategizing through manipulation, intimidation and blackmail to secure elective and appointive positions. Most sadly is the utter neglect of the foundation for a better tomorrow, and the premature cutting down-with unfeeling abandon - of the young stem carrying the promised seed for tomorrow's harvest. *If*, thus, seems to say "If only we had common sense and good leaders... if only we had decent and responsible government etc, the plight of the down trodden would have been addressed and life would have been preserved. What a