

**Theatre Training in the Nigeria University System: A Critical
Assessment of Selected Design and Technology Courses at Ibadan and
Lagos**

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Abstract

From the early 1960s, when the first institution for the training of theatre artistes and practitioners in Nigeria was established at the University of Ibadan, the Nigerian University system has witnessed the establishment of Departments of Theatre Arts, Performing Arts and Creative Arts, all concerned with the training of graduates in theatre arts. Prominent among these universities are the Departments of Theatre Arts at the Universities of Ibadan, Calabar, Nsukka, Maiduguri and Abuja, the Departments of Creative Arts at the Universities of Port Harcourt and Lagos and the Department of Performing Arts at the University of Ilorin,

The paper examines the curriculums of the universities of Ibadan and Lagos in the areas of design and technology, with a view to assessing their adequacies. In essence, the paper attempts to relate the development of theatre practice in Nigeria to the training provided by the universities in the areas of design and technology.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

It is generally accepted that there is no one method or mode of producing theatre. Different production styles exist with performances held in formal or non-formal theatres; some with sparse design elements, some with more elaborate design considerations. This paper does not attempt to make a case for any particular type of theatre or to be prescriptive in the type of theatre that students of theatre arts should engage in. It, however, is of the view that students of theatre arts must be well-grounded in the design areas of the theatre and be aware of the potentialities of these areas in the making of theatre in and out of the university. As it is, the students on graduation cannot determine where to work

or what productions to work on. They should, however, be prepared and be well-trained to face different design challenges in the productions that they may potentially be engaged in.

Establishment of the First School of Drama

The School of Drama of the University of Ibadan, established in 1962, is considered the first educational institution at the university level for the training of theatre artistes. Arising from a workshop organized by the then Department of English at Ibadan, the school had as pioneer staff, Geoffrey Axworthy, Martin Banham and later Errol Hill, complemented by a core of Nigerian staff, which included Wole Soyinka, Demas Nwoko, Joel Adedeji, Dapo Adelugba, Ebun Clark and Funmilayo Sowunmi. In the original plans of the university, however, the teaching of theatre arts did not feature, even though the university built an Arts Theatre in 1955. This was essentially for the staging of concerts and film shows.

The School of Drama later became a full fledged Department of Theatre Arts in the 1970-71 academic session, with Wole Soyinka as its inaugural helmsman, even if for a short while, before Joel Adedeji took over (www.ui.edu.ng). In the early days in Ibadan, Demas Nwoko, Dexter Lyndersay and his wife, Dani Lyndersay, were in charge of the design and technology aspects. Sumbo Marinho, who trained with Dexter Lyndersay, was to hold forth in the design and technology realm for over two decades after Lyndersay, while Esohe Omoregie was for many years in charge of costumes followed by Chuks Okoye, Alphonsus Orisaremi and Grace Hassan, who have at some period or presently been in charge of the design areas at Ibadan.

Other Theatre Arts/Performing Arts/Creative Arts Departments

From the pioneering efforts at Ibadan, other departments of theatre arts in Nigerian universities include, but are not limited to the following: the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, the Universities of Jos, Calabar, Ilorin, Nsukka, Benin, Abuja and Maiduguri. Others are the Lagos State University, the Delta State University, Ogun State University and the Kogi State University. The Redeemer's University is currently developing a Performing Arts Department. These departments go by different nomenclatures, apart from those that are named Theatre Arts, such as Dramatic Arts at Ile-Ife, Performing Arts at Ilorin and Creative Arts at Port Harcourt and Lagos. The Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), however, has a curious combination of Department of Theatre and Performing Arts!

Brief on Theatre Practice in Nigeria

The International Theatre Institute (ITI) gives a summary of the origins and developments of the theatre in Nigeria thus:

Nigeria has for many centuries had a vibrant life in drama, music, dance, puppetry, acrobatics, etc., but its recent theatre history is often dated to the innovative years of the Nigerian Travelling Theatre Movement led by the late Chief Hubert Ogunde but deriving its inspiration from the itinerant theatre troupes of many centuries standing. The work of the educational institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries may also be seen as the beginnings of an Anglophone-oriented tradition which derived strength from the dramatic efforts of the University of Ibadan School of Drama beginning from the early sixties at the level of formal training and from the dramatic writings of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and their successors.

(International Theatre Institute, 2005, iti@unesco.org)

The ITI further reiterates that

While works in the sub-genres of drama, music, dance, puppetry, acrobatics, etc. continue to appear, the history of the last four decades of Nigerian theatre has shown that there is a preference for 'total theatre' both by practitioners and by audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

(International Theatre Institute, 2005, iti@unesco.org)

Observations on Productions

While indeed there might be a preference for the total theatre, stage dramatic presentations in Nigeria have become far and few between but is mainly sustained from the universities and a few privately led production companies. On a general basis, there have been some improvements over time in the quality of these productions generally. The scripts, acting, directing, management etc have by and large generally witnessed an improvement in the standards presented. However, in the areas of design and technology there does not appear to be a commensurate improvement that can be said to have been observed? The factors that can be responsible for this, in the view of this paper, can be traced to the inadequacy of training in these areas in the universities. Apart from the training, inadequacy of facilities and equipment also are a major factor.

With the advent of the production of video films in Nigeria, live theatre seems to have taken the back burner in theatrical activities in Nigeria. Stage presentations are mainly seen at the universities, state art councils in the thirty six states and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. The National Troupe of Nigeria, based in Lagos, also has a string of performances by the troupe of dramatic, dance and musical productions. A few private production companies, the most prominent of which is Wole Oguntokun's Jasonvision, has sustained live theatre over the last few years with some twenty six productions mostly at the MUSON Centre in Lagos and currently at Terra Culture, in Victoria Island, Lagos.

In the last three decades, there have been visiting productions in Nigeria which to a large extent have assisted in improving the landscape of productions in Nigerian universities as these productions have exposed some of the students who saw them to new methods of productions. Some of these productions have included Ipi-Tombi (1976), Sikulu (1993), Umoja (2004), all from South Africa, and

the recent production of Shakespeare's *Othello* (2004) organized by the British Council. The case of *Othello* staged at the Muson Centre's Shell Hall was particularly interesting for the students of the University of Lagos as the stage was converted to part of the seating area and the performance was held in an arena format in a traditional proscenium hall. In addition to this, some major productions in the universities have also assisted in keeping the level of productions relatively high. By and large, however, the designs of the productions have been an admixture of the eclectic, with elaborate design elements, to the Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski presentational 'poor theatre' modes, with sparse designs.

Design and Technology Courses at Ibadan and Lagos

This paper will now look at the courses relating to design and technology at the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos. From our investigations, these courses at the university are programmed to run from the 100 level to the 400 level in a four-year first degree programme.

The first of these courses is CRA 134 (Basic Technical Theatre Practice) at Lagos and THA 101 (Introduction to Theatre Design & Organization) at Ibadan which is a study of how to relate scene design to text in actual production by focusing on the factors that control design and procedures for the varying media. The CRA 134 also introduces the students to the aspects of production hierarchy, management and the general areas that make up design and technology for the theatre. The Ibadan programme undertakes this from the historical perspective from the Greeks to the present.

At the 200 level in Lagos, THA 232 (Theatre Design and Technology) is a study of how to relate design to text in actual production between theatre and drama as a theoretical and practical concept, revealing their interrelatedness. In addition, the organization of theatrical productions is discussed within the framework of design and technology, looking at the various elements in productions and their relationships. The course then focuses on lighting design for the stage, from concept to realization. In Ibadan, THA 210 (Basic Computer Skills) is a variation from the Lagos model as it was expected to attempt to take the students through basic computer skills, but this course is yet to be introduced into the curriculum (personal communication with Alphonsus Orisaremi, Lecturer for technical theatre at Ibadan).

Ibadan's THA 314 (Design & Technical Theatre) and Lagos' THA 324 (Advanced Technical Design) are the courses at the 300 level. In particular, the THA 324 is a continuation of earlier courses at the 200 level with in-depth study of the design process for the performing arts. It refreshes the students on the areas of set and lighting design and goes on to focus on sound design, costumes and make-up for drama, dance and music productions. The approaches taken for these courses include research into play texts using the library and other sources with adequate description and rendering of designs. Design and analysis of several plays - from different periods and different cultures are emphasized,

concentrating on the design and technical aspects. Each student is expected to focus on, and design aspects of the different productions, producing advanced technical design drawings. Each student's area of interest and individual talent constitute the area of concentration. The final of these courses are the THA 435 (Design Styles) at Lagos and Ibadan's THA 414 (Design & Technical Theatre) which lay emphasis on the principles of design while each student is expected to go beyond the basic and general elements to the development of styles for the stage productions in any of the design areas of set, lighting, costume and makeup, and sound. The emphasis is on the development of the style of a particular production to reflect a recognizable pattern of compositional elements that provide a distinctive reflection of the social and political history of the time in which the production is situated.

In addition to the courses listed above, both Ibadan and Lagos require the graduating students to submit final year long essays (THA 450 at Ibadan and THA 401/2 at Lagos) in their areas of specialization, and the students are also to be involved with practical projects in which they are expected to demonstrate a high degree of competence in their areas in realized productions.

Teaching Approaches

The approaches to the teaching of design and technology courses at both the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos, from our investigations, focus on the following:

For the introductory courses, the theatre as an organization is thoroughly investigated with the constituents of the production team, elements of set design/scenery, the theatre, Front of House (FoH), the auditorium, stage, backstage, control room and the workshop areas. The different types of stages such as the proscenium, thrust, arena, theatre-in-the-round and flexible staging, such as the California Institute of the Arts Modular Theatre, are also discussed. A brief history of set design from the Greek, Greco-Roman, Roman, Renaissance, etc are also undertaken. Functions of and types of set; unframed and framed, 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional sets, with the use of new materials and processes are undertaken. The sessions end with practical workshops.

For Theatre Design and Technology, organizations of theatrical productions are examined with emphasis on the use of lighting in stage presentations from the developments of the concepts to realization. The aims of lighting and the qualities of light are discussed in relation to the different lighting and control equipments. Colour in light, the electro-magnetic spectrum, and the various colour media, are taken along with the development of lighting plots for drama, dance and musical productions.

For Advanced Technical Design, design and analysis of several plays from different periods and different cultures are examined while each student is required to focus on, and design aspects of different productions, producing advanced technical design drawings in the areas of sound, costumes and make-up. The nature of costume design, types of costumes, psychological meaning of clothes and objective information provided by clothes are discussed. For make-

up, the types of make-up, application techniques and 3-dimensional make-ups are undertaken.

The Design Styles programme require intensive research into play texts aided by the library, internet and other sources with group projects designed and executed with students being in charge of the different aspects. Emphasis is placed on the ability of the student designer communicating ideas and information in two ways:

- *Verbal*: This entails detailed and comprehensive discussions with the production and design teams.
- *Visual*: This involves the use of illustrations, drawings and plots which show clearly the designer's ideas for the whole design.

The Computer Age

There is a need for students of Theatre Arts, particularly those in the areas of design and technology for the theatre to get more training and exposure in the use of computer aided programmes and computer aided design tools to enhance the creative process. From observations of the curricula of the two universities under consideration, Ibadan and Lagos, the students are virtually ill-equipped in the use of these design computer application programmes and tools. This to a large extent will be a limiting factor in their ability to design productions that have the ability to retain their audiences.

Perhaps more fundamental is the fact that the computers are not even there for them to use. While it is observed that most lecturers now have personal computers and or laptops, these are used more for the lecturer's research and hardly ever get used as teaching aids, especially since multi-media projectors are also not available. Recently, however, this researcher obtained through a donation from a colleague at the University of Roehampton, thirty refurbished computers for use in the department of Creative Arts of the University of Lagos. These computers are being installed with the necessary soft- wares to enhance training in the areas of design and technology.

Computer Aided Design Programmes

A few of the design programmes available in the industry that can be of tremendous help in the training of theatre arts students in Nigerian universities in the areas of set and lighting design include the following well developed ones, some of which are obtained from the Brawner and Associates website (www.brawner.com).

- a) Programs such as RenderWorks and WYSIWYG allow work designs in a virtual 3-D world where controllable surfaces react as they would in the real world. Stages, sets, lighting positions and fixtures can all be built in this environment. With the ability to turn lights on within the program and see their realistic effect the programmes guarantee precise and excellent results onsite.

(Website of Solaris stage design software).

b) AutoBLOCK 2000 is the industry standard plug-in for AutoCAD in the entertainment lighting industry. Released in September 1999, AutoBLOCK has proven to be the lighting designer's first choice.

c) Stardraw Professional uses the latest in 3-D technology to allow you to design and visualize lighting systems (or any 3-D environment) without needing any special computer hardware, or software training (Brawner & Associates website).

d) The simple CorelDraw 12 programmes are also important computer aided design tools that can be used in the designs for stage sets and costume designs.

The Digital Age

A CNN programme, "Future Summit", of Saturday 18th August, 2007 presented at Stamford discussed how the digital technology has affected life in general and the arts in particular. We are therefore left with no choice but to create a new generation of digital artistes as there is no doubt that the digital technology and the availability of the World Wide Web has to be an important part of the future of designs in the digital age. Students of theatre arts have to, as a matter of utmost necessity, be involved at the level of this evolutionary technology to keep pace with the practice world wide.

Conclusion

For the students to keep pace with these innovations, it is imperative for them to get more involved with experimental and innovative productions beyond the set texts. These could relate to devised productions, created by students to experiment with new production types and techniques. Such productions, to maximize the benefits, would require staff supervision. For this to happen, the faculty must themselves be familiar with the use of such computer aided softwares and programmes. The Nigerian theatre practice at the university level must provide a leadership in this regard and go beyond just theory to theory and practice.

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