



The **Stolen Manuscripts**

Effiong E. Johnson.



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INTRODUCTION

You might probably wonder what my motivation was for writing *The Stolen Manuscripts*. You might have thought that a situation similar to the one dramatized in the plot did happen to me. No. It has not happened to me directly, but to others I share the same corridor with. It has happened to many others in the civil service. Their ideas have been fought and suppressed by their ill-informed bosses because some credits would go to them, or possibly, some promotion could come as a result of the experimentation of the idea. It has happened rather rampantly in the University circles where the struggle to get to the top is mostly a matter of hard work.

And in the Arts in particular, such struggles have been realized to materialize within a short time for the creative ones. You asked what my motivation was? Well, just to punch with a little pin this bubbling balloon of vandalism, and to do that mercilessly if I could, if by so doing, these terrible monsters could be driven back to the jungles, away from where human beings reside. Do you think it is too much on them?

Someone had earlier said that *The Stolen Manuscripts* has the potential of scattering campuses. I told him not to fear. Only the guilty need fear. If this work can carry out this great feat, then my aim would have been achieved. Not that I propagate the destruction of systems though, but to execute a radical revolution in the regions of crookedness. A painful inclination meted against such characters as "Dr. Martins" so that others might shudder even at the thought of malicious and pernicious conducts and activities.

OBSERVATION:

Sometimes names live out their meanings. Not only in humans, but even in literary works. Would you conceive that *The Stolen Manuscripts* has been stolen - four copies of the work stolen at different times? Whatever the reasons for stealing *The Stolen Manuscripts* God Almighty left a remnant of one copy hidden in one of my professor's archives for eleven years. This resurrected the near-lost hope of *The Stolen Manuscripts*. But I keep wondering why this particular script attracted so much thievery.

Effiong Johnson (Ph.D)

OTI R BOOKS BY CALTOP PUBLICATIONS

PLAYS:

Ijaiye: Wale Ogunyemi

The Kings Banquet:

Sweet Agony: Taiwo Adeyemi

Not without Bones: Effiong Johnson

Doom in the Dimes: Stella Oyedepo

Don't Believe What you See: Stella Oyedepo

Comrade and Voltage: Iyorwuese Hagher

Something to Die for and other plays: Saviuor N. Agoro

The Stolen Manuscript: Effiong Johnson

PROSE:

Eyes of Darkness: Sina Oladhinde

A Ticket for Regrets: Soji Obebe

Where Lies The Honour?: Soji Obebe

CHARACTERS

Dr. UKEME

37yrs, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Creative Arts. A writer whose works have enjoyed great following.

Dr. MARTINS

55yrs, Head of Department of Creative Arts

Mr. BAYO

40yrs, Assistant Lecturer. A critic, also in the Department of Creative Arts.

Dr. Mrs. OKOYE

40yrs, Senior Lecturer, Department of Creative Arts.

Prof. IDUMAH

57yrs, Dean of Arts,

Mr. OKAFOR

45yrs, a Publisher.

Mr. OKORO

47yrs, Marketing Supervisor.

INSPECTOR THOMPSON

*40yrs, of Criminal Investigation Department (CID)
Alagbon Close.*

Four Final Year Students

MOVEMENT ONE

Before the acting area is lit, a Carpenter's hammer is heard hitting hard on the roof of a half-completed building. Another man hits another thing close by, while others drag things that sound like cement bags on the floor. Somebody whistles in the midst of the noise. Light is introduced gently on the stage. The acting area is the Departmental Conference Room. Presently, it is temporarily used by the Senior Staff, whose offices are undergoing general renovation. Mr. Bayo sits at the right hand corner with a few books in front of him.

BAYO

(Complaining) Two months! Yes it is exactly two months today and the crazy work isn't done. This mad house.... Bull shit! *(Dusts the desk hurriedly)* How can one's mind function in the right direction in a place as rowdy as this? *(Grabs one of the books in front of him, turns a few pages quickly and drops it back)* it's no good. I think the students ought to appreciate our problems because as it is, I can't prepare for any goddamn thing now. *(Dr. Martins the H.O.D. suddenly opens the door and enters)* Good morning, Dr. Martins....

MARTINS

... Morning Mr. Bayo. How good that you made yourself available. I was thinking of you as I drove down here.

BAYO

Thinking of me? Well... here am. I came in here to put things right before my lecture at ten 0'clock. But it seems I can't make any headway...

MARTINS

Why? You should try. You remember the students' complaint about you last week? If anyone must double up, it's you.

BAYO

What can one do in a ridiculous place such as this? This is more or less a sanitarium to me especially when we have the misfortune of having three or four of us in here. We don't talk academics then...

MARTINS

You should have straightened things up at home. I quite sympathize with the problem we're currently facing. But we all agreed that the offices should be renovated to create more space for our comfort.

BAYO

Yes, we did. But none of us was told that the job would take centuries to be done. You talked of home as if I haven't told you the headache my four boys gives me when I get back home.

MARTINS

Patience, Mr. Bayo. Give the masons a few more days... It's the patient dog that eats the fattest bone; you know.

BAYO

I know, but I'm wondering how the patient dog goes about surviving before this fattest of bones appears. Is it not two months now since the work began? Well, let's not talk about it, I get upset even thinking about it. What were you thinking of me for on your way here?

MARTINS

(Gets up and picks the Guardian News Paper before

moving to Bayo) I've got news for you, Mr. Bayo. News, first the good ones. The Senate yesterday approved our suggestion for the building of a bigger proscenium theatre which will conformably seat about three thousand people. Our proposal for the site, which was midway to the North Gate from Kemble Drive, was also adopted. Moreover, our twenty-eight seater Coaster Bus, to add to the other two old ones, is just on the way. Isn't that wonderful?

BAYO *(Indifferently) ... Well...*

MARTINS *(Changes the subject)*

Have you seen today's papers, Bayo?

BAYO

Not yet.

MARTINS

Look at this... *(places the paper in front of him)* page ten. *(points his finger at the head line!)* "A work of the Century" Imagine the superfluity of it. It's amazing what Professor Atanifan sees in "Ancient Masks" that is so enchanting and encapsulating to him.

BAYO

(Gets up excited) "Ancient Masks"? "A work of the Century"? You mean Dr. Ukeme's "Ancient Masks" is this work of the century according to Professor Atanifan of the University of ...?

MARTINS

Read it for yourself. The flamboyant merits and sugar-coated appraisal lavishly embroidered on a thing that wasn't much of a success when the performing company dramatized it last season. A shoddy thing that attempted some breakaway from popular conventions but succeeded in being a woeful failure.

I can't forget the memory of last season. Just last season. And now, it is applauded "The Work of the Century". By a renowned professor.

BAYO

(Sits down quickly and picks his reading lenses) "Arts, they say is a way of life and what an excellent way Dr. Ukeme has logically proven this in his masterpiece collection "Ancient Masks"...

MARTINS

(Walks away disgusted) No, no, Bayo, read it to yourself. I have read the ridiculous account myself. I wouldn't believe Professor Atanifan could be so blindly extravagant and generous that... Well, let me reserve my comments till you have finished going over it. *(Someone opens the door. Martins is startled but the door is closed again.)* Who the hell was missing his way in here? *(Grudgingly)* I thought it was Dr. Ukeme...

BAYO

(Gets up) This is alarming: Listen to this..." His careful choice of titles which clearly keep revealing themselves in every scene of the work, the tactful co-ordination of the facts in a masterful ensemble and the selectivity of language for the different genres that make up the collections, are all quintessences

MARTINS

Enough Bayo, please. I have told you to read it to yourself. It's disgusting to me. Finish it and let's plan writing a strong rebuttal against this...

BAYO

(Sits.) Reads for a while then gently closes the paper) That's

interesting!

MARTINS

Not to me.

BAYO

Well, what do you want me to say again?

MARTINS

It's appalling...

BAYO

The harm has been done already.

MARTINS

The harm is not irreparably done.

BAYO

How do you mean?

MARTINS

It's not. Two of us can put the society straight. Get them better informed. Shatter the fabrics of the Professor whatever's fabrication. Look Mr. Bayo, you don't seem to realize the implication of this cheap popularity Dr. Ukeme is receiving from different quarters. It is buying him airs everywhere. Unless we do something about it urgently, we will regret it.

BAYO

Well Dr. Martins, as a critic, it is obvious that not everything that Professor Atanifan has written in favour of "Ancient Masks" is exaggerated. There are some outstanding truths he's told about it also. Besides, you do not seem to appreciate the important roles big names play in our Society. Come to think of it, if a professor of Theatre Arts like Atanifan should pass a vote of confidence on "Ancient Masks", what chances do unknown people like us have? Well, if you still insist on

the rebuttal, you can write it.

MARTINS

No! *(Gets up again, somewhat desperate)* Listen to me, Bayo. You've lost sight of many things. Our positions in this department are at stake. How can we allow somebody from another tribe to boss over us? Maybe you haven't thought of that. Already, Dr. Ukeme has many points. More than any of us does. He is on the list of prospective professors being examined by the University Council. And professor Atanifan was deputy Vice-Chancellor when our V.C. was at the University of Nigeria. And they worked all those years in unalloyed harmony. Think about these... If you don't use your renowned position as a critic to shut in these er...er...forays, released by Atanifan, then we are finished. He's going to be appointed our boss.

BAYO

(Grabs the paper again and scans through the review) Too late! It is too late now to start the fight. I mean the professor's review work is already published, probably the V.C. has already read it and other members of the University governing Council. Meanwhile, the Council has been meeting on the subject of appointments and promotions rather fortnightly these days and Dr. Ukeme's collection of five plays on different themes has been published and marketed as his third major published work. Are you really sure a thing like mere rebuttal in one newspaper can miraculously stop him from becoming what he has worked hard for these many years?

MARTINS

Many years? Oh come off it Bayo. Many years? I taught Ukeme. I recommended him for the Assistantship he utilized

to become a doctor in just three years. Well, he's a smart fellow, no one disputes that. But he's only just worked for four years and he has these books in the market. And now you are canvassing that I should allow him to build a nest on my hair. Write that rebuttal, Bayo. I would have... but I'm not a professional critic. Moreover, if I wrote it, it would have glaringly shown that I was er...er...jealous or maybe... trying to cling tightly to my position. This thing must be done subtly at the background.

BAYO

All right, now tell me, what do I write?

MARTINS

My goodness, Bayo. This is something you've done a thousand and one times, and you are asking me who is a kind of a novice in the game what to do? I am a technical man. Pull down the Leko and the Frenel lamps in the theatre, ask me to determine the best angles for them and I will do that. Or sit me in the control room to man the sound and light consoles and you would admire me playing with the buttons craftily. But criticism? No.

BAYO

What do I write? You watched the production of one of these plays and only a short while ago you called it a 'Shoddy' presentation. What are those things you couldn't compromise in his work?

MARTINS

Well, Aristotle's poetics gives explanation on what a play at the beginning, middle and end should contain. But Ukeme vehemently violated that convention in his "Ancient

Masks". Again, by making the end to be the beginning, he destroys the illusion of reality which is very vital in theatrical productions

BAYO

Is that all?

MARTINS

(Uncomfortably) Well, in one of his works, the one he calls er...er.. well, that doesn't matter now, you can check that up for yourself, he's done nothing new as far as I am concerned. All he does is borrow extensively from Brechtian and Pirandelian ideas. He even plagiarizes Shakespeare..

BAYO

Shakespeare? That is too remote Dr. Martins: Are you sure?

MARTINS:

Why not? Shakespeare, or how can you explain the expression "The stench that staggered me"?

BAYO

Simple. That particular scene was romantic and flowery languages and expressions were very appropriate. Apart from that, the character that made that statement was a poet or was said to be one by the author. So, that is as justifiable as it is pardonable. I don't think he plagiarized.

MARTINS

Well, you write. I have made enough contributions. Look out for some other facts and details yourself. *(About going).*

BAYO

Wait a minute, sir. What of the language, theme, characters

and other elements both theatrical and dramatic in the collection? Don't you have what to say about them? These are what really matter in dramatic criticism....

MARTINS

(Escapes from exposing his ignorance) That's an assignment for you.

BAYO

Dr. Martins *(Gets up frustrated)* if you really want this scheme to be a success, you need more strategies than one. I will write .. but think of other avenues...

MARTINS

Exactly, I have an idea. He gave me his most recent collection to vet for him. Wanted me to write the foreword to it as an honour... being his lecturer for many years.

BAYO

How many works?

MARTINS

Three! Three full length works. A tragedy, a comedy and a melodrama; still on manuscripts.

BAYO

What do you intend to do with these manuscripts?

MARTINS

Leave that to me. *(Just that moment the door opens and Dr. Ukeme comes in. He is smartly dressed in a pair of black trousers, a white long sleeves shirt with a black bow tie to match)* Dr. Ukeme... speak of the devil ... you're dressed for dinner, I suppose.

UKEME

Morning Sir, Morning Mr. Bayo. *(Looks at his watch...)*

Not for dinner Dr. Martins. Maybe for luncheon. I'm expecting my publishers this afternoon. It's past ten o'clock Mr. Bayo, your class...

BAYO

Oh, forget it, man. The students should appreciate our plight and understand our problems. What good can one make out of a terrible place such as this?

UKEME

Well..., (Goes to sit opposite Bayo. Drops his books and picks a pamphlet to fan himself) No light?

BAYO

There is.

UKEME

Then for God's sake, the fans if you don't mind. I'm sweating profusely. (Goes to put on the fan)

MARTINS

You haven't seen today's papers, have you?

UKEME

No, not yet. What's up?

MARTINS

There is something in *The Guardian* that should interest you

UKEME

What is it?

MARTINS

Professor Atanifan's ravishing appraisal of your "Ancient Mask"

UKEME

Professor Atanifan?

MARTINS

Exactly. "The work of the Century" he calls it.

BAYO

It's like a birthday present from an old girl friend, isn't it?

UKEME

Wait a minute, Mr. Bayo. Professor Atanifan... who is he? Where is he...

MARTINS

You don't mean that you don't know him. The head of Theatre Arts Department of the University of...

UKEME

Oh, oh ... I now understand ... I remember now.

BAYO

A one time Deputy Vice – Chancellor of the University of Nigeria ... during our V.C's tenure...

UKEME

I understand. Let me see the paper (Goes to get it from Martins)

MARTINS

Page ten!

UKEME

(Turns it hastily. Some of the leaflets drop on the ground, he picks them up hurriedly) "A work of the Century"! "Art they say is life and what an excellent way Dr. Ukeme has logically proven this in his master piece collection, "Ancient Masks"... (Looks at Martins) What a flashy scenario!

MARTINS

He's generous, isn't he?

BAYO

Very vociferous, I would say.

UKEME

Call it what you will. I think the man is making an honest appraisal. He's been intrigued by the collection, don't you think? *(Reads the paper)*

MARTINS

Have you worked with him before? Been his student maybe during your graduate studies abroad? For certainly, I know he never knew you during your undergraduate days here...

UKEME

What are you talking about, Dr. Martins? I've never known him before ... never seen his face even in the news papers.

BAYO

Then this is the time to scout him up. Pay him a visit and express your unreserved appreciation of his flamboyant...

UKEME

Come on Bayo, that is not necessary. I mean, it is a review any right-minded person would have carried out on a work he fancied...

BAYO

I have been nursing the idea of writing a critique on your celebrated "Ancient Masks", perhaps those I have watched on stage if I couldn't treat all of them at a go.

UKEME

Then go ahead. Choose your point of view as well and let's see the impact that it can make.

MARTINS

You mean you never knew or saw professor Atanifan all your life...? Then what are his grounds for coming out with a thing as sweeping as that about you?

UKEME

What are his grounds? His love for the arts. The appreciation

of pedantic attainments. A rather fatherly blessing on scholarly achievements. He hasn't minced words in expressing his mind on this, has he?

MARTINS

(Snaps) Are you really agreeing that "Ancient Masks" has all these attributes? To me, there are quite some approaches of yours that do not have any artistic base...

UKEME

(Casually) Well, Dr. Martin's this is a free society and everyone is entitled to his own opinion....

MARTINS

No, Ukeme, don't dismiss this allegation with a mere wave of the hand. Do you really think there will be another great scholar like Aristotle whose theories have been upheld jealously over the centuries? Or do you think there will come an age which will produce another Shakespeare? These are men who have left indelible marks in theatre concepts, theories practice, and we the lesser beings are struggling to find the path they trod to place our feet on their footprints.

BAYO

Impossible, try as we may, we can never beat their records... The cream of such men is not for our age...

UKEME

What are you both saying?

MARTINS

What we mean here is that a lot of your works are loosely built on seeming sand and would crumble by a strong wind of criticism because they lack classical foundations.

BAYO

This has been the fear that has delayed the writing of my

criticism on "Ancient Masks". I wouldn't want to be seen as thwarting my colleague's academic progress, being much aware of the set back my criticisms could cause.

UKEME

This is incredible! Ridiculous! Mr. Bayo, a theory is not a theory if it can't stand the test of violent criticism. I have told you before to come out of the cooler with your superb critique and show the whole world the havoc this can cause. Dr. Martins, apparently, you are a rigid conventionalist. I am not. We are in the twentieth century where theatre is characterized by the freedom of style, form and technique. What is Classicism? Where does it stand in the face of realism, naturalism, existentialism, absurdism, futurism and cubism and post-modernism to mention these few, whose manifestoes have eternally crippled classicism. And Shakespeare? People worship him as the greatest... but scholars haven't maximally resolved the doubts as to whether those works haven't been wrongfully accredited to him. And who says he's the greatest? What of Moliere acclaimed the "French Shakespeare at one time? Shaw and Chekhov in their times? Or what of August Strindberg who before his death in 1912, had become a dramatist of prodigious energy whose volumes of collected works numbered over fifty five? What of Soyinka? Our own W.S. of Africa, what of Osofisan whose record at his age threatens the creative scenario?

BAYO

You've left something out there. These men you've mentioned didn't really slap classical conventions on the cheek... Strindberg even used some lines from Shakespeare in his work "The father".

UKEME

What of the men who broke the head of conventionalism? What of Victor Hugo who in the 19th Century, mobilized the world against it? Have you forgotten his Preface to Cromwell, where he raged, let's take up a hammer to their theories and systems and treatises. Mr. Critic, have you forgotten when he cried out let us tear down the old stucco-work which conceals the façade of arts? When he proclaimed there are no rules, no laws except the general laws of nature? That was when the deed was done.

MARTINS

How effective was his propaganda? How many could he win to his side? Only a handful of...

UKEME

How? Dr. Martins, it seems to me that you have totally lost the gleam of world theatre history. (*proudly*) Listen, Doctor, whenever a revolution breaks out, imaginations become frightened. Brains become people with phantoms. How effective was his propaganda you asked? It lasted for a reasonable span in the theatrical epoch. Men like Diderot, Balzac, Alexander Dumas and George Sand, bear testimonies in literature as romantic writers who were no more imprisoned by the fetters of conventionalism, though, so what the hell are you guys talking about?

BAYO

There is no point in your dancing in the galore of self exaltation, trying to show us that you are historically accurate simply to beg the issue home. It won't work. Admit that you have failed in some points you know, for classicism remains the bed-rock of dramatic ideologies.

UKEME

To you, Bayo, and that's why you sleep on it without waking up in time for anything substantial. That's why your imaginations are shut out and your creativity is near permanently jeopardized. Tell me Dr. Martins, have you ever heard of a man named Antonin Artaud? He died in 1948. Ten years before his death he wrote this profound essay titled "No More Masterpieces". Masterpieces of the past are good for the past, he said. Not for us. We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a direct way corresponding to present modes of feeling and understandable to everyone. Bed-rock of dramatic ideologies? Classicism in the twentieth century? How unfortunate and antiquated!

MARTINS

That's how you ramble. In your works, self is not removed. You can see Dr. Ukeme speaking through all his characters as if all of them were smart, educated and intelligent as him. That's wrong. When I taught you in your undergraduate programme you used to criticize some writers parading themselves in high grammatical exhibitionism. Now you fall a victim to the same criticism. Your situations are absurd, removed from day to day routine experiences. The common man does not understand you. Sometimes one wonders who you are writing for?

UKEME

(Annoyed) Not motor park touts definitely! I write for educated minds. Routine experience to me is not art. Why come to the theatre at all if what you are shown is the same as

the incidence you witnessed on the street? No, Martins, art goes beyond that. I create forms out of visions and add techniques to intuitions. That's art. And I would rather have my characters depict that in a reasonable language than, er, choose a cheap stance in pidgin English.

BAYO

Pride, pride. Dr. Ukeme. Pride is ruining you ...

UKEME

Beauty, Bayo. Virtue and intelligence. That's my emblem, and glorious pursuit. Why don't you write your critique and get it out while you wait for my rejoinder? And let the society judge us.

MARTINS

How wrong you are in hope. They would applaud you with woes. They will celebrate you with rejection. They...

UKEME

Like Professor Atanifan has done, isn't it? That is just one out of thousands. One whose mind is not perpetually plagued by a cancerous ailment which could be diagnosed possibly as blind envy.

BAYO

Enough! Ukeme. Dr. Martins is not your mate. You can give your insults to me, not him. He taught you

UKEME

Because he taught me, I should be boxed up in his pigeon hole of shortish ideas?

MARTINS

(Dejectedly) Allow him to rave, Bayo. Truth will be our judge...

UKEME

And that soon. I think you have shown me enough of it already.

Can I have back my manuscripts, please? I don't appreciate the approach you will adopt in writing that foreword. I had given you the privilege to write. I thought I could bring you out from the dark for the rays of the sun to warm a bit. But you have chosen to remain shut out. Stay there and rot in your archaic traditions and worm-eaten edifice of conventions and rules. Let me have my manuscripts.

MARTINS

(Pretends to be sober) Let not what I'm going to tell you now be misinterpreted to have any connections with what has transpired between us today.

UKEME

Why fear? Say anything you like but let me have my manuscripts. My publishers, I told you, are coming here today ...

MARTINS

It concerns the manuscripts.....

UKEME

Never mind if you didn't even read them. I wouldn't be surprised. Just give them back to me.

MARTINS

Not that. You see ... the renovation exercise completely disorganized my office...

UKEME

It disorganized mine ... all of us have been disorganized. So it's no news to me.

MARTINS

I haven't seen the manuscripts. I thought they were in one of the files but I have checked in vain for them. For two months now, I have searched for them in silence. That's what

I was telling Mr. Bayo before you came in. The manuscripts, I think must have been stolen by one of the many people who helped convey my props to my house, before my office was pulled down by the masons.

UKEME

(Shocked) I can't believe this, Dr. Martins. I mean, it is not possible. My manuscripts stolen? It's impossible. Go back and search thoroughly for them. I'm sure they are in one of your files. Unpile them and fish out my manuscripts, please.

MARTINS

I have done all that, Dr. Ukem. *(Indifferently)*

UKEME

I think this is a scheme, Dr. Martins. Better get me the manuscripts soonest or we'll talk about it outside the four walls of the university. *(Walks Out)*

BLACKOUT.

MOVEMENT TWO

As the lights return Mr. Bayo is sitting on the desk reading a book in one hand and eating groundnuts with the other. Dr. Martins is busy packing his books together.

BAYO

(Casually) Getting ready for a class, Sir?

MARTINS:

Not at all. *(Looks at his watch)* Oh my God, I'm almost fifteen minutes behind time.

BAYO

Appointment, meeting?

MARTINS

(Picks his keys) Not exactly. The kids. I should have gone to pick them before now.

BAYO

What's your driver doing?

MARTINS

Took my wife out. She got a letter from her mother to come home urgently.

BAYO

Hope nothing serious?

MARTINS

Hope so too. This is not the time for a ceremony like death... I'm just not ready for it.

BAYO

A ceremony, death?

MARTINS

Why, yes. That's what it is nowadays. A big ceremony. Send the dead body to the mortuary while you start building a house if you had none. If you had one, well, you give it a

face lift. Make announcements in the media, send a fax to relations overseas. Meanwhile, the dead soul is accumulating hospital bills while all these plans must fully materialized...

BAYO

It's absurd. We pay more attention to the dead than the living. They won't even go to the hospital when they are sick or rather, they won't be taken to the hospital...

MARTINS

Misplaced priorities; it's everywhere ... please tell anyone who comes to look for me to give me just thirty minutes. I'll be back soon.... *(Dr. Mrs. Okoye comes in)* Dr. Okoye.....

OKOYE

Glad I've seen you.... where are you going to ?

MARTINS

(At the door) Auntie Stella's-er my kids ... I'm sure they'll query me today. I'll see you when I return. Thirty minutes. *(Leaves)*

BAYO

Good afternoon, Madam. How's the family?

OKOYE

Not bad. My boy came in yesterday from Kano. Federal Government College, Kano. He's just finished his School Certificate of Education (G.C.E) examinations.

BAYO

Oh, so fast? That's beautiful!... I've got news for you, Madam. Or, have you heard it already?

OKOYE

(Settle down) What news?

BAYO

The Senate has Okayed the building of the proscenium theatre, at last.

OKOYE

(Excited) That's fantastic! Oh, victory at last. Let's get out of the Mini-Theatre at last. I can't forgive it for ruining my production last season, you know.

BAYO

I had told you to use the Open Air Theatre but you feared the havoc rain might cause you. Yet, it didn't rain that week.

OKOYE

It did. The last night of the production, it so rained that the National Electric Power Authority disrupted power supply and the action froze for ten minutes while we waited for the University plant to come to our rescue. I wondered what would have happened if we were outside in the Open Air Theatre.

BAYO

I Remember now. I travelled out after the fifth night's performance.

OKOYE

Tell me more ... They have, where? *(Takes a few dance steps)*

BAYO

Everything as we suggested. Mid-way to the North Gate from Kemble Drive.

OKOYE

Beautiful. It's much better there than in the heart of the campus. We will then have a good parking space for the audience. And we can display our artistic talents there without being inhibited by space problems any longer.

BAYO

The Mini-Theatre had its own advantages also. Psychological immediacy and good actor/audience relationship. You remember how effective that was in Dr. Ukeme's "Ancient Masks" last season?

OKOYE

If I were him, I would have put on "Crumbling Walls". Though I don't quite like tragedies but I think he has done justice to the hero. I hate trust being unjustly rewarded the way the hero suffered it at the climax of the play. Ukeme handled it the way I would...

BAYO

Well, I think I know why he preferred "Ancient Masks".

OKOYE

why?

BAYO

That's the title of the collection. You know, putting on "Ancient Masks" sounded like putting on all the plays in the collection. That was the idea behind it. More so, he had already produced 'Crumbling Walls' and the rest. He wouldn't have loved repeating sit as if he had only that.

OKOYE

I see. I didn't know about that. But if I had my way, I would mount it up again in the new Proscenium theatre. I think the complexities of the set can better be handled there than one would have attempted elsewhere.

BAYO

The work in the new theatre is yet to begin even though we believe it won't take a year to be done when everything is given to the contractor. But you can never say, imagine

our staying here for two lousy months. Who thought we would spend up to three weeks here? I didn't. May be your interest will shift to another interesting work before the theatre is completed ... *(There is a knock. The door opens and four students comes in. Two men and two ladies).* Are we safe?

STUDENT I

Quite safe, Mr. Bayo. Good afternoon. We waited for you at ten o'clock but you didn't show up, what happened?

STUDENT II

Last week it was the same thing. Though then you sent in an apology. You said you were terribly occupied by those old friends of yours from Lagos. What happened today?

STUDENT III

Our comprehensive exam is just around the corner, yet, we haven't done anything in Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Dr. Ukeme has given us lecturers in creative writing to cover the periods and aspects in the syllabus. And Madam....

OKOYE

I will meet you at two. Two o'clock is that okay with you?

STUDENT III

Yes madam, but we would have preferred it at one o'clock instead of two. We have no lectures at one. So, if you don't mind that time

OKOYE

You mean one is free for you?

ALL

Very free.

OKOYE

All right. I even prefer it because it have an appointment with someone at two o'clock. I have been contemplating on stopping the lecture after forty five minutes

STUDENT III

It's quite okay for us. We can even fix the time permanently so that we shall not be missing our lunch, you know.

BAYO

I'm sorry. I know how you feel. I sympathize with the situation but you need to appreciate my problems too. There is nothing I can possibly do in a junk of this nature. And at home, rule out anything serious because my kids are really naughty. However, you will have what to write in Criticisms in your comprehensive examination. When do I meet you again?

STUDENT IV

Tomorrow, and that should have been the final lecture but now it is the first. I hope Sir, it wouldn't be the only lecture because I'm afraid we have quite some grounds to cover in Criticism.

BAYO

No, it won't I'll arrange for extra lectures with you.

STUDENT

You see? That will affect our time table Well, we'll appreciate it if only you will make it. By the way, Mr. Bayo, how far have you gone with the last chapter of my project? You haven't said anything about it for three weeks.

BAYO

(Lies) I'll soon send in my comments. It's all right. You would have had it before now but this disorganisation...

well, we hope and pray that this renovation thing were finished for one to settle down in his office and work.

STUDENT III

Yes Madam, now that my colleague has mentioned it, you promised to discuss my last chapter with me. Remember, you told me last time that I had gone somewhat out of my topic...

OKOYE

I did. I haven't forgotten. Next week Monday, may be. I'll be less busy then.

STUDENT III

Please, because the deadline for the submission of the work is fast approaching.

STUDENT II

What of Dr. Ukeme and the Head of Department? I thought I saw their cars in their lofts this morning.

BAYO

I don't know the whereabouts of Dr. Ukeme but Dr. Martins will be back soon. He went to pick his kids from school. Any problems? You can see them later in the day.

STUDENTS II

All right Sir, we will be expecting you tomorrow. We have missed you, you know.

STUDENT IV

Bye Sir, Madam, we will see you at one o'clock. *(They all leave)*

BAYO

These students

OKOYE

They are so irksome, aren't they?

BAYO

Let them keep roaming about and not read their books. When the degree examinations begin they'll shit in their pants. Good Lord, the scenes I have witnessed in this mad house today. First it was Dr. Ukeme and Dr. Martins and now this bunch of never-do-wells...

OKOYE

Dr. Ukeme and Dr. Martins? What happened?

BAYO

Well, it all began after we had read a review on "Ancient Masks" written by Professor Atanifan in the Guardian Newspaper.

OKOYE

Is that all?

BAYO

Not all that. You see, Dr. Martins believes that the work was somewhat exaggerated; that "Ancient Masks" didn't actually have all the merits professor Atanifan generously bestowed on it. And I think Martins was right.

OKOYE

Well, I'm not surprised that Dr. Martins said that.

BAYO

Why, anybody would make similar comments after reading that review work. The headline alone is enough cause for concern.

OKOYE:

What is it?

BAYO

"The Work of the Century" Imagine that, isn't that being too loud-mouthed for a professor?

OKOYE

Why, suppose nothing has interested the professor all these years the way "Ancient Masks" has, and he doesn't think there will be any other work that will appeal that much to him in the next coming years? That pronouncement shouldn't cause much of a fuss. I mean, If you don't see Dr. Ukeme's book in the same light professor Atanifan sees it, then write your own version of what and how you feel about it. And let us have peace here though I still feel that there are other reasons why Dr. Martins couldn't see the merits in Dr. Ukeme's book.

BAYO

(Suspiciously) What other reasons do you feel, motivated Dr. Martins to say.....

OKOYE

Well, I was here rather tired that day; three weeks ago, I think, and I bowed my head on the table. Dr. Martins capitalized on my indulgence and narrated his fears to Dr. Sokoya. You see, there is a certain precedence Martins wants to set here and that is, the dominance of key positions by a particular group of people. Well, I happen to belong to that group unfortunately, but I don't think that should be the criterion here. For one, this is a Federal University, the location of it notwithstanding and besides, academic is a competitive venture, like business, and it's always the hardworking ones that shoot their heads out in the crowd.

BAYO

Eh-eh?

OKOYE

Bayo, you know that hard work is the solution to Dr. Martins' fuming reaction and all others in his shoes,

including the big men in the Civil Service who have struggled over the years through promotions and mediocre trainings to get to the top. Hard work. Yes, that is what all of them need, not to feel threatened by the young blood and aspiring ones who sacrificially work hard and have fortune smiling at them

BAYO

(Defending) Dr. Martin's reactions... I mean his concerns... are for the good of all of us and the sooner we identify with him in the struggle, the better...

OKOYE

Not me! You struggle the meaningless and bankrupt struggle. I have better productive things to think about than engage my time in fruitless and perverse struggles. *(There is a gentle knock at the door. Okoye looks at her watch)* I hope it is not these students again coming to drag me to the lecture theatre. I still have ten minutes. *(The knock is repeated)*

BAYO

Come inside, please. The door isn't locked. *(Mr. Okafor and Mr. Okoro enter)*

OKAFOR

(Respectively) Good afternoon. I think we are in the right place, aren't we? We are looking for Dr. Ukeme; J.S. Ukem. Is this where to find him?

BAYO

(Gets up politely) You are in the right place, gentlemen. Come in please. You are welcome. I guess you are the gentlemen he's been expecting. Sit down.

OKORO

Exactly. Mr. Okafor, his publisher and I, Mr. Okoro, the

Market Supervisor of the publishing Corporation. Sorry. "Sunrise Publishing Corporation". Our concern is to encourage young and talented writers to get their dreams fulfilled and get their works to the market, be better known and watch their artistic visions come true.

OKOYE

Oh, that's fantastic. Sounds interesting. I think you will help me then. Oh, how I wish I had some more time to spend with you. You see, I have a lecture right away and the students are waiting for me. How long are you keeping here?

OKAFOR

I'm afraid we may not keep very long. We are here for business. You understand. However, drop any messages you might have for us with Dr. Ukeme. He is a good fellow. Expect every encouragement and cooperation from us.

OKOYE

Thank you. You are in good hands. Dr. Ukeme I guess, will soon be here. He's one fellow I know who keeps to time accurately. Excuse me for now. *(Leaves the hall)*

OKORO

The last time we came here this place didn't look like this. It looks so strange to us now. We almost couldn't know where to begin tracing out you people, but for one of your students who came to our rescue.

BAYO

Oh, I'm sorry about that, Mr.Okoro. there is this renovation exercise going on. The work became necessary so that we could have some more space for ourselves. You are welcome. I'm sure Dr. Ukeme will soon be here.

He was here a couple of hours ago. How is the market situation of his work?

OKORO

Receptive. Very encouraging. Infact the best our company has seen this season.

OKAFOR

That's why we are here. This is the time we feel he should make his next collection available in the market. It's a strategy that can pay off very well, you know; if well handled. Peoples' interest in his work are glowing and if they saw another work of his now, they wouldn't mind going for it. That's business and you have to follow its trend mathematically.

BAYO

It's very good of you to timely bring this good news to him. I'm sure he will be thrilled to hear it. About how many copies have so far been marketed?

OKORO

Seven thousand copies. And that's not a bad deal for a start. With the cover price of five hundred naira, Dr. Ukeme is a rich man or better still, on the verge of becoming one. I think some credits should go to our agents and the sales representatives. They are doing quite some work, don't you think so?

BAYO

(Confirming it) Really, I would think so.

OKAFOR

We predicted that with the current trend at which the sales are conducted, we should hit a bumper target of ten thousand copies in three months' time. It's very possible