



Performance Review of the Prisoners

Effiong Johnson

Performance: The Prisoners.
Author: Chris Nwamuo
Directors: Etop Akwang Assisted
by Ndifreke Umoren
Place: Little Play House, Department of Theatre Arts,
University of Uyo.
Cast: The 300 Level Class
Duration: 1½ hours.
Dates: April 12 – 14 2005
Reviewer: Effiong Johnson

Introduction

The 2004/2005 theatrical season of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, shall be remembered for a long time, for several reasons. The Departmental Board had resolved that directors of the various performances should choose plays of their creative discretions. This decision was arrived at primarily to tolerate no excuse whatsoever, from anyone for any shoddy job. So, directors of the performances just had to select what they deemed malleable enough in their hands to shape towards attaining their ideal performance objectives. In all, five performances were

detailed. Ofonime Inyang chose from his personal repertory, "After the War" – to give a premier, using THA 100 Class. Effiong Johnson chose his "Itiaba" (for a second showing of the play) using THA 200 Class. Etop Akwang chose Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoners*. Using the 300 level students Enobong Umoh and Alphonsus Udoh – directing majors chose Effiong Johnson's "Trapped", while Uwem Atakpo preferred Ola Rotimi's *If*. Between November and March, the Department bubbled every night, sometimes all night, as different classes under different directors and their assistants battled with rehearsals to shape out their desired performance thrusts.

One of the most striking features of the performances of the season was the sheer coincidence of themes. All the plays in their unique dramatic genres and preoccupations, waged wars against oppression, dared and circumvented every orchestrated blockade to attain freedom. All the plays (except "Trapped") were crowd-prone performances, which wittingly or unwittingly attracted indices of spectacle. Of course any theatre – knowledgeable person would not fail to appreciate the creative-technical demands of attaining crowd-structure on stage via composition, picturization and even pictorialism, among others. The performance attained these directorial levels.

Again, more than ever before, the different groups manifested a copious sense of competitiveness which allowed for proper creative checks and technical balances-dovetailing into aesthetic explorations of imaginative nuances, in a bid to give a

stamp of uniqueness to the performances.

Unwritten codes of determination, zeal and hard work characterized the rehearsal runs and the main performances. The 2004/2005 season of performances, indeed, left unprecedented memories about the loftiness and comeliness of theatre.

The Story of the Drama

It would appear that in *The Prisoners*, the playwright is cocooned in a perplexing disillusionment for a country enveloped by a totally unnecessary war, with its attendant breakdown of law and order, famine, insecurity, sickness and death. Meanwhile, the people in authority, such as, Superintendent of Prisons (PS), Nnedu (Prison Sergeant) and Boko (Prison Corporal) are absolutely inhuman and merciless in looting the treasury; (the very essence of life, represented by food) – among other vile vices. Using four prisoners of war, namely, Buchi, Obi, Onwu and Mezie, charged with running away from the war, rape, theft and even murder, the drama plunges into a search for meaning and freedom. The Prison metaphorically comes across as the only place of succour to all – that which everyone strives and contests for, for survival. The PS and his lieutenants are feeding fat from the prisoners' food donated by a charitable organization. Buchi and his gang risk death sentence and go a looting from the prison food store rather than starve to death. Even Stella, the eighteen year old belle, comes to the prison for the superintendent, perhaps not necessarily to sooth her seemingly scratching libido, but because the prison is the place of her sustenance. By this dramatic link to the prison, the playwright justifies the title of *The Prisoners* for the play.

The dawning weight of impending doom for the four prisoners, challenges them into a consolidated determinism to survive, no matter the quantum of risk or threat. In a stupendous craze, the prisoners master mind a strategy which the corruption intoxicating prison officials, fall easy prey to. The palace-like coup succeeds with the prisoners assuming the reins of power and authority. Every opposition is squashed, climaxing in the arrest of the Superintendent with Stella in a naked act of sex.

Thus, in *The Prisoners*, the playwright makes penetrating statements, one of them being the casting of Nigeria as a prison, where the good, the bad and the ugly, mix in the conflux of cyclic detour heading only to mutiny and for more hardened criminals to assume capital power. This grim disillusionment seizes the discernible at the end of the play even in the midst of jubilating echoes by "prisoners" of freedom.

Casting and Acting

Being a THA 300 Production Workshop, the director had to draw his cast from the 300 level class only. In the University of Uyo Theatre Arts Department, girls outnumber boys. The 300 level class particularly is the worst hit where out of 25, only five are boys. Casting then from the class immediately poses a problem, a problem which "improvisation" usually proffers the approximate solution. And improvisation was excellently utilized in the casting. Apart from the Superintendent played by Atansek (a male) Nnedu and Boko were played by females, (Idongesit and Chioma respectively). The choices of the two female casts were the very

best in the circumstance. Their looks, height, voice and carriage, were very suitable. The only betraying element of the disguise was their busts. Similarly, one of the prisoners (Onwu) was played by a female, namely Glory. Glory was also an approximate disguise. Her slim built fitted her more as an hungry prisoner. The only betraying element of this role was her voice. Both the cast and the director really did a good job in casting. The performers played to blocking instructions: Stella was ideally cast. Her beauty was striking; her seductive movements and voluptuous mannerisms were quite typical. Kate indeed brought out the Stella of Nwamuo's conception! Most ideally were the prisoners, especially the duo of Obi and Buchi, played by Dominic and Inyangette respectively. The energy, agility, facial manipulations, gestures and character relationships, were expertly handled. The moment of desperation when unity was crucial for mutiny, was carefully depicted with risk and threat standing contrapuntal to determinism.

In sum, the acting was realistic and very contemporary. Stainlavski's idea of subjective acting was the adopted method here. Roles depiction came convincingly from within – toning and giving characterization its appreciable weight and essence.

Directing

Being a director myself and one with a discernible eye for details, it was obvious that many directing approaches were juxtaposed at various levels to bring out the communicative values of *The Prisoners*. Quite striking was the use of the central

metaphor. Like Edwin Wilson would desire, it left no theatre enthusiast in doubt, who sat in the auditorium waiting for the start of the drama, that freedom was to be fought for, by the imposing motif of broken chains off the wrist of tortured hands, on the upstage wall. This design element – for those who understood it, was very introductory and very preparatory for the run of events. At one hand it raised anticipation and curiosity to a height comfortable enough to absorb the kick-off rhythm of the play. On the other hand it served as a bait, hooking up the audience until the eventual moment of revelation when freedom was attained.

Visible also was Stanistavski's sub-textualistic aesthetics approach, where interpretation of the play was not surface-based but rootedly excavated. By that directorial approach, you could see for instance, in Buchi, a welling up from inside the bubbling desire for food or later, for freedom. Actions were birthed, after some kind of artistic labour-pains. No wonder they were celebrated with reception and joy.

Harold Clurman's the spine approach was also noticeable in the play. The spine among others, identifies the main action of the play, and then creatively links up supportively other actions towards realizing the performance such as the looting of food by officials, the lecherous affair occasioned by Stella etc, were all dramatic actions used (as it were) to facilitate the dawning of the main action, namely, freedom.

An attempt was also made at deploying the total theatre aesthetics. Though not in its total paraphernalia, the total theatre

forms held sway. Songs, dances, crowd and community spirit, were all given expressions in the performance. Not that these were merely synchronized into the drama for the fun of it. They were actually designed to be functional. The songs, for instance, granted the desired mood to the drama and also enforced the dramatic action at the point of usage. The crowd at the beginning illusionised the mass of people caught by the inferno of war; while at the end, the crowd of freed prisoners had to be the size we saw to justify the action if 'general amnesty' slammed on inmates by the mutiny of Buchi and gang.

Approaches are not used for the demonstration of a director's familiarity with them-possibly to showcase his proficiency. No. Approaches are always used for the purpose of selling the play's essence onto comprehension and delectation by the audience. These, Etop Akwang's multi-dimensional approaches in *The Prisoners*, acted as tonics of appreciation, accentuating the dramatic and theatrical aesthetics for meaningful absorption.

The Design Elements

The stage environment was bare with no physical attraction about it. It was a prison custody, after all. It was used representationally, because prison custodies in Nigeria definitely have props, such as beds. The idea of the bareness, I guess, was dual-motivated. Firstly, it was deliberate to have a bare stage area to create maximum room for the expansive movements of the prisoners. Secondly, it was symbolically sustained as an unwritten statement about the on-going civil war with sweeping devastations-

leaving the society bare-not even law and order. Be that as it may, the elements which constituted stage props in the first-scene, such as food-rice and bread, left crumbs which became misnomers in the next scene which happened to be a field. It became incongruous to find rice remnants and bread crumbs on the supposed field which the prisoners were doing their hard labour chores. The criss-crossing accident confused the audience who might have wondered whether the cell-room had now been over grown with weeds.

Stage lighting was functionally used. General illumination of the performance space was effective. No shadows, long or short, were seen. The super spot was creatively used when it was cast to capture an actor who had a different motive from the rest. The signification told the story to those who understood it. Similarly, the strobe added illusionistic impressions to the scene of confusion when the prison corporal was spitting commands at the prisoners, beating them and even shooting into the air to confuse and scare them. The strobe was used intelligently. However, by extending the action far into the auditorium, for example during the Narrator's two appearances in the performance, illumination was poor. The super spot could only reveal the actions to a point and in a desperate attempt to illuminate her well, an ethical blunder was committed, namely, spillage of light on the audience. Perhaps since the scene had to be played in the auditorium for effective psychological immediacy, the house lights should have been used to serve the purpose of illumination.

The sound effect was poor. The barking dogs, for instance,

during the invasion of the food store by the prisoners, could neither be heard clearly as the barking of dogs nor loudly for the attainment of the effect it was supposed to serve. Perhaps if a good sound facility was found to boom through heavy loud-speakers, the effect could have been realizable.

The maximum usage to which the Little Play House was stretchfully put, was creatively ingenious. The manner the Superintendent's lecherous hive was carved out of the little space by the down-left step near the side door of the auditorium, was impressive. However, having established it as where the whorring that was perpetuated between him and Stella was, it became questionable as to how they disappeared from there to the back of the auditorium where they were nonetheless caught in the very act! I think there was creative "unkninkingness" here.

The makeup artist did an impressive job in character depiction. The foundation applied to the faces of everyone who appeared under the super floods, helped maintain recognizable features and contours. No one was disfigured by the damning strength of light. The character make up, especially on the females who played males, were painstakingly done. That really unsexed the girls! Except on Glory, one of the folks playing Onwu, one of the four prisoners, whose beard began to unglue-courtesy of sweat and physical exertion of the body- the make-up designs were capturing.

The costumes were tolerable. One however would have expected that with the howling, flogging, kicking and hard-labouring

both as visibly dramatized and reportedly expressed, the clothing of the prisoners should have been more torched. But they were not, hence making the interpretation at that point seem artificial and unbelievable. Also, having glaringly presented the prison officers realistically, by finding some para-military uniforms for them, for their costumes, real prison uniforms could then have been borrowed. The stuff they wore at first sight, tended to present them as boy scouts.

The hand prop-rifle-held by the Superintendent, was simply ridiculous. Everyone who could see the small thing, was convinced that it was a toy. This drowned the effect that gun was to serve at that point. In fact, it would have been better to hold no gun at all, than the toy a whole Superintendent was showcasing in a desperate abandon.

The Audience

Max Stafford-Clark, Phyllinda Lloyd, Denise Wong, John Wright and Jude Kelly – all very modern and current directors, prioritize the audience factor as the most crucial for a production. They are of course right. The audience of *The Prisoners*, was a lively, enthusiastic and participatory type. There was no dull moment as the performance was punctuated by applause, positive comments and post-production 'care-free' remarks. From these reverberations, it could be deduced that the performance of *The Prisoners* was, after all, a success.

One of the highest points of the performance was the

privilege of having the playwright of *The Prisoners*, Chris Nwamuo, in attendance. It was a morale boosting thud for the students, who hardly ever saw playwrights (outside the Department) come to watch their creations. I think even if Mr. Playwright was the only member of the audience that play would have run on well!

Nwamuo admitted that only had he not seen any production of *The Prisoners* elsewhere take the "experimental" form like the Uyo experience, he also expressed overt satisfaction for the success of the show. He was visibly impressed and confessed that he could hardly recognize his play. I guess he felt fulfilled like any playwright would, whose work made it successfully to the living stage!

That Nwamuo, a professor of Theatre Arts, felt it was an excellent job done by the 300 level students under the guidance of Etop Akwang, strengthens the conclusion of this review with a positive verdict.

But wait a minute, Prof, are you still of the opinion that scavengers, criminals and coupists should take over the reins of the Nigerian State? Send the answer through my e-mail number!