

Carving out a Niche: Leveraging on the scholarly iconic personality of Duro Oni

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Abstract.

Theatrical enactments over time, have witnessed the input of craftsmen. The craftsman (Maitre de jeu) has always been at the epicentre of all theatrical performances bringing his personal vision to bear. Duro Oni is a director cum lighting phenomenon in Nigeria in the mould of Adolphe Appia, Richard Wagner, Richard Forman, Robert Wilson and Dexter Lyndersay. Oni is a highly sensitive director cum lighting designer who displays humongous authorial aesthetic skills in varied theatrical performances and pedagogy. He has had good training which involved wide reading and excellent exposure to theatre practice and education at home and abroad which, invariably, are salient apparatus of a good director cum lighting designer. This paper takes a look at Oni's immense service to humanity as a builder of budding and great minds, his exposure of some directors' poor packaging of productions, attempting a historical survey of theatre practice in Nigeria, unearthing the problems bedevilling theatre practice and study and offering a recipe for revamping same as well as a look at Oni's enigmatic and charismatic frame as a prodigious aesthete.

Keywords: Oni, lighting, Lagos, theatre arts, Duro, Lyndersay

Introduction

The coinages for the description of a theatre director in the thespian hierarchy are endless; the stage director has been described in roles as follows; the director is the primary critic in the theatre who has become the twentieth century most important stage critic. He is a communicator of the highest order, the master designer and artist of the stage play. He is the god of the theatre who does not ask, to be called "a god", yet his role implies he is (Cited in Nneyelike I).

which perhaps refers to Duro Oni, celebrates Oni as a director per excellence. Oni is a restless soul who traverses all the arts of the theatre, leaving indelible imprints which have impacted profoundly on theatre education in Nigeria and beyond. Using the words of Francis Hodge, Oni, as a director, is a combination of;

*an architect, sociologist,
craftman, sculptor,
choreographer, plumber,
Painter, carpenter,
electrician, stress-
engineer, historian, nurse,
drill- engineer, psychiatrist,
anthropologist, costumier,
musician, dancer and
public relations man
(Hodge 26).*

The remark above by Abdulrasheed Adeoye,

Humane and unassuming, Oni is a distinguished doyen of Nigerian theatre who

handles every theatre business with a 'tour de force' which stands him out as a master of his craft. He takes his place amongst theatre greats like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Olu Obafemi, Emeka Nwabueze, Chris Nwamuo, Ahmed Yerima, Steve Abah, Victor Dugga, Sunny Enessi Ododo and others.

A Peep into Duro Oni Background

Oni was born in Minna, Niger State of Nigeria, on the 15th of December 1952. There were no comets on the day he was born. He was born like every child of his time into a struggling lower class family. He is from Iwoye Ijesa in Osun state, a state known for its tourism potentials. He is a fellow of the society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (FSONTA), fellow, National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAPI) and fellow Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts (RSA), UK. He is also a fellow of the Nigerian Academy of letters (FNAL). He was once a Senior overseas fellow of the Ferguson Centre, Open University, UK. He holds B.A. and MFA degrees from the California Institute of the Arts and a PhD in Theatre Arts from the University of Ibadan. He has been External Examiner and Assessor for the Universities of Ibadan, Abuja, Jos, Benin, Ilorin, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, as well as other state owned Universities such as Kogi, LASU (Lagos State University), OOU (Olabisi Onabanjo University-Ago – Iwoye, Ogun State,). Oni has equally served as an External Examiner cum Assessor to the University of Ghana and the University of Derby. UK.

A professor in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Nigeria, Oni served as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Management Services) at the University of Lagos from February 2013 to February 2017. He was a member of the University of Lagos Governing Council for eight years (2007-2011) and 2013 – 2017. He was Dean of the Faculty of Arts from August 2009 – February 2013, Head of the Department of Creative Arts from 2006-2009; Director-

General and Chief Executive of the Federal Government parastatal, Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) from 2000 – 2006. His research interests are in Theatre Arts, Design and Aesthetics, the Nigerian Film/ Nollywood aesthetics and Cultural Studies. Oni, who is a detribalised Nigerian, is married to Francesca (from Ogoja in the Cross River State of Nigeria) and the marriage is blessed with four children, Yemi, Duro Jnr., Dele and Dolapo, all graduates of the University of Lagos. Oni speaks English, Yoruba and Hausa (*Striking Expressions*, Back Cover).

It is pertinent to inform the uninformed that at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Duro Oni and others like Molinta Enendu, Domba Asomba, Taiwo Adeyemi and the late Sunbo Marinho were the first generation of lighting and scene designers trained and nurtured by late Dexter Lyndersay under the Diploma programme in the Theatre Arts Department. Dexter Lyndersay was a Trinidadian academic/Theatre instructor, who bestrode Nigerian theatrical landscape for about two decades (1967-1985). Lyndersay trained in the process Oni and his likes who went on to become masters in their own rights. Apart from being a protégé of late Dexter Lyndersay at the University of Ibadan, Oni was equally influenced by theatre expatriates like Kenneth Post, Geoffrey Axworthy, Martha Banham, Peggy Harper and Ulli Beier. These, indeed, had a flowering influence on Oni's career much later in life (Essi, 4).

On the lighter side, Oni is a debonair who possesses an irresistible aura and panache which stands him out as Nigeria's 21st century equivalent of Adolphe Appia, a master. craftman and father of modern day lighting. In his interview with his mentor and tutor Dexter Lyndersay, Oni asked him what he (Dexter Lyndersay) would consider as his legacy to stage lighting, Lyndersay reply thus:

All of theatre, deserving of the name, is performed for an audience. After a period of time

working in Nigeria, I would say that my gods were out there in my audience and I was working hard to satisfy them. In whatever way this overall concept would be accepted and applied by my students, I feel that their attention to the early details I offered would help towards the realization of their own visions (Oni 61)

In a like manner, Oni has worked so hard to satisfy his gods and has guided and shaped the lives of students who passed through him over the years.

The Man and His Works

See'st thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings: He shall not stand before mean men (Proverbs 22 : 29)

Indeed, this sagacious workaholic has been diligent in the theatre business for over four decades as a tutor, director cum lighting consultant, scenographer, critic, theatre administrator and curator. As a tutor, he has in turn, mentored so many students who have gone on to make their mark in the theatre world and other allied professions. Theatre business has taken Oni all over the world where he has stood before kings and theatre buffs, teaching the arts of the theatre, directing and lighting productions. Oni, as a director cum lighting designer, believes fervently in the words of Richard Pilbrow below.

Theatre today, perhaps influenced by the speedier world in which we live, tends often to speak in shorthand, Plays no longer observe the Grecian unities of time, and space; scenes jump through place and period as rapidly as the imagination of the playwright will allow. Lighting can support this fluidity by rapidly conveying to the spectator a sense of place and time. Lighting supports the story telling process and by grounding the scene in its environment of the

moment in the play, the designer is contributing to the performance impact (9).

On the above submission, Adolphe Appia avers that “we don't know enough about the infinite resources of light, and how many treasures are enclosed in the simply ray of a projector (Roose-Evans, 51). Pilbrow's and Appia's iconic statements are proofs that lighting is in part, a salient condiment of theatrical productions. This has been the fulcrum of Oni's directorial repertoire and pedagogy. It is in this regard that in his seminal article titled “Towards the Development of Theatre Practice in Nigeria: The Design/Technology Dimension”; Oni gives an audacious homily as follows:

*Some theorists in the Nigerian theatre seem to have taken refuge in the works of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski in their approach to the theatre. They virtually perform their Plays in the moulds espoused by Brook and Grotowski in their famous works (Brook's *The Empty Space* and Grotowski's *the Poor Theatre*). One is however of the opinion that while “*The Empty space*” and *The Poor Theatre*” may have contributed immensely to the development of the Literature on performance paradigms, they have by and large, been exercises that have not survived the practice of theatre world wide (75)*

In view of the above, Oni asserts that theatre is essentially an experience between the actor and the audience and as such, packaging performances with all the condiments of theatre cannot be taken for granted. These condiments of the theatre, he says, are the design elements which are: Lighting, Sound, Scenography (decor) Costume and Make up. Admittedly, the world is visual and these design elements are what in part constitute aesthetics and spectacle in theatrical performances. Adesina Adegbite explains in this regard that:

As an integral tool, the designer uses design and technical concepts in the theatre to project the playwright's and director's artistic expression, communication, and all types of structuring and arrangement... In modern design trends, these elements are subsumed under the roles and functions of costumes, make-up, props, scenery, lighting and sound in theatre performance (118).

Resting on the above backdrop, Arinde Tayo Simeon opines that "We are left in no doubt that aesthetics is the ingredients that should be added to every theatre production to achieve a referenced performance" (156). On the strength of the foregoing, Oni holds that any performance bereft of the design elements, such theatrical enactment is tantamount to an "escapist situation" (76).

Furthermore, in his aforementioned article, Oni classifies the arts into the following divisions:

- Literary Arts, as they concern Literature such as playscripts
- Auditory Arts, as they relate to sound and audio productions.
- Verbal Arts, as they relate to oral poetry and renditions
- Visual Arts, as they concern the plastic arts
- Mixed arts, being the combination of all the other arts (76)

The theatre being a performing art, Oni says, belong to the realm of mixed arts, combining all the other arts into one in which all the elements of the arts are present (76). He succinctly affirms thus:

The basic elements of design and the general principles of design provides us with essential considerations in the theatrical culture of performance and form the basic guidelines which if adhered to, will assist in

improving our performance aesthetics (80)

Inferred from the above, Oni pose the following question: Were the travelling theatres of Hubert Ogunde and his later contemporaries in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras in Nigeria, in the main, poor theatres in their structure and form? Oni's response is an emphatic no. Oni informs that Hubert Ogunde's theatre was not bereft of design elements and that; these design elements actually gave Ogunde's theatre mass appeal. Oni observes that Ogunde's theatre made use of design elements like lighting, scenery and later sound amplification (78). He says that Ogunde's first native air opera "The Garden of Eden" and "The Throne of God" were performed on the proscenium stage of the Glover Memorial Hall on the 12th of June 1944 (Oni 78). He reports that during Ogunde's visit to England with his wife Adeshewa, he spent the sum of two thousand Pounds sterling on the purchase of lighting and stage equipment (98). Oni argues therefore, that the foregoing actually reinforces how paramount the design elements are to every theatrical pact.

In addition, Oni says that Ogunde's visit to England actually influenced his staging aesthetics on his arrival back home. Hence he maintains that:

Essential elements of the Ogunde theatre in its total theatre realization of the theatre as a mixed art are in scripting/ storylines, music, including the use of Western-type instruments such as trumpets, dance, stage sets and colourful stage lights (79).

Consequently, theatre groups in Ogunde's era like Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya and Oyin Adejobi also manifested grand experiments in self-development, perseverance, industry and resourcefulness (Oni, 78). Regrettably, in recent times, there has been a dearth of theatre equipment in Nigeria. Universities of

Ibadan, Calabar, Lagos, Ahmadu Bello (Zaria) and Ife (Obafemi Awolowo), which hitherto, had well equipped theatres are now shadows of themselves. Apart from government's lack of proper funding of universities and university theatres, our culture of maintenance in Nigeria university theatres is appalling. This attitude should be jettisoned if we must get out of the woods and keep pace with technology. In spite of the fact that many university theatres parade obsolete, over utilized technical and lighting equipment, careless handling of these equipment contribute mainly to their damage. In the area of stage lighting, Dauda Enna adds that:

The Universities that were able to purchase some lighting instruments (several) years ago are in capable of replacing them with modern ones. This aggravates the situation for the technical field, which is already plagued by the death of trained manpower (67-68). John Illah equally.

Submits that "the Design and technical course is taught as theory because of the inadequate material input for student's (28) such anomaly constitute what Ademola Adegbite calls "The transformation of living art into a dry abstract science" (66). As a result, Sunny Enessi Ododo avers that "to train and practice with obsolete equipment will surely not engender professional advancement" (23). This could be the major reason some directors today in Nigerian universities direct their productions in situations akin to a poor theatre, which Ayo Akinwale espouses thus: "What is regarded as poverty here is not ideas or content but of a considerable management and usage of materials within the scarce resources available to him" (19).

Conversely, Oni replies that:

The argument that plays produced in Nigeria should be devoid of technical input in view

of our limited production facilities runs against the grain of training in the theatre, We must always insist that adequate facilities be provided in the theatre for students of Theatre Arts, similar to the way and manner that laboratory equipment and facilities are provided in the sciences. A well-equipped theatre is the laboratory for the students of the theatre (89).

As can be observed, Oni urgently demands a situation akin to a "state of emergency" in Nigerian universities where Theatre Arts is offered as a course of study. He recommends the following:

- i. *Training facilities in the Universities/Colleges of education*
- ii. *Provision of in fratructural facilities and equipment.*
- iii. *Associations such as SONTA (Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists), NANTAP (National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners). ANTP (Association of Nigerian Theatre practitioners) should be made to play a greater role in complementing the work of the universities by providing" avenues for practical training (80).*

Subsequently, Oni adds that IT (Information Technology) is a sine-quantum for the development of theatre practice. He argues that IT affords Nigerian directors and students relevant software programmes for design in theatrical productions.

Away from Oni's foray into the woes of Nigerian university theatres. Duro Oni is a cerebral personality who outstrips his frame in terms of his prodigious academic works. He has presented a lot of academic papers at numerous conferences and fora within and outside Nigeria. Some of his published

academic works are: *Evaluation, Analysis, of Theatre Groups and Performance Venues in Nigeria Stage Lighting Design: The Nigerian Perspective*,. *Arts and the Man: Interpretive Essays on Bode Osanyin* edited by Duro Oni, *Striking Expressions: Theatre and Culture in National Development*, amongst others. Oni has also co-authored some texts which are; *Larger Than His Frame: Critical. Studies and Reflections on Olu Obafemi*. (co-edited with Sunday Enessi Ododo), *Nigeria and Globalization: Discourses on Identity Politics and social Conflict*. (co-edited with Suman Gupta et al), and others too numerous to mention. Oni has also conducted some published interviews with some theatre buffs, these are; “Arts and the Man: Bode Osanyin’s Humanism and a Dislocated society” (Published in *Arts and the Man: Interpretive: Essays on Bode Osanyin*); “Talking With the Master” (An Interview with Dexter Lyndersay, Oni’s erstwhile mentor and tutor, published in *The Performer, Ilorin Journal of the Performing Arts*). Interestingly, Austin Akpuda remarks that names like Duro Oni, Chris Nwamuo and the late Ezenwa Ohaeto are almost always written in the legendary format typical of such global trademarks as Emos London, Faber and Faber, Steven Spielberg, Levis Strauss etc. For a man known for his amiable mien and spartan disposition, he is simply Duro Oni to so many people across the world including his admirers. This impresario has given so much to humanity yet exudes the ferocious energy and tenacity of a matador.

Conclusion

Duro Oni has brought strength, range and vitality to Nigerian technical theatre. He is one of the bastions of directing and technical theatre in Nigeria. He will remain for a very long time, a major reference point in the study of the varied aspects of Nigerian theatre. On this note, one does not require a divining ball to answer the question: What would technical theatre in the academic and praxes in Nigeria have been without the Duro Oni phenomenon?

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