

**Seeking an Alternative Approach to Teaching
Scenographic Theory and Practice: The University of
Zimbabwe Theatre Legacy**

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Abstract

The teaching of scenographic practice and theory in Zimbabwe was introduced in 1984 by Robert McLaren (formerly Robert Mshengu Kavanagh) in the Departments of English Literature and Africa Languages. The programme set to teach and train young black Zimbabweans in practical theatre courses so they could replace the established white designers in the performing arts industry. Built on the premise of “Zimbabweanization, Africanization and socialist transformation”, the theatre programme sought to challenge the colonial legacy and domination of Repertory Theatres and the National Theatre Organisation. In this regard, the Theatre Arts programme was a postcolonial response that sought to dismantle the British theatre style while developing young trained and able technical personnel and a new Zimbabwean theatre trend conversant with the aspirations and dreams of the majority populace. Through engaging the University of Zimbabwe’s thirty-year static scenographic teaching methodology and theoretical approaches, this paper argues that an alternative approach is now needed to enable graduates to be relevant and positively contribute to the practice of scenography in contemporary Zimbabwe. This paper will review and challenge the founding assumptions and legacy of the University of Zimbabwe’s Department of Theatre Arts’s scenography pedagogy. The paper will pay particular attention to the available learning and performance spaces and their influence thereof on the practice and teaching of scenography.

Introduction

Theatre has always existed in one form or another in African societies (Larham, 1985; Kamlongera, 1989; Etherton, 1989). The development and training of performance practitioners in indigenous communities hugely relied on performance and oral tradition, until colonial education domesticated the process within educational institutions, mainly in higher education. This paper considers the process of scenographic teaching and practice under broad categories; firstly, learning and teaching environment, which deals with the working conditions within and through which scenographic training is delivered. Secondly, interrogates the teaching and learning spaces, framed as a 'performer' in scenographic learning and performance process. This interrogation is envisaged to positively challenge the approach and use of space in the development and training of scenographers within the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts Department. The paper will further critically examine the integration of theoretical training and scenographic practice within the university, foregrounding the teaching and performance space; the Alfred Beit Hall. Finally, proposes alternative approaches to scenographic teaching and practice within the University of Zimbabwe's theatre programme, highlighting the foundational principle of foregrounding and understanding the socio-political and economic ideologies and the cultural landscape within which the programme is delivered.

Although this paper employs a theoretical method of self-consciousness and invested localised analysis (Knowles, 2004), it does not attempt to create a theoretical template that can be applied in scenographic training, teaching and development in any specific context. Rather, it attempts to demonstrate an open approach in which scenographic teaching and learning and performance spaces are both considered flexible and collaborative. The engagement that follows, therefore, isolates, enunciates and questions the most common practices and conditions of scenographic training and teaching that obtain at the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts and draws attention to specific learning spaces and teaching approaches that have shaped scenographic practice at the University of Zimbabwe, in particular, and in Zimbabwe generally.

The ideological narrative that the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts was founded upon responded to the political and cultural demands of the new Zimbabwean post-colonial state (Chifunyise, 1990, McLaren, 1993). McLaren (1993:36) narrates that the new drama programme related to the "development of the society in the immediate post-independence period" and followed a "process of

democratisation, Zimbabweanization, Africanization and socialist transformation". This narrative is proffered against a context where colonial education was read and understood as having created an impression that theatre could only be produced in English (Ravengai, 2014). This directly or indirectly meant that the West End and Broadway English theatre and literature standard became the main denominator of judging of any theatre endeavour. While the University of Zimbabwe's drama programme sought a complete break from this performance narrative (linguistically and aesthetically), as evident by Kavanagh's modernist approach of challenging convention when he sat the audience on the proscenium stage and used the auditorium as an acting space for his 1985 production of *Mavambo* at the University of Zimbabwe Beit Hall (Ravengai, 2011). The ideological and politico-economic signs inscribed on the teaching, learning and performance venue and the theoretical foundations of the drama programme, the English theatre realist framework continue to live on within the University of Zimbabwe's theatre performance styles and scenographic designs. However, the modernist performance narrative sponsored by directors such as Samuel Ravengai, Bill Morse and Joy Wrolson (visiting lecturers), the University of Zimbabwe would then be a "proponent of a populist approach and de-role the elitist and Eurocentric 'ivory tower' relationship with the community" (McLaren, 1993:37).

To achieve a mutually benefitting relationship with the Zimbabwean community, performing industry and realise its role as a 'people's university' (McLaren, 1993), the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts/Drama programme demanded a relevant theoretical foundation, applicable and adaptable practical approach that would necessitate the training and development of graduates that would fit 'hand-in-glove' into the alternative theatre performing industry. This is not to say that all theatre teaching programmes should produce students that fit 'hand-in-glove' with the industry, rather, graduates that are technically adaptable to the demands of various scenographic genres and performance spaces. Chifunyise (1988, 1986) proposes a 'national theatre' that goes beyond the white and black racial binaries, in which "the themes of our national theatre should be non-racial" (1988: 40) and the performative idioms of this national theatre should be based on the people's visual and performing arts. While Chifunyise's call is modest and well appreciated within the performance industry, this paper argues that it is rather misdirected as it deals with the side effects of the real problem: training and development of theatre practitioners within institutions of learning.

The challenges of Chifunyise's call for a return to the 'traditional' are varied. Who does he refer to as the 'people'? What does he refer to as the 'people's performing arts'? I will argue that Chifunyise's concept of a

national theatre sought to propel Zimbabwean indigenous performative narrative over and above all the varied forms obtaining in post-independence Zimbabwe. In this light, I will further argue that Chifunyise's 'national theatre' replaces a hegemonic theatre trend facet with a binary facet. While his proposal fell within the political ideology re-alignment of non-racial nation building and togetherness, the question that remains is: Was Chifunyise's 'national theatre' going to provide a liberating framework that would bridge the divide between the National Theatre Organisation affiliates and the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre affiliates?

Teaching Approach

Before we get to discuss the major issues under this sub-topic, it is important that I provide personal background foundational information. I studied for a Bachelor of Arts Honours in Theatre Arts at the University of Zimbabwe from 2004 and graduated in 2007. After graduation, I worked with community theatre groups in Bulawayo as a lighting designer and operator. While working within different performance spaces used by these community theatre groups, I had challenges in transferring and applying the theoretical training I had gained at university, into the practicalities of scenography due to the failure of the curriculum in integrating theory and practice from an African performance paradigm.

Rick Knowles (2004) posits that the training of technical theatre personnel must provide an all-purpose preparation for professional practice; it must provide practitioners and students with the complete range of expertise needed to participate in any kind of theatre of their preference or where opportunity leads them to. The University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts is therefore charged with this responsibility of producing various professionals; the department's teaching should, therefore, prepare students to be specialists in their areas of preference, nurture and build up their expertise as well as satisfy the needs and demands of the industry that is going to take them in. As a pioneer university in Zimbabwe in developing of theatre practitioners and academics, this is the gap that the Department of Theatre Arts needs to satisfactorily fill in post-independence.

With Zimbabwe gaining independence in 1980, there was a need for a new performance narrative that would serve the political and propaganda interests of the new state and majority populace (Seda, 2004; Chifunyise, 1988). In 1983 the University of Zimbabwe appointed Robert McLaren, to succeed Stephen Chifunyise, to set up the Drama programme within the English Literature and African Languages

Departments. The Drama programme, as it was called then, sought to achieve a socialist Afro-centric re-alignment. The programme set to transform the University of Zimbabwe into a “people’s university” (McLaren, 1993: 35) and put the traditional cultural experiences, learned and lived over the years, at the base of its research, teaching and learning. This would in turn cascade towards a regenerative connection and rediscovery of “cultural symbols and activities” (Ngugi, 1997: 18) that represent or will represent Zimbabwe through performance. (Ngugi reference not in bibliography)

McLaren, exiled from apartheid South Africa due to his socialist work with Junction 77, brought in a wealth of experience, in terms of practice and theory, to the cause of the Africanisation of the Theatre programme. Questions could be raised as to why the University of Zimbabwe’s administration would hire a white man to set up an African-oriented drama programme. However, if we concentrate on the race issue, we might run a risk of trivialising the African performance paradigm and modernist pedagogical foundation that McLaren introduced in the Drama program. What might be of interest to this paper is his academic theoretical grounding vis-à-vis the African performance paradigm that the Drama programme sought to provide.

The theoretical underpinnings of the Theatre Arts programme (the successor of the Drama programme set up in 1984) highlights an over-reliance on Eurocentric scenography theories. Firstly, this was a revelation of the academic theoretical training of McLaren, who was schooled in London. Secondly, with a number of African countries receiving their independence, the European university became major points of references and as such their guidelines became the standard for most African universities, the University of Zimbabwe included. In such a context, while the drama programme at the University of Zimbabwe sought a radical break from the white culture, its theoretical approach remained stuck in the Eurocentric pedagogy.

The reading list given to design students over the past fifteen years includes Peter Arnott (1990), Michael Gillette (1999), Harvey Smith and Wilfred Parker (2002) as the principal references. These theorists developed their frameworks in the global-North context which focuses on architectural spaces of learning and performance with theatres and universities that had fully fledged and experienced supporting staff which the University of Zimbabwe’s Beit Hall does not have. The Theatre Arts programme, thus, became a site for the struggle between an African-based performance narrative proposed by the ideological narrative and a Eurocentric teaching and performance preparation and development approach engendered by the theoretical framing.

The cultural and political dynamics which informed the development process of these theories that the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts adopts as the 'bible' in scenographic teaching are far removed from the Zimbabwean locality in which they are read and applied. The Theatre Arts programme at the University of Zimbabwe was and/or is meant to be in keeping with the "process of democratization, Zimbabweanization, Africanization and socialist transformation" (McLaren, 1993:35), while the Eurocentric theories that the programme is based on negates this whole process. In line with Ngugi's argument, the programme should not be a remote event, but, must be "part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community" (1981: 37). The term community is used in this argument to refer to Zimbabwe as a nation. This meant that any attempt to domesticate the teaching of theatre in the Zimbabwean context should have engaged with this rhythm of daily and seasonal life. The theatre programme should have been inspired by this rhythm.

A close analysis of the scenographic practice discussed by Arnott, Gillette, Smith and Parker highlights that they were designed to fit into the operational organograms of West End theatre companies. The practice perpetuates a realist theatre tradition that seeks to dress and decorate sets and stages as an object to be looked at and set a space to be inhabited by performers. The fundamental objective of the practice is to create a design, which is an 'object' hidden behind the curtain and revealed to the audience when performance begins. Conversely, most of the improvised and workshopped performances by the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts students demand scenographic designs that are 'performers'. This creates challenges with theoretical approaches that seek to create a 'static object' rather than an interactive scenographic design which interacts and re-acts to the space, performers and audience.

Richard Isackes (2008: 41) notes that the Eurocentric scenographic pedagogy follows a fixed sequential progress: "read the play, do research, develop a concept, do sketches, and devise the floor plan". This approach seeks a representational model over and above a presentational model that the Theatre Arts programme at the University of Zimbabwe sought to implement. The sequential progression presupposes that the script is the fundamental 'raw material' in developing a scenographic design. In a context where experimentation and creative workshopping and collaboration are the means of creating performances, students often find themselves in a quandary as theory dictates the opposite of practice. The contradiction that ensues in the theory-practical application and performance paradigm in the implementation and development of the

scenographic designs results in 'make shift' approaches as students seek to satisfy the demands of their practical examination.

Isackes' (2008) fixed sequential scenographic process is mainly concerned with creating a representation devoid of the performers and other creative team's input. As Ngugi (1981) notes, performance preparation and event in the African context, which Zimbabwe shares, is a holistic process which engages everyone in a collaborative and improvisational basis. Thus, applying a theoretical framework that adopts an individualised fixed process on a collaborative performance style which is flexible, non-linear and improvisational in nature produces practitioners who cannot fit in either of these two distinct performance practices. This is the dilemma that is faced by many of the graduates, and this paper argues that the negligible numbers of graduates practising as scenographers points towards the direction of this dilemma.

Knowles further posits that most of these scenography theory texts that are based on the English-speaking theatre experience, which the Theatre Arts Department uses, unconsciously accept and reinforce the dominant understanding of the roles of scenographic designs in theatre through reinforcing and supporting the 'looked-at-ness' of designs and the object of gaze of the audience as consumers. This is because these texts

tend to naturalize these conditions as simply the taken-for-granted way things are rather than to frame them as culturally determined and determinate, the products of specific historical, political, and economic conditions that function to shape, frame and contain the designer's work. (Knowles, 2004: 29-30)

The lack of critical understanding of the relevance of the cultural, political and economic landscapes by the Department Theatre Arts has resulted in the creation of a programme which fails to "question ideological coding of training that often seems quite comfortable as part of a theatrical industry in co-operation with other industries" (Knowles, 2004: 31). The application of these theoretical approaches as the ultimate scenographic creative paths overlooks the indigenous performance approaches and material conditions that the Theatre Arts programme seeks to champion.

Megan Arutz *et al* (2012: 26) argue that theory in theatre training and teaching should function in the same way as a "functioning heart or marriage; they exist in an internal and external arrangement that allows them to carry on". This implies that the theoretical framework should enrich and enhance practical scenographic endeavours within specific

socio-cultural contexts and vice versa. Thus, in theatre performance, different situations require different strategies for the materiality of theatre changes with changing political, social, cultural and economic conditions. Therefore, in postcolonial Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts programme needs to be anchored on theories that take cognisance of the material conditions prevailing. The programme should have been grounded or developed theories that speak to the political, socio-economic and cultural landscape affecting the practice of scenography.

In line with Chifunyise's (1988) call for a national theatre that is Afrocentric in nature and approach, this paper argues that the University of Zimbabwe's theoretical framework continues the perpetuation of colonial pedagogical hegemony that relegated indigenous paradigm to the dungeons. In the Zimbabwean context, the theoretical foundations of the Theatre Arts degree must respond to the technical, practical and cultural needs of the Zimbabwean theatre such that its application in the general practice is adaptable to certain standards and spaces without difficulty. While arguments could be proffered in terms of the university positioning itself as an island of best practice, I will argue that as a 'people's university' that sought to draw its narrative from the community, it ought to embrace the society's practice. The failure of theoretical framework being culturally, politically and economically relevant to the needs of Zimbabwean scenographic experience results in a negligible number of practically and technically conversant scenographers in Zimbabwe, especially within the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts.

The Teaching and Learning Environment

The problems of training and development in the Zimbabwe theatre sector are tied to the teaching and learning environment and spaces within educational institutions. Since the attainment of political independence in 1980 in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe has had a monopoly in the provision of formal training of theatre practitioners. However, new departments of Fine and Performing Arts, Creative Arts and Theatre and Film Studies have been set up in the relatively new universities such as the Midlands State University, Lupane State University, Chinhoyi University of Technology and Great Zimbabwe University. These new departments of Performing Arts continue to follow the model that was used to set up the Department of Theatre Arts in 1983/4. This is due to the influence of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Zimbabwe as a monopoly in training graduates that have become the pioneering staff members in these new universities. Thus the challenges facing these

new departments can be traced back to the learning environment at the University of Zimbabwe.

Kenneth Eni argues that “success in theatre technology depends on access to its current tools and materials of production and functionality takes precedence over aesthetics” (2013: 165). The University of Zimbabwe uses the Alfred Beit Hall as its learning and performance space. This space is a proscenium arch stage with an open hall filled with chairs and benches used by students during lectures. It has a non-functional workshop which has not been used by students since 2004. This is largely due to a lack of qualified design technical personnel that can manage the workshop and allow students to creatively use the space. As such, students that graduate from the university will have done scenography in theory and practice through ‘make shift’ approaches. Tied to this is the semester system which all Zimbabwean universities adopted. The time factor demands that students be ready for examination at the end of every semester. This indirectly forces the Department of Theatre Arts to adopt an examination-oriented approach over and above the development of competent scenographers; thus students merely pass examinations and graduate. The net result of this ‘make shift’ approach on the technical theatre industry is distressing.

The many improvised and workshopped productions by the Theatre Arts students follow a Zimbabwean indigenous performance paradigm that seeks the participation of the audience. As a result, designing and performing such productions on the proscenium arch reconfigures the performances as the ‘to-be-looked-at object’ and relegates the audience to passivity. The ‘make shift’ approaches are a result of the failure of the Theatre Arts programme’s reading and understanding of the social and cultural context of the productions and the ideological, socio-cultural and political coding of the Beit Hall as a performance space. With the exception of Ravengai’s and McLaren’s, most productions done by the staff and students have failed to find a working solution between the theories they learn in class and the African performance paradigm they aspire to.

Jonathan Pitches and Sita Popat (2011) argue that space performs and it must be considered as an integral aspect of the performance experience, reminding us that the space is never fixed but continually in an active state of becoming. The Beit Hall is a residual structure left to the Faculty of Arts by the then University of Rhodesia and has continued to be a building that the university administration recalls for use at their own discretion even to the detriment of the Theatre Arts students. The hall is, therefore, inscribed with a politics and hegemony inherited from the colonial period which the administration continues to perpetuate.

Performing and teaching scenography in such a space positions the Beit Hall as a site that conforms to yet challenges scenographic practice and theoretical hegemony. On one hand, the space is a site to challenge and disregard order, hegemony, power, and hierarchy, and yet a site to perpetuate and reinforce hegemony, status quo and power. On the other hand, the use of the proscenium arch conforms to the illusionary style that forces the audience to be passive recipients of the performances on stage. Most of the performances are presented on the proscenium arch stage, with lighting from above and costume designed to communicate the status of the actors, create mood, atmosphere and locale. The proscenium arch creates two separate physical spaces during these performances: the auditorium and the stage area, which could be further isolated by the introduction of the curtain (Pitches and Popat 2011). These separated spaces prevent the audience from directly experiencing the space that the performers inhabit, thereby negating the African performance paradigm that underlies various performances produced by the students at the University of Zimbabwe.

Challenging the performance and teaching space at the University of Zimbabwe, does not mean that within the Zimbabwean context the proscenium arch is irrelevant and problematic, rather, this paper seeks to challenge the creative engagement and use of the space by the students and staff alike. Brian Massumi (2002:79) acknowledges that it is pertinent for practitioners, students and lecturers to understand that it is not about the “boundedness of the space, but what elements that space allows to pass, the criteria it uses to assess these elements and the effect thereof of these elements”. This calls for the understanding of the socio-political and cultural environment and transcribing the environment’s characteristics into the teaching and training methodology. Understanding the location, politics and ideological coding inscribed on the teaching and performance spaces and translating that appreciation to the teaching and training framework will provide relevance and aptitude to the Theatre Arts programme at the University.

Challenging accepted models of theatre architecture allows us to combat not only the rigidity of built environments, but also the powers that shape them. In line with the argument of this paper, Pitches and Popat (2011) contend that theatre and the buildings that house it should be a platform for radical dialogue that critiques the status quo. A free-flowing exchange of ideas can be made present by spaces that operate figuratively and concretely as an accessible form. The Beit Hall is used as a space for teaching and performance by the Department of Theatre Arts and examination centre by the university administration. The lack of an open creative approach that allows students to experiment within the

space scenographically allows the space to be neutralized by conventions as Pitches and Popat argue. In line with Eni's (2013), ideas of transitional performance spaces that strive for new methods of new adaptation of the existing proscenium arch stages so that they do not create a performer-spectator separation, this paper argues that the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts needs to acknowledge "architecture (spaces) as spatiotemporal event, with alternating and overlapping realities" (Pitches and Popat, 2011: 62) which brings into focus the built form with temporalities of performance and creative experimentation.

The University of Zimbabwe needs to create, build and develop new stages that appreciate the African theatre experience. The difficulty that African scenographic academics have encountered in defining an African aesthetics in performance emanates from the lack of spaces that promote such an aesthetic (Eni 2013). The proscenium arch poses quite some challenges in the African theatre context in the sense of performance and audience integration. Thus, the University of Zimbabwe as a pioneering theatre training institution, should be adapting its spaces to suit and develop an African aesthetic in performance in line with the vision of creating a theatre that is peculiar to Zimbabwe and Africa (McLaren ,1993). The creation of new stages widens the horizons of creativity and collaboration among students, lecturers and technical personnel. These spaces could also operate as creative 'incubator' spaces for the students and lecturers, and force the Department of Theatre Arts to optimally use the equipment at their disposal creatively and experimentally.

Pitches and Popat (2011: 62) add that scenography advocates a more interactive intervention and a holistic approach to design for performance in which the design of space is central – a space created for performing bodies to interact with rather than against. This paper argues that scenographic training and development must be regarded as performance and the space used should be creatively engaged and be part of the process of the teaching and training so that the students can appreciate and understand the implications it has on their design endeavours. The scenographic learning spaces at the University of Zimbabwe should be solely set aside for creative engagement in performance and technical development. Doubling the space as a learning, performance, and examination space/centre affects programming of performances, rehearsals and experimentation as access is limited.

The infrastructure in new Zimbabwean universities has followed suite in converting the Beit Halls into performance spaces, learning and examination centres. The basic problem with these spaces is their inability to adopt technological developments and advancements to reconfigure the space for performance, enhance aesthetic appeal and allow for

continued scenographic experimentation. There is thus need to heed Catherine Noske's (2013) call for new subversive places; the Department of Theatre Arts needs to develop fluid learning and performance spaces that are reflective of the class, race, politics and culture (Chennels, 1999). Such spaces will transform the lecturer-student relationship from a one direction flow to a collaborative and experimental one.

Tamantha Hammerschlag's (2011) call for a need to rearticulate power dynamics in scenographic teaching and learning is relevant in the teaching and learning process used by the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts. The learning space used for performance leans towards object-based theatre, which is very representational in nature. Eni (2013) argues that the perpetuity of the box type of the learning and performance space is inhibiting to the student studying scriptwriting, design (scenography), acting and directing. To liberate the scenographic teaching and learning process, more adaptable presentational spaces are needed within the University of Zimbabwe. The transition from the box-type spaces to more liberating spaces will enable the transformation of the learning experience and equip students to know and respond to the concrete realities and demands of the scenographic world within the theatre industry in Zimbabwe. The box-type Beit Halls keeps students submerged in a situation in which critical awareness, creative experimentation and collaborative engagement is practically impossible.

Scenography and Performance at the University of Zimbabwe

A wide range of material factors frame, contain and contribute to the ways in which scenographic design are created, executed and understood within theatrical productions. As a practical oriented programme, the Theatre Arts students are expected to participate in a class practical, individual acting or directing project, written design project or produce a journal that details these creative processes. Reading from McLaren's (1993) manifesto on the development of university drama in Zimbabwe, the university theatre was dedicated to the development of a Zimbabwean national dramatic repertoire in implicit opposition to the canonical hegemony of the global North practices. In analysing scenography and/in performance within the university's performance paradigm, the paper will look at the performance space in relation to the English-speaking theatre practices vis-à-vis the new Zimbabwean national theatre and culture that McLaren and Chifunyise called for.

The performance space exerts influence, silently inscribing or disrupting specific and ideologically coded ways of working for practitioners and of seeing and understanding for audiences. The student

scenographer should then be prepared to negotiate this coding and configure the space to suite the demands of his/her performances. The student should be equipped to appreciate that the ideological and cultural coding of the space enables the performance space to be a performer within their scenographic work. However, the university's programme is based on examining the design students' ability to create designs which are an objects 'to-be-looked-at' and a 'house' for the performance. The object-based scenography approach forgoes the socio-political and cultural codes which condition the receptivity and extent of engagement of the audience. Knowles posits that the

raw event - performance –and the material conditions that produce it and shape its reception can only endure and become available for analysis once they are together translated into the realms of discourse and understanding where they come into being for critics and audiences alike as 'performance texts' and where ultimately their meaning is produced. (2004: 3)

The scenographic designs by the University of Zimbabwe theatre students should be understood through the spectrums of the material conditions that shape their production and space for its reception. Chief among these material conditions is the performance space: the Beit Hall. The Theatre Arts programme therefore should engage the politics of its space as a performance determinant so that scenographic designs that students produce respond to the technical demands of their respective productions without taking for granted the performance space. The reason why most of the set and lighting designs by student scenographers are finalised just hours before the practical examination performance is that they take for granted the spatial characteristics of the Beit Hall as a 'house' for the performance rather than integrating their scenographic designs into the performance. This results in the students adopting 'make shift' approaches which "have worked for them in the past and which are themselves ideologically coded" (Knowles, 2004:28) and enable them to pass the practical examination.

Knowles argues that the proscenium arch historically evolved specifically to inscribe and make manifest a particular monarchical social structure in the seventeenth century. This social structure related to the political, socio-economic and cultural ideologies that influenced performance and presentation. In a post-colony like Zimbabwe, the Theatre Arts programme needs to deconstruct these ideologies, and develop an approach that neither confirms these canonical hegemonic traditions nor

perpetuates their existence by refusing to holistically adopt the Beit Hall as a neutral environment for teaching and training.

Theatre presents and embodies culture and technology in its completeness. The scenographer takes symbols from a cultural environment and uses them to present and interpret their design ideas. Space therefore shapes the pattern of scenographic practice and is essential in generating a theatrical language. Peter Brook's (1986) concept of 'the empty space' redefines and largely challenges the traditional Western view of scenography in performance. Brook's call for a presentational style which uses minimal scenographic items for maximum aesthetic effect provides points of discussion in relation to the practice and teaching of scenography at the University of Zimbabwe. By reducing a performance event to a raw spatial encounter between participants (Pitches and Popat 2011), Brook was grounding the built and natural environments within the event and emphasizing the role of space in both action and reception. He challenges practitioners to move beyond the middle class entertainment staged for the people who sit submissively in the auditorium waiting for the framed performance to unfold before them, a tradition the University of Zimbabwe is trapped in.

Eni (2013) posits that technology in the theatre must learn to solve problems and deliver solutions which are continually relevant, logical and yet spatially and physically attractive. However, the technology that the Beit Hall has creates more problems than solutions. In terms of lighting design, Beit Hall's lack of lighting fixtures and equipment and a functional lighting rig relegates creative lighting to the provision of illumination on stage, forgoing all the creative aesthetic considerations. While it can be argued that with minimum lighting resources, one can create a wonderful scenographic experience in performance, I argue that this is only achievable through experience, which the students at the University do not have.

The lighting technology available at the University of Zimbabwe creates challenges vis-à-vis the representational and realist proscenium stage. While arguments can be proffered in terms of the unlimited creative possibilities with regard to lights, sound and set, it is a challenge for the University of Zimbabwe students who do not have enough and adequate time for experimenting and preparation. The students are forced to undertake this creative process as part of their continuous assessment and end of semester examinations. The few Fresnels available and the lack of technical guidance forces the students to take the easy way out: provide illumination where there is action, a practice which has become the general acceptable norm within the University of Zimbabwe scenographic practice. The desire by students with interest in scenography to

experiment and go an extra mile in their creative scenographic development is curtailed by the unavailability of the Beit Hall, technical guidance and equipment to use.

Since the Beit Hall is a multi-purpose venue, the lights and sound system are only set up when there are performances. Students get to encounter the strand lighting desk during technical runs which are normally hours before the performance. The net effect of this approach is sub-standard and half-baked scenographic designs that seek to fulfil the occasion of the performance rather than the needs of the performance. This further translates into the broader theatre industry in Zimbabwe, thus, a negligible number of the University of Zimbabwe Theatre Arts graduates operating as scenographers within and outside of Zimbabwe. The students that graduate from the Theatre Arts Department will have actually observed a demonstration of rigging, focussing and operating the manual lighting strand desk and sound system, which for a long time has been done by the Theatre Manager/Technician. This process robs the student of the practical hands on experience and they graduate without the necessary practical orientation and experience resulting in them failing to fit into the large theatre industry in Zimbabwe.

In scenography, aesthetics deals with the quality of a work's physical appearance and its pleasing nature and the unity of form and appearance of each aspect of design against other aspects that evoke emotional response (Eni 2013). However, to understand the aesthetics one must acquire the necessary expertise, adequately exposed and informed about the approach and process of scenography. Hence, the contention that the approach and process of scenographic learning and teaching at the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts Department needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed into a fluid, flexible and experimental approach that acknowledges that performance occurs all round us in the everyday world and 'unhouses' it from conventional stages that dictate how performers and audiences act, re-act and inter-act.

Rethinking Entry Points: Seeking a Working Framework

It is important to note that one way of working is merely one of a number of methods, each of which may be equally valid. Thus, this assessment is but an attempt to initiate dialogue and engagement that seek to contribute towards the review of the Theatre Arts programme at the University of Zimbabwe, in particular, and creative scenography in Zimbabwe in general. Isackes proposes that there is need to appreciate that the primary obligation of the scenographer is not to the script but to the performed event. The understanding of this position enables students to critically

interpret the relationship between the script and the scenographic process. Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls for a language in African theatre that underlies the politics and a liberating perspective within which we can see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe. A new framework towards re-energizing and redirecting scenographic training and development by the University of Zimbabwe's Theatre Arts programme therefore should involve two processes: the choice of the material and the attitude to, or interpretation of that material (Ngugi, 1981).

The choice of material relates to the theoretical foundations that underpin the Theatre Arts programme. Challenging and disrupting the preconceptions of the privileged position of the global North theatre strands on the written script, begins to redefine the role of the scenographer and their participation in the creation of the performance event within the African theatre paradigm. The role of the scenographer becomes a generative one rather than a reactive one and as Demas Nwoko (1981: 76) notes, the visual forms come before text in importance within the African indigenous performance paradigm. He further argues that theatre performance can validly exist without text, while text without visual expression can only become literature and not theatre. African theatre, thus, places importance on the visual, which makes the aesthetics of scenography imperative to its realisation.

The appropriation and development of this aesthetic within the academy demands a shift from the English-based approach to a more radical African archetype. The styles and means adopted in the scenographic process should navigate towards defining an African aesthetic, in general, and a distinct Zimbabwean scenographic aesthetic, rather than following Western models that are mechanical and highly hierarchical. The understanding of the cultural environment and socio-political and economic influences on the artistic creations will provide distinctive aesthetic value. In attempting to achieve 'Zimbabweanness', 'Africanness' (McLaren, 1993) through scenographic creations, the Theatre Arts programme has to highlight an awareness of the role theatre plays in the Zimbabwean society and it has to represent and present peculiar icons that identify, culturally and aesthetically, with being Zimbabwean since no work of art is created out of a cultural vacuum.

The attitude to, or interpretation of that material relates to the application of the theoretical framework in practice, the performance spaces and how they are configured. Eni (2013) argues that in contemporary theatre practice, the stage is undergoing a transition and theatre artists are striving for new methods of presentation. The underlining reason for this trend is the desire to create a total environment in which the actor,

playwright and scenographers are not restricted or confined to Western aesthetic forms and conventions but are given freedom of expression without compromising the 'Africanness' of the plays being presented. The University of Zimbabwe needs to develop new performance and experimental spaces that will enable scenography students to creatively engage themselves and the 'new' spaces in articulating a distinct scenographic aesthetic that will define the 'Zimbabweanness' which McLaren sought to develop.

The understanding of scenography as part of performance and not a supportive element enables the redefinition of the role of the scenographer, scenography, as well as the process and approach of scenographic practice. Isackes (2008) argues that scenographers are usually regarded as 'facilitators' in colleges and universities because of the failure to fully understand the relationship and role of scenography within a performance event. Pitches and Popat (2011) agree with Isackes when they conceptualise scenography, as involving, among other things, the construction and organisation of the stage space as an elementary aspect of the creative process, not simply as a practical solution to staging. The Theatre Arts programme needs to adopt a scenographic sensibility that can assist in designing both new spaces of performance and creating events where the role of the audience is questioned. The Theatre Arts programme's focus on design as a product on stage to be looked at by the consumerist audiences presents them (audience) as passive viewers and not active participants in the performance. In integrating the auditorium into the scenographic teaching and scenographic practice as a space that needs to be designed as well, the Theatre Arts programme will redefine scenographic practice within the university. The designed performances will, thus, be able to constitute a sense of community within the audience and the stage, a characteristic of the indigenous African performance, which the university theatre is based on.

In line with Eni's (2013) call for a generation of a distinct aesthetic which is typically African, developed as a result of borrowing and mixing concepts and philosophies from the African art traditions and Western performance practice, this paper argued that the University of Zimbabwe has failed to develop a distinctive scenographic tradition that defines its practice. On the other hand, this paper challenged the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Theatre Arts to engage the teaching, learning and performance space (Beit Hall) as a performer within the learning and performance event to provide fresh points of stimulation in the scenographic process and experience. In acknowledging the active participation of the architecture, canonical hegemonies and global North staging conventions are deconstructed and reconstructed in a relevant African performance

paradigm applicable in the Zimbabwean context as a distinct scenographic aesthetic.

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