

Directing for Stage and Screen in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Directing for stage or screen goes beyond placing actors, arranging sets, or controlling lights. It is a creative and cultural process in which stories are shaped through performance to engage an audience. In parts of the world, directing has been shown through European theories such as Stanislavski's psychological realism and Brecht's epic theatre, where the director acts mainly as an interpreter of the script (Stanislavski; Brecht).

In Nigeria, however, directing has developed a different character. Nigerian directors work within a hybrid artistic environment, combining elements of traditional African performance such as ritual, music, dance, and storytelling with adapted Western techniques and postcolonial aesthetics (Soyinka 27). Unlike Western traditions that often focus on the director as a single creative authority, Nigerian directing is strongly influenced by communal creativity and the idea that performance belongs to the community (Ngugi 58). This makes directing both a continuation of cultural heritage and a space for innovation (Boenisch 102).

This approach is rooted in Nigeria's history. Although Western theatre and cinema arrived through colonialism, Nigerian practitioners did not simply imitate them. They indigenized these forms by incorporating masquerade, praise-singing, ritual symbolism, and other African performance traditions. This aligns with Soyinka's Fourth Stage, which views African performance as a link between the spiritual and social worlds (Soyinka 27).

Today, Nigerian stage and screen directing reflects this dual heritage. It is a dynamic blend of Western and traditional presentation that allows directors to address Nigerian realities while still producing work that resonates globally (Boenisch 102). In this way, the Nigerian director becomes both an innovator and a custodian of culture (Soyinka 27; Ngugi 58).

Forms and Types of Directing

Directing in Nigeria takes a variety of forms which reveal the cross of tradition, postcolonial reality, and international influences on art. Although the general objective is storytelling, the stylistic approaches of the Nigerian filmmakers demonstrate a deliberate compromise between imported Western patterns and local African aesthetics. We can broadly classify these forms as stage directing, screen directing, and hybridised directorial practices that swing across the borders between theatre and cinema.

A) Stage Directing

Nigeria - Nigerian stage directing is entrenched in ritual and community based performative arts. In contrast to the proscenium-arch theatre prevalent in Europe, the traditional form of African theatre has always been held outside in open-air areas where the crowd is considered to be part of

the show (Stanislawski; Brecht). This tradition is frequently reinstated by Nigerian stage directors who incorporate ritualistic elements into the Western patterns of drama. Ola Rotimi concept of total theatre is a blend of music, dance, chants, and dramatic text and is the whole performance in the production of *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Rotimi). In a like manner, Segun Adefila and his Crown Troupe use ritualized performance that incorporates community storytelling, improvisation, masking, and satire-reaffirming theatre as a participatory performance art (Adefila).

B) Screen Directing

Nigerian film industry- Nollywood has created new arenas of directing, which have big differences with that of the stage. Directing on the screen is predetermined by the technological possibilities and limitations and focuses on the camera grammar, editing, and visual narration. An example would be the work of Obi Emelonye, who, in a series of productions, employs the cinematic theatre: dramatising social problems with theatrical intensity and using cinematic spectacle and narrative control, such as *Last Flight to Abuja* (Emelonye). Nollywood filmmaking is stylistically elastic, ranging between realist films and experimental films that integrate music-video aesthetics and fast production patterns characteristic of the sector.

C) Hybrid and Multimedia Styles

Hybridity is a peculiarity of the modern Nigerian directing. It is customary that directors go across stage and screen borders to produce both theatrical and cinematic productions. This is demonstrated by Bolanle Austen-Peters, who utilizes massive musicals and multimedia performances like *Saro the Musical*, which include massive sets, choreography, live music, and projection to show how directing in Nigeria is being integrated into a multimedia form of practice (Austen-Peters). This hybridity can also be viewed as a more general postcolonial aesthetics: combining ritual and realism, spectacle and intimacy, the Nigerian directors break down the notions of traditional and modern and shift to the development of new ways, where culture and globalization can find common ground (Ngugi 58; Soyinka 27).

Functions of Stage and Screen Directing

Stage and screen directing in Nigeria is not only focused on the mechanics of performance, but on cultural identity, political opposition, social learning, and entertainment. Directing in the Nigerian context is not a technical process but a cultural practice that reflects the experiences of the people who live and serve as the intermediary between the modern and the traditional. Its activities could be divided into artistic, social and political levels.

A) Artistic Functions

Directing in Nigeria arranges the numerous aspects of performance: actors, space, music, dance, technology, into a sensible unity that conveys meaning. Nigerian filmmakers prove their creativity by intertwining the traditional forms with the Western dramatic structure. Considering the case of Ola Rotimi, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is a Sophoclean tragedy reconfigured in Yoruba cosmology, thereby converting a western canonical text into an African story (Rotimi). In a comparable measure, cinema storytelling methods are employed by Nollywood practitioners such as Obi Emelonye in dramatizing the realities of Nigeria to the local and international audiences, a demonstration of how directing as an aesthetic innovation (Emelonye).

B) Social Functions

Directing is also a social instrument in that it helps people to interact collectively and to have a sense of community. In Nigeria performance is seldom distanced by the audience; instead, audiences are stakeholders in the meaning-making process. This is the case with the Crown Troupe led by Segun Adefila, who has been performing ritualistic shows in open areas and has removed the distinction between the two: the actor and the audience (Adefila). This role refers to the theory of the fourth stage by Soyinka where performance is a group ritual that brings together spiritual, social and metaphysical life (Soyinka 27). Directing is thus entertaining besides a group cultural experience that strengthens identity and linkage among groups.

C) Political Functions

Most significantly, perhaps, directing is a way of political criticism and protest in Nigeria. Theatres and film have always been an important tool of postcolonial African performance to question authority and social injustice. Ngugi wa Thiong'o reiterates that performance is an instrument of decolonization of culture and politics (Ngugi 58). This is the same direction that Nigerian filmmakers have taken through cinema and theatre to deal with corruption, inequality, and national crises. An example of re-enacting the life of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti that is not merely entertainment is *Fela and the Kalakuta Queens* (Austen-Peters). With these kinds of works, directing serves as advocacy, activism, and voice of the disenfranchised.

D) Leisure and Universal Attraction

Directing also plays the role of entertainment simultaneously by attracting different audiences. Nigerian directors have become global narrators as Nollywood, one of the largest film industries in the world, makes films that are consumed by the diaspora and Africa (Boenisch 102). This entertainment role does not make the messages delivered in the works any less serious, on the contrary, it proves the versatility of directing in Nigeria to inform, entertain, and inspire at the same time.

Elements in Directing

Nigerian art of directing can be characterized by certain aspects that combine classical rules of theatre with African taste and modern technology. Where Western theories emphasize plot, character, space, and spectacle as some of the most important elements of directing (Aristotle 13; Stanislavski), Nigerian practice modifies and extends such categories. These factors of Nigerian directing are space, time, technology, ritual and music, communication with the audience, and symbols.

A) Space

The Nigerian concept of space is not a geographical place, but rather a cultural and symbolic place of communication. The form of traditional performance in Africa has been the practice of open-air performances conducted in a market square, courtyard or open field where performers and audiences are not separated by strict borders (Ngugi 58). The latter tradition is followed by modern stage directors such as Segun Adefila with their performances in unusual locations eliminating the barriers between the actors and the audience (Adefila). Other screen directors such as Obi Emelonye, manipulate cinematic space with framing, camera angles, mise-en-scene, but tend to

inject local environments, like the streets of Lagos, with their visual narrative and to turn space into a character in its own right (Emelonye).

B) Time

Directing time in Nigeria is quite loose, combining a linear narrative progression with a cyclic vision of time through the African cosmology. Whereas the Western tradition of stage and screen performance is inclined towards chronological organization, Nigerian directors often interlace past, present, and future within one actor. According to Soyinka, this theory is depicted in the Fourth Stage, which focuses on the use of ritual as a mode that concretizes historical time into the mythical and spiritual time (Soyinka 27). The Ovonramwen Nogbaisi films cover historical events and also respond to new politics in Nigeria and how the Nigerian directing system invents time, creating a continuum between the past and the present (Rotimi).

C) Technology

Technology has emerged as an important aspect and this has come at the time of Nollywood and commercial stage productions. Bolanle Austen-Peters and other filmmakers are using expensive light, projecting mapping, and sound amplification to convert multimedia spectacles to match up the standards of Broadway (Austen-Peters). Directors use digital cinematography and editing effects to realize narrative fluidity and international appeal in film (Boenisch 102). Technology has been used, however, to support cultural identity as opposed to obliterating it- such as by overlaying traditional motifs, masks and music in techno-sophisticated forms.

D) Ritual, Music, and Dance

In contrast to Western theatre, where dialogue is frequently the primary emphasis of performance, ritual, music, and dance become central to Nigerian directing. These features are not a form of decor and bearers of meaning and cultural memory. The methods of drumming, chants and masquerade used by Adefila in her drama and Afrobeats and highlife by Austen-Peters in her musicals (Saro the Musical) and caress the border between entertainment and cultural affirmation (Adefila; Austen-Peters). This is in line with Ngugi when he posits that there is no way music and ritual can be separated in relation to African performance traditions (Ngugi 58).

E) Audience Interaction

The most impressive aspect of the Nigerian directing is probably the active audience. In Yoruba performance, viewers improvise, sing or even engage in the performance (Soyinka 27). This culture is still living in modern-day productions: call-and-respond is still encouraged in live theatre in Lagos, whereas Nollywood movies oftentimes use melodramatic signals to trigger foreseeable emotional reactions in viewers (Rotimi; Emelonye). Directing in both instances is more akin to dialogue than dictation in the relationship between performer and audience.

F) Symbolism and Allegory

Lastly, the use of symbolism is still one of the fundamental aspects of Nigerian directing. Allegorical storytelling is commonly used by directors both to avoid censorship and to make political commentary in ways that are culturally appealing. One such use of myth to speak of chance and corruption is *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by Rotimi, but the films of Emelonye are more likely to be written metaphorically to dramatize such anxieties of nationalism as migration,

insecurity and government (Rotimi; Emelonye). This is where directing is seen as both aesthetics and culture at the same time.

Some Nigerian Directors and their output

Nigerian directing has developed through a series of figures who have influenced its aesthetic values as well as its cultural meaning. Their work demonstrates the way in which Nigerian directing has ceased to ape western traditions in order to declare a particular postcolonial voice. The prominent examples are Ola Rotimi, Segun Adefila, Bolanle Austen-Peters, and Obi Emelonye, and the theorists Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Hans-Thies Boenisch.

A) Ola Rotimi and Total Theatre

Ola Rotimi (1938-2000) is one of the gurus of the modern Nigerian theatre. His total theatre was a pointed rejection of the Western view of the theatre as a fragmented compartmentalization where music, dance, and dialogue function as distinct elements of the play (Rotimi). Rather, Rotimi defined performance as a cultural ceremony consisting of music, dance, mime, chants, spectacle, and dramatic text created as a whole. An example of this philosophy can be seen in his work *The Gods Are Not to blame* (an adaptation of Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*): by reinterpreting a Greek tragedy through Yoruba cosmology, Rotimi indigenized a foreign text without overemphasizing its focus on universal human experiences with fate and destiny (Rotimi).

The contribution made by Rotimi goes beyond the field of aesthetics to pedagogy. As a director, he has trained generations of theatre practitioners in Nigeria to regard performance as an art and cultural responsibility. His overall theatre formed a pattern of directing with a focus on cultural truth, audience participation and duty. This style was also used as a denunciation of colonialism cultural hegemony in a postcolonial setting and also as a way of asserting African tradition as an acceptable basis of theatre in modern times (Soyinka 27).

B) Ritualized Performance by Segun Adefila

Segun Adefila of the Crown Troupe of Africa embodies the revival of theatre as a grassroots, community based activity. Adefila, unlike Rotimi, whose works tend to base their production on literary adaptations, is concerned with performance as living ritual and street-level activism. His approach to direction resurfaces Yoruba traditional practices like drumming, masquerade, and improvisation, and puts them in modern settings that directly address urban Nigerian viewers (Adefila).

The performances of Adefila usually occur not in the frames of the classic theatres, but in the open air, in the streets of Lagos, in the community square, and in markets. This makes his directing easy and participatory and turns theatre into an art of the people and not a high culture hobby. His input is that directing as a survival and resistance tool is reframed and that theatre is not an institution but flourishes in communities. His ritualized directing brings back the communal ethos of African theatre traditions by blurring the distinction between performer and the audience (Ngugi 58).

C) Bolanle Austen-Peters and Multimedia Theatre

Bolanle Austen-Peters is said to have commercialised the Nigerian theatre. She has produced musicals through her company called Terra Kulture; these include *Saro the Musical*, *Wakaa!*, *Fela* and the *Kalakuta Queens*, *The Musical*. The directing style of Austen-Peters is based on

multimedia spectacle, using grand sets, computer projection, live orchestration, and choreography. Her work is sold to the Nigerian market as well as to overseas theatre stages, with productions including the West End in London (Austen-Peters).

She has made two contributions to the Nigerian directing. First, she has increased the infrastructure and exposure of theatre, turning Lagos into a performance centre with advanced production values. Second, she has shown that Nigerian theatre can be commercial and cultural. In her visual-enriching performances, Austen-Peters fills the gap between entertainment and learning by dramatising Nigerian social history, including the life of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. By doing so, she is not alone as Boenisch addresses postdramatic theatre in which theatre is treated as a multimedia and immersive experience as opposed to a textual experience (Boenisch 102).

D) Obi Emelonye and Cinematic Theatre

Obi Emelonye is one of them; he has taken Nollywood to the world of screen directing. His movies, such as *The Mirror boy* or *Last Flight to Abuja*, can be seen as illustrations of what can be termed as cinematic theatre: films, which maintain the same level of dramatic intensity and symbolic profundity as those found in theatrical performances, though they use cinematic elements like close editing, visual effects and conventions of global narrative (Emelonye).

Emelonye has made his contribution in the rebranding of the aesthetic value of Nollywood. Poor productions and melodramatic acting were commonly found in early Nollywood, but Emelonye brought professionalism, global collaboration, and better cinematic language to the industry. Still he preserved Nigerian themes and his stories were based on migration, spirituality and national crisis questions. His direction thus brings out the issue of how Nigerian film can appeal to audiences around the world yet still be culturally specific. He is a perfect example of what Ngugi has maintained in his statement that postcolonial performance should not be erased by returning to local voices in the world arena (Ngugi 58).

E) Theoretical Anchors: Soyinka and Ngugi and Boenisch

Theoretical knowledge is added to the practical contributions of these directors. The concept of the fourth stage by Wole Soyinka theorizes African theatre as existing between the mortal and the metaphysical and implies that African practice in directing inevitably incorporates ritual and spirituality (Soyinka 27). The theory put forth by Soyinka justifies the ritual aspects of both the work of Rotimi and Adefila.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o stresses theatre as a decolonizing weapon and believes that culture should not be subdued by colonial rule and indigenous languages and forms should be revived (Ngugi 58). His theory is close to the grassroots performances of Adefila and the desire of Emelonye to narrate Nigerian stories in Nollywood cinema.

Lastly, Hans-Thies Boenisch places the directing in Nigeria in the broader context of postdramatic theatre, in which spectacle, multimedia, and hybridity are subverting the primacy of Western text-based traditions (Boenisch 102). His model helps to see the multimedia musicals of Austen-Peters and the experiments of Emelonye as the state of the art in the global practices, rather than a derivative one.

Conclusion

The historical development of stage and screen directing in Nigeria exhibits an aesthetic ambivalence which cannot be easily reduced to either Western or indigenous. As this paper has argued, Nigerian directing is a negotiated cultural arena, in which European naturalism, postcolonial resistance and African performance customs meet (Soyinka 27). In contrast to Western traditions that mostly separate theatre and cinema, Nigerian filmmakers embrace a less rigid practice where ritual performance, spectacularity, and realism converge to represent the cultural multiplicity of viewers (Boenisch 102).

The works of the critical personalities demonstrate this mixture. One example of total theatre indigenizing global classics was Ola Rotimi, adapting them into Yoruba cosmological systems and showing how traditional forms could question modern problems, like leadership and destiny (Rotimi). Segun Adefila's ritual drama revived grass-root performance to include masquerade performance, improvisation, and theatre became a civic dialogue tool through participation and politics (Adefila). With multimedia musicals like *Saro the Musical* and *Wakaa!*, Bolanle Austen-Peters brought Nigerian stagecraft into commercial markets internationally, addressing African tropes without compromising production values to meet international levels (Austen-Peters). Similarly, the cinematic theatre under Obi Emelonye replaced the Nollywood by incorporating theatrical fervour and cinematic subtlety to film works that were not only dominant in this area but were also recognised in other countries (Emelonye).

Their importance is also supported by the theoretical basis of the practices. In the Fourth Stage, Soyinka situates the Nigerian directing in a ritual continuity of myth and modern realities crashing on the stage with both cultural assurance and social commentary (Soyinka 28). The decolonial aesthetics of Ngugi wa Thiong'o establishes performance as a response to cultural domination, an approach that justifies the populist and activist appeal in the work of Adefila and Rotimi (Ngugi 58-59). The concept introduced by Boenisch, the postdramatic theatre, can be a helpful way to comprehend how the elements of multimedia spectacle and immersion in the senses employed by Austen-Peters and Emelonye relegate the role of text to the background in favor of performance as experience (Boenisch 104).

Combined, these works indicate that Nigerian directing has outgrown its focus on copying Western paradigms. Rather, it has grown into a powerful artistic practice of its own, bearing the stresses of a postcolonial, multicultural nation struggling with political instability, cultural diversity and global ambitions (Ngugi 60). Through the combination of ritual, community involvement, spectacle, and new movie technologies, Nigerian directors have established a local aesthetic that is simultaneously national and global (Soyinka 29; Emelonye).

Nigerian directing demonstrates that creativity flourishes when traditions meet, when cultural past interacts with new technologies, and when performance is still a reflection of society (Rotimi; Adefila; Austen-Peters). The future of directing in Nigeria will further be based on this mixed trend--one that is uniquely Nigerian, but has the potential to influence the theatre and film worlds around the globe (Boenisch 106).

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