

Academic Drama and the Dynamic Theatre

Conversation between Ben Tomoloju and Dapo Adelugba

Sir, what is your opinion about dramatic criticism as applicable to Nigerian works?

Thank you very much. I think I should spend more energy on dramatic and theatrical criticism than on the literary criticism *per se*, since in fact there are a lot of other people who can talk about literary criticism. I've been very pleased by the growth of dramatic and theatrical criticism in the last ten years. It seems to be something in response to the call that we made in the 1960s for this kind of activity to take place even in the popular press. The academic journals have also brought very pleasant results in critical standards at home and abroad. Whereas there was a time when plays were examined by critics as if they had never been performed, as if there wasn't a dynamic to performance and staging, the kind of books coming out nowadays – on Soyinka, for instance – attempt to look at dramas with the stage possibilities or in fact, certain echoes from the audience. And I would say, particularly, that dramatic and theatrical criticism has not been restricted to the works of dramatists who write in English. There is growing criticism of works also in indigenous languages as evidenced by the contributions of Yemi Ogunbiyi, Ebun Clark and Biodun Jeyifo. I consider this right and proper.

You want to elaborate on this, more so as the practice of institutions of drama overseas now is to expose their students to both the literary and theatrical sides of the drama coin? European universities have sometimes invited African companies to stage African plays as part of their drama education programmes.

That is a very good question indeed. Actually, the movement in academia to understand drama within the dynamics of theatrical realisation goes back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But it did not acquire

momentum until the 1940s when a great movement kicked off at Harvard with a view to making a point that to really make academic progress in drama, you've got to recognise the dynamics of the theatrical realisation and that to produce good playwrights they need the workshop situation. Anyway...so, from the 1940s onwards, the Western traditions themselves started to respond to that dynamic between drama and theatre. But the problem in Europe is that their theatrical activity was not a matter for academia. It was a matter for the academies rather than for the universities, or for the drama studios or for art schools. And, in fact, those schools have their own snobbery. So, we've inherited many traditions. Now, America gave the early sign that theatre arts would have a place in academia and to the degree that you can recognise that the arts are now being studied in academia, you do not apply the rules of the studio. There is, however, an academic content to all the area of the arts and someone has got to inherit that knowledge and carry it forward, and so, I see the growth of theatre in academia as a healthy exercise.

Now, to the Nigerian situation, what I think is happening is that we are not tying ourselves to any copy of either Europe or America. I think our system is evolving in Nigeria, bearing in mind our own peculiarities. As the business of the practical theatre in America led in the mid- to late-60s to the establishment of the acting companies as an adjunct to the Theatre Arts or Drama departments, so is it now in Britain where drama experts are thinking of supplementing their drama training with some kind of illustrative works. So, if there are universities in England that want productions from here as a way of educating their students, I would say that it is part of the trend which began quite a few decades ago and I think it is a very healthy sign. But to get to your main point, which is our own situation here, I would say that I am very happy that there is a structure which makes it possible for theatre arts to be properly studied in the universities, to the degree that this does not exclude those who want to receive their trainings in studios outside the university context.

Perhaps we should now zero in on the university context. What do you have to say about the critical pendulum between the rightist and leftist perspectives and how much impact they have made on drama scholarship?

I think of an assumption in the needs of society, the aspiration of society—whether it comes by way of sociology or politics or economics or religion or psychology or philosophy. I consider it progressive once it satisfies the needs of society. And I will say that the call by our leftist critics for a more relevant dramatic writing is a very healthy development. I think it

is producing very good result. However, it is dangerous for critics on the left to believe that any play that does not fit into their formula is, *ipso facto*, to be rejected. There are, indeed, some leftist critics who are somewhat extreme in their views coming to the real value of the plays in this category, what, in Nigeria, is called leftist drama should be something much more radical than what's being done now. What's being called leftist drama is a kind of revisionist drama really. I'm expecting something fundamentally different. I'm expecting that dramatists would go to search for the original root of drama. I'm expecting more of a study of folk theatre tradition hoping that Africa can produce research forms similar to the Noh or Kabuki experience of the Japanese. That I would call work on the left. The only person, so far, who is moving in that direction, is Funmi Odusolu, author of *Orji*. His works are deeply researched in terms of traditional practice, beliefs, customs and poetry. Also he is very leftist in the sense that he is not using these things in a decadent manner. He is using his sophistication in world theatre forms to inform not just the starting of his works but their writing and I think, if you could study what Odusolu is doing carefully we may have a model for the future.

Well, since you're reputed for this kind of scholarly grounding in folk-life and drama at home and abroad, I would like us to close this interview with a comparative analysis of the Nigerian experience and J.M. Synge's Ireland on which you have published some works.

Since we are discussing folk-types and scholarship, this transition is a very natural one with me. Within the Irish situation through colonisation, English has come to replace Irish by and large. But in some plays of J.M. Synge you find characters who are identifiably speaking Irish although he cast them in English language. Synge, like I expected of our dramatists, was identifying himself as an Irish dramatist. Therefore, in him we saw a great flourishing of the Anglo-Irish. This is why he is very valuable. With his study of life in the island and of the peasants part of the island he was able to come close to folk-life in a very rare way. He knew the Irish peasant and the Irish ordinary man in a vital way and as a vital force. This is nationalistic. Synge brings out the beauty of traditional poetry. I am as interested in that as I am in the Nigerian situation. He says confidently that the people of Ireland are not yet removed from poetry and if our own dramatists want to find the people of Nigeria are not yet removed from poetry, they have to go into the villages and I think that kind of approach should inspire future writers.

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