

## Scene design and stage construction: Evaluating Paul Ugbede's *Our Son the Minister* and Ahmed Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great Productions*

Jibril Imam Mohammed-Kabir<sup>1</sup>, Musa Salifu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Department of Theatre, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria. [kabirjib@gmail.com](mailto:kabirjib@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, ORCID: 0009-0007-3056-4463<sup>1</sup>, [mcdegreat@gmail.com](mailto:mcdegreat@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>, ORCID: 0009-0005-9789-0162<sup>2</sup>

---

### Abstract

Theatre performance is not only meant to entertain, it also passes across important messages and information to the audience. The aforementioned goals of the theatre can only be realised if the mood of the production as well as its theme, historical background, locales, directorial concept and theory are properly defined and interpreted and translated visually by the designer. Symbolically, design and construction are indispensable elements of the theatre. Yet, it has been observed that there seems to be total neglect of this most auspicious aspect of theatre production by practitioners and amateurs. This aspect is most precious that if it is not given attention, the production may be meaningless. It is against this backdrop that this study aims at evaluating the essence of stage construction and design in theatrical performance. The study adopts a content analysis approach of the qualitative research methodology through the analysis of Ugbede's *Our Son the Minister* and Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great productions*. The findings show that scene design and stage construction are veritable areas in theatrical production. Thus, the study concludes that if attention is given to these key areas, the audience may not have any option than to come back again and again. Thus, the paper recommends among others that scene design and stage construction should be given adequate attention in the process of preparing for theatre productions.

**Keywords:** Construction, Impacts, Scene, Symbol, Theatre

---

### 1. Introduction

Theatre performance as an art form is distinguished by a number of characteristics. One of such characteristics is that theatrical pieces are meant to be presented live before an audience. In other words, unlike other art works like literature and painting, theatre performance creates robust opportunities for its artists to have live and immediate interactions with the audience. As such, Nwamuo (2006: 1) observes that, theatre is a social institution through which the society needs to meet and interact. . . an art in which performers or actors embody imitations of people in a story that is enacted to an audience. Obviously, there cannot be theatre without the audience. Hence, one of the major concerns of the theatre artists is to meet the needs of the audience which includes entertainment and enlightenment amongst others. Owing from the above, array of scholars and theorists of the theatre world over, have over the years done researches and interrogated the better ways to meet the needs of the audience in the theatre. Many of them, including Craig and Dick (2015) and Brook (1968) seem to agree that careful consideration of all the elements of the theatre will help theatre artists to achieve their goals. In this context, selection of good scripts and actors are not enough; consideration should also be given to other elements such as costumes, lighting, and general scenic environment. In this vein, Enendu (1993: 166), argues in this line of thought that

People come to the theatre to be entertained, no matter the level of education or awareness you intend to create with such performance. So, if the acting is expected to be real, the scenery is also expected to be real. . . What makes a performance entertaining to me is the spectacle in it, without it many aspects of the story is dead. . .

It is obviously correct when Aristotle, the Greek philosopher outlined the elements of drama, and spectacle is one of these elements and is central to the thrust of this study. Spectacle defines the scenic environment of the play in performance. Hence, a well-defined scenic environment has great potentials to promote the overall intentions of theatrical production. However, despite the fact that the benefits of design and construction in the theatre cannot be over emphasised, it has been observed that, in the actual practice of theatre in Nigeria, the integration of the design is often overlooked (Eni 2021: 159). Eni's (2021) observation may be correct, but on the other hand, over the years, a number of Nigerian theatre scholars

like Sumbo Marinho, Duro Uni, Sunnie Ododo, Agbo Folarin, Molinta Enendu, Taiwo Adeyemi among others have done tremendous works in the area of theatrical design and stage construction. The works of the aforementioned scholars have in recent years influenced and improved the perceptions and understanding of many Nigerian theatre artists with regard to the impacts of design in the theatre, hence, making them produce performances that have well-defined scenic environments. Despite the efforts of the above scholars, some directors and theatre designers seem to neglect these areas, maybe as a result of the non-availability of funds and equipment. It is against this backdrop that the study interrogates the menace of the neglect of the design. Therefore, the need for a choice of Paul Ugbede's *Our Son the Minister* and Ahmed Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great* as paradigms.

## **2. Literature review: Concepts of Scene Design and Stage Construction**

Scene design and stage construction are some of the technical elements of the theatre. Technical theatre involves the applications of practical skills such as construction of objects, painting, and skilfully using of stage lights in order to realize a space for actors to perform. According to Brockett (1979: 367), scene design is the organization of performance space. The designer defines and characterises the space, arranged it to facilitate the movement of the actors. This corroborates Gillette (2019: 19) submission that

Design deals with the external manifestation of a theatrical production or performance. It is a sort of transition from page to page. Design in a theatrical performance is more of a process. It is a series of steps through which we pursue the goals of creating what we hope will be a work of art.

Indeed, the building and construction of a theatrical set involves a number of processes. These processes begin with the reading of the script by the designer in order for him to have enough knowledge about the performances locales, historical period, thematic pre-occupation, as well as the time and financial requirements needed for the job. The understanding of these would enable the designer via the directors concept. The best designer evolves step by step with the director, going back, changing, scrapping, as a conception of the whole gradually takes form (Iwuh 124), to communicate to the audience symbolically/visually. Because theatre deals with verbal and non-verbal communication; the audience learns through hearing and seeing.

This research work is guided by Emile Durkheim, 1858-1917, Functionalism Theory, which can equally be seen as Structural Functionalism. Thus, Structural Functionalism Theory sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. Durkheim (2011: 198) believes that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability". Durkheim (2011) argues that for the society to function all these parts must work together that if a part stops to function the society is heading to failure. These different parts of the production work interrelatedly to make the society functional. Hence, theatre performance is a system of interconnected, interrelated and interdependent compartments that function together to attain its goals. Once one of these elements ceases to function then theatre production is headed for destruction.

Apparently, deducing from the closing remarks, this theory has critical implications on this research work. For certain, the statement of the theory which has to do with the working together of different parts of a system in order to actualize a purpose is a strong backup for the argument of the paper. The study hold that all the compartments; directing, costuming, make-up, lighting, design, construction, lines, movements, postures and gestures must work together to bring the intent of the theatre production to frontline. Ideally, theatrical ideas like playwriting, acting, music, costume, make-up, set design and construction, just like the theory argues about a system, must be brought to together in order to realize a perfect production. Hence, using the functionalism theory with theatrical practice will go a long way in promoting the art of the theatre. Therefore, if the director succeeds in bringing other areas as mentioned above together and neglect scene design and construction or any other elements of theatrical production failure awaits him at the gate of exit.

### ***Synopsis of Our Son the Minister and Oboni the Great***

*Our Son the Minister* is a play written by Paul Ugbede, directed and produced on the 21st October, 2021 at Kogi State University Arts Theatre by Samuel O. Alidu. The performance is presumably set in 21st Century Nigerian society. It tells a story of a people who collectively promote corruption at the detriment of the development of their society. The drama revolves around Akoji, a newly appointed minister of a federation. Akoji is a patriotic, honest and intelligent young man who wishes to serve his people with total obedience, honesty and high sense of responsibility. But his people including his mother, uncle, friends and relatives have different ideas about Akojis appointment as a minister. They look at the position as something Akoji must use to dry up the national purse and enrich himself and the people around him.

Thus, the play opens with festivities embellished with singing, dancing, drinking and eating. The festivity is organized by Mrs. Angelina, Akojis mother to celebrate her son's appointment. Apart from the members of Akojis family like his uncle, many friends are also present at this occasion. They are not only around to celebrate with Akoji on his appointment, but each of them is around with the desire to benefit from Akojis appointment.

The mother believes that the position means nothing but a better means to embezzle the national treasures for the benefit of the family at the detriment of national interest, and what Akojis uncle and his friends understand about the position is the same with Mrs. Ajelinas belief. Thus, the performance reflects how the collective greed of the masses champions and leads leaders to involve themselves in illegal acts. The play reflects the typical nature of the Nigerian society where leaders are engrossed in syphoning, laundering and embezzlement of public funds.

*Ameh Oboni the Great* on the other hand, is a play written by Ahmed Yerima, and directed and produced on the 17th October, 2021 at Kogi State University Arts Theatre by Jide Yakubu. It is a historical drama that captures a serious conflict between Igala traditional institution, and British rules. The key actors of the drama are Ameh Oboni, a powerful traditional ruler and Mr. Muffet, a representative of British government. As a traditional African society, Igala Kingdom has its culture, norms, and leadership institution before the arrival of Muffet. However, for a number of reasons, Muffet sees the peoples ways of life as barbaric with derogatory nomenclatures and wishes to change the existing institutions. Ameh Oboni, the custodian of the people's culture, through different means rebels against the colonial imperialist. Hence, Muffet makes necessary arrangement to dethrone Ameh Oboni. However, at the climax of the performance, Ameh Oboni ponders on the dangers of Muffet's plans on the future of kingship in his lineage amongst other things, and then chooses to commit suicide.

#### ***Impacts of Scene Design and Stage Construction on Our Son the Minister and Ameh Oboni the Great***

It is intriguing to start this session with an insightful position of Brook (1968: 124) that,

I have found that the set is the geometry of the eventual play, so that a wrong set makes many scenes impossible to play, and even destroys many possibilities for the actors. The best designer evolves step by step with the director, going back, changing, scrapping, as a conception of the whole gradually takes form...

This is the essence of theatrical thinking: a true designer will think of his designs as being all the time in motion, in action, in relation to what the actor brings to the scene as it unfolds.

Apparently, the manifestation of Brook's position above to some extent is seen in the design of Ugbede's *Our Son the Minister* and Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great*. For the two plays are set within different eras, and both reflect different issues. There are also many scenes in each of the performances. Thus, a successful portrayal of the issues by actors, and realization of those scenes on stage depends on, among other things, a careful visual interpretation of the work by the designer. How well the designers of the performances did execute the aforementioned demands?

Answers to the above question are embedded in the analysis thus: for most of the actions in *Our Son the Minister* are meant to take place in a parlour and bed room, particularly, the apartment of someone who has just been appointed as a minister in the 21st century Nigerian society. As such, the designer of the performance produced and presented a scenic environment that interpreted the home of such personality. This was achieved through the use of beautiful colours, curtains, chairs, tables and other props, as well as lighting as it is captured in figure 1 below:

**Figure 1:** Family and friends in Mr. Akojis parlour



**Photo Credit:** These Researchers, 2021

### **3. Research methodology**

The study adopts content analysis approach of the qualitative research methodology through the analysis of Ugbede's *Our Son the Minister* and Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great* productions.

### **4. Data analysis**

However, Craig and Dick (2015: 2) assert that, "theatre design is concerned with the total visual and aural effect of a dramatic production". A close look at figures 4 and 5 above can justify this fact. The designers of these performances were to make the production aesthetically and visually relevant to the audience by creating beautiful scenic environments through their choices of colour, selection of fine curtains and creative paintings and drawing of elephant, lion, and mystical symbols as captured in the pictures.

Generally, the set design and stage construction of any performance is always aimed at capturing the environments created in the world of the play text; the environments which could be in heaven and on earth like places such as paradise or hell, market, hospital, Motor Park and others. Thus, the design is not only meant to create aesthetics, but it also joins hands with other theatrical elements of the production to project its total essence including the production's directorial concept, theoretical framework as well as its place and periodical settings. For example, *Our Son the Minister*, like it has been analysed earlier, borders on the corrupt attitudes of family and friends of newly appointed Nigerian leaders. They

normally conveyed at the houses of the leaders, most often in colourful mood, atmosphere and environment singing, and dancing in honour of their leaders. The major aim of these acts are to lure the leaders to embezzle national treasures, and by extension, for them to have a share of the embezzled treasures. Hence, the designer of this production alongside the other artists, did his best through painting, lighting and structural construction to project the aforementioned socio-economic realities to the audience. The director's conception of the production was centred on realism. Ostensibly, with dialogues, movements, actions, costumes and make, the designer of the production was able to create a beautiful scenic environment that reflects realistic situations and atmosphere in Nigerian society where people sing and dance in honour of corrupt leaders as it is captured in figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Akoji's parlour, friends and family in celebration mood



**Photo Credit:** These Researchers, 2021

In the same manner, the design of *Ameh Oboni the Great* to some extent reflects the directorial concept of the play. Like it has been examined earlier, the performance revolves around a historical events in Igalaland under the colonial rule where Ameh Oboni, a powerful Igala traditional ruler clashed with the British rule led by a British administrator called Muffet. However, it is obvious that the best way to present history to the people is to project it as realistic as possible. Hence, in the theatre, the effort to represent and bring history on stage is usually realized via the theory of realism. This with no doubt was manifested in the production of *Ameh Oboni the Great*. In line with the principles of realistic theory, the director of the play in collaboration with other artists like set designer, projects the idea of the play as accurate and realistic as possible. The evidence of this claim can be seen in the manner the designer built and designed the scene of the production as it is captured. In the scene, just like in the palace of Attah Igala of Igala kingdom, magnificent royal stool, drawing of lion and elephants and other mystical symbol are seen.

## **5. Findings and discussion**

The findings show that scene design and stage construction are veritable areas in theatrical production. Thus, the study concludes that if attention is given to these key areas, the audience may not have any option than to come back again and again. Thus, the paper recommends among others that scene design and stage construction should be given adequate attention in the process of preparing for theatre productions.

Thus, the design and stage construction of this performance in a number of ways makes it possible for the actors to move their bodies as it is demanded. In other words, all the scenes in the performance are visually well built to promote the movement of the actors. The designer's efforts in this regard is seen in how he realizes Mr. Akoji's parlour scene, his bedroom, and the entrances. He creates Akoji's parlour at the centre stage with about three chairs and a centre table; one of the chairs was placed at the upstage centre, another was by the right and the third one was situated by the stage left, while the table was in the middle of the chairs. It is important to note that like it is seen in figure 2 above, the weight of the parlour is on the stage left. This of course, helped the designer to create Mr. Akoji's bedroom behind the chair by the stage right. The bedroom, which is elevated above the parlour, was built with solid structures like wood and plywood, and curtains. The orchestra were placed by the downstage right. The change of scenes from the parlour to the bedroom and orchestra's area was done with the help of lighting. There were two entrances to the parlour; one leads in from the right and other, from the left. The entrance to the bedroom passes behind the chair by the stage right. All these visual arrangements of the scenes in no little measures made the actors' movement flexible. Stage construction and scene design are auspicious areas of stage performance that any attempt to neglect them will mar the essence of the production. The abovementioned helped the audience to understand the different actions of the production and went home with avalanche of messages which is the sole aim of any performance after aesthetic purposes. The effort of the designer is acknowledged because the audience members do not need the help of the interpreter to understand Akoji's parlour and bedroom.

*Ameh Oboni the Great* on the other hand has a royal palace as its setting. Unlike the setting of *Our Son the Minister*, the architectural outlook of this performance was convenient with little stress for the designer who simply did a replica of Attah's palace by placing the Attah's stool at the upstage centre, and places chairs by the stage right and left just as it is captured. There were two entrances from the downstage which served as palace gates, and one entrance by the upstage

right which served as entrance to the Attah's royal chamber. All these efforts of the designer helped the actors in many ways as they discharged the artistic duties within the various parts of the stage.

## 6. Contribution of the study

The study argues that rigorous attention must be given to the area of design and construction when it comes to theatrical productions/performances. There is no way a production will gain audience applause without design and construction.

## 7. Implications of the study

Deducing from the findings and conclusion above, the researchers find it seamlessly to recommend that, scenic design and stage construction should be given adequate attention in the process of preparing for any theatrical performance as its role can never be underestimated in theatrical production as can be seen above. Director and theatre designer should endeavour to pay attention to the design aspect of the production because it has the power of verbal and non-verbal communication that help the audience members in understanding the production better.

Directors as the melting pot of theatrical activities should incorporate the designer as he plans to do a production. He should avail his directorial concept to designer to enable the designer start work on time. The costumier and the make-up artists are to note that the designer must know their concept as members of the designing team to enable them attain the essence of the performance. They do this with the interest of the audience at the back of their hearts

## 8. Conclusion

It is a truism that the organization and appearance of the performance environment and space otherwise known as scene design and stage construction is one of the major elements of theatrical production. In fact, the audience has reasons for coming to the theatre; these reasons presumably include the desire to be educated and informed while being entertained. These desires with no doubt can only be possible through the blending of the various elements of the theatre which include design and stage construction. Hence, Durkheim's Theory of Functionalism; any part of the performance that seizes to function will affect the entire production. Like the case of stage construction and scenic design. Henceforward, area of design in the theatre deserves to be given serious and adequate attention. Thus, this paper has projected this position by examining and revealing the several impacts design and construction have had on the selected performances.

## References

1. Craig, W., & Dick, B. (2015). *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*. Boston: Wadsworth.
2. Dunkhiem E. (2011). Functionalism. *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
3. Enendu, M. (1993). Modern Technology and Theatre Production in Nigeria: Theatre Studies Review (TSW), In *Chris Nwamuo (ed), Calabar: Dept. of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar*.
4. Eni, K. E. (2021). Multimedia and the Creation of the Sceneographic Space in the Stage Realization of Emmanuel Emmasealu's *Nerves*. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 7. 2-11.
5. Gillette, M. J. (2019). *Theatre Design and Production: An Introduction to Scene Design and Construction, Lighting, Sound, Costume and Make-up*. New York: McGraw Hills, 1997.
6. Iwuh, J. (2019). Technical Theatre and Inter-Disciplinary Collaboration: Experimental Theatre Practice". *Journal of Theatre Design and Technology*, 3. 150-170.
7. Liman, R. A., & Zaure, F. P. (2020). Architecture, Stage Design and Performance: The Case of Ahmodu Bello University Studio Theatre. *Journal of Theatre Design and Technology*, 4. 91-109.
8. Oscar, B. (1979). *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
9. Ugbede, P. (2018). *Our Son the Minister*. Lagos: Paperworth Books.
10. Yerima, A. (2006). *Ameh Oboni the Great*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.