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**SUB-TEXTUALISM: DEPTH,
MEANING AND
INVOLVEMENT IN DIRECTING**

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ABSTRACT

Directing is a theatrical phenomenon which inescapably tasks the versatility of the director in all aspects of theatre arts. Often, the approach of choice slammed on directing, or the lack of a definite approach in directing, can wittingly or unwittingly, expose the uncreativity (if not weakness) inherent in a director's art. Beyond the interpretation of roles, choice of colours and surface dressing of the arts, directing demands the execution of a plethora of creative formulations for it to evince as a convincingly composite art. **Sub-textualism** as a directorial approach, compulsorily takes the director to the inner recesses of the script, the character, the situations and all nuances genetic to the directing art.

INTRODUCTION

*I am alarmed by the grim reality I see around me,
that the world is racing ahead and leaving us
Africans behind... How long shall we remain
passive consumers of other people's discoveries,
rather than being active partners in the voyage of*

*discovery? Femi Osofisan (2001:131-2).
....Spectators come to the theatre to hear the
subtext, they can read the text at home.
J.L. Styan (quoting Stanislavski) 1979:224)*

Not only is Osofisan "alarmed" over the Nigerian tendency to relish unambitiously in innovative creations, in fact, if at this point in our create-theatrical age (not development), the issue of non-inventiveness and brazen uncreativity, especially as touching the evolution of an approach in theatre practice is not worrisome to the average professional cum practitioner, then a re-examination of the fellow's psyche is necessary as a matter of emergency.

One does not need to look too far to come to terms with the odious fact of our impoverishment as so called creative persons, teachers, scholars, theorists, professionals et al, to (re) discover the sheer indifference which characterizes our practice. Perhaps without Indo-European sources, we may never have had theoretical sources, upon which to our discourses and teachings. Perhaps without them, I mean the likes of Stanislavski, Brecht, Brook, Grotowski, Papp, Chiakin etc, we would have been barren of examples to cite on practicing-practitioners of theatrical-practice. For how long shall we remain caged up in the cold world of professional nonidentity?

Having failed in preceding decades to hoist our flags of identity in crafting our kind of art, either individually or collectively, this new dawn should not pass us by as a creative people without a **form** which can be said to be uniquely ours, in theatre practice. It is on this note that this paper posits itself to challenge our creative and professional aptitude towards the creation of a form.

SUB-TEXTUALISM: HISTORY

It was the famous Stanislavski who coined the word "sub-text" and also invented the sub-textual approaches especially in "acting a role". This he did, for the purpose of the exhumation of convincing and believable truth beyond the facial colourings of the script; for exhibition on the broad canvas of performance; and that, for the communication of the play's intestinal intent, and achieve a pro-meaning essence. The accounts of Edwin Wilson (430), Francis Hodge (30) Philip Zarrilli (283) and J. L. Styan (224), confirm that genetically, sub-textualism was Stanislavski's, and was applied to role-interpretation to achieve depth and conviction in performance for the audience's delectation.

Many directors of the Stanislavskian school have invented appendages of their own to achieve the same purpose in performance. Coinages such as "objective and subjective acting", "extrinsic and intrinsic interpretation" among others, have come as off-shoots from and by-products of Stanislavski's tutelage to mean (in principle) sub-textualism. While that may not be a bad idea on its own, the point made by Francis Hodge (1971:300) should be given attention especially as it shares corollaries with the thinking of this paper:

Many directors and actors trained in Stanislavskian approaches assume that if the subtext of a line is fully comprehended the technical delivery of that line is assured. This assumption is simply not true, for the subtext and text must both be communicated... The important thing to understand here is that the basis for all dramatic meaning is the sub-text...

Indeed, "the basis for all dramatic meaning is the sub-text".

While this paper agrees perfectly with Hodge's assertion, and would actually attempt at unfolding how meaning can be sub-textually garnered through the various sub-departments of performance, namely directing, acting and design, it should unfailingly point out the shallowness inherent in an approach which inadvertently fails to consider the import of the sub-text in the process of communicating meaning, and satisfying the audience through theatrical performance.

SUB-TEXTUALISM: ITS MEANING

Many theatre scholars quite unusually, agree on the definition of the sub-text. A few of these will be on parade here:

Philip Zarrilli (1999:283) "Sub-text literally refers to the meaning below the text"

Don Taylor (1996:136) "Sub-text (is) what the character means when he says the words".

Milly Barranger (1991:125) "Sub-text has been defined as the movement against or away from the literal statement of the characters' purposes or intent. It is the actor's job to show the pressures-outer and inner-that are being put on the character by the play's situation".

Edwin Wilson (1991:430) "Sub-text is a term referring to the meaning and movement of the play below the surface; that which is implied and never stated. Often more important than surface activity:

Milly Barranger's and Edwin Wilson's definitions of the sub-text suggest that, sub-textualism as an approach, may not necessarily be limited to role-play. Barranger's "*movement, against or away from the literal statement of the character's purposes...*" and Wilson's "*meaning and movement of the play below the surface...*" seem to take cognizance of the entire play which a director can so choose to lift its presentation beyond the mere surface level. If this is so, the question then arises as to the

techniques that this can be creatively done, and in what departments of the play this will be so exemplified. But, while we await that, it is pertinent to consider more theoretical thrusts on the subject of sub-textualism, so as to situate the discourse within acceptable frameworks.

SUB-TEXTUALISM: THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

A good place to start is Edwin Wilson's definition already quoted within context. The last line of his definition of sub-text states rather poignantly thus: "*Often (sub-text) is more important than surface activity*". This statement means that, to approach a performance rather sub-textually, is to attempt to bring out the crucial "important" matters about that performance. On the other hand, to limit the approach to mere surface interpretation, what Kenneth Cameron and Theodore Hoffman (1974:253) refer to as "*A slavish fleshing out of the text*", is to limit the performance to the region of insignification devoid of its crucial, if not "cruxial" essence.

To buttress the point on the need for digging into the inner recesses of the play so as to unravel its signification, Cameron and Hoffman remind the directors who seemingly act as surrogates to the playwright, that, the playwright (many of them) is conceived as a "*novelist who happens to work heavily in dialogue*". The playwright, it would appear, ends his work on the pages of the book. Far away from the reality of the stage floor; (Albeit another experience altogether). To allow one's initiatives to be overtly influenced by the playwright, is to do the misnomer. Osofisan's (2002:112) declaration is found apt here, and is worthy of consideration.

All scripts, whatever their provenance, must proceed from paper to performance, from their single source of parturition in the poet's mind, to the