



*Research Article/ Performing Arts*

## **Directing the Contemporary Theatre: The Case of Oki's *Night of Ijalo***

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### **ABSTRACT**

In contemporary times, the sophistication of media gadgets coupled with the development of the media-savvy audience has necessitated the theatre to devise alternative ways to sustain audience attention and interest. This has required theatre directors to revisit their approach to interpreting contemporary performance by engaging several elements of aesthetic communication to enhance the overall outlook of the performance and boost show business. Contemporary theatre directors, as the example of Olumide Oki (2023) illustrates, have identified this need by establishing a deliberate use of media elements and thus birthing techniques essential for the creation and interpretation of the contemporary performance. This paper engages Hans-Thies Lehmann's post-dramatic theatre as a theoretical framework. It is a descriptive study that secures its data through participant observation of the 2023 production of *Night of Ijalo* by the Zion Royal Theatre. Based on the perception that the media has become an intrinsic part of the daily routines of the contemporary audience, Oki prioritizes the need to create a media-intensive theatre experience for the media-savvy audience. Hence, he adopts a mixed-media technique to boost his directorial interpretation and provide a seamless connection with the audience's

demand through the deliberate use of aesthetic communication, intermediality, sound prerecording, mediation and mediatisation, and spectacle. With the mixed-media technique which includes the use of several media elements, Oki presents the media as a

quintessential part of the contemporary performance and recommends it to theatre directors as a valuable technique for enhancing directorial interpretation and creating a media-oriented theatre experience.

**KEYWORDS:** Theatre directing, contemporary theatre, post-dramatic theatre, mixed-media technique

## INTRODUCTION

Since its regularization in the early beginnings of the classical era, the theatre has evolved through several stages that stemmed from significant factors which include epochal changes, theoretical underpinnings, paradigm shifts, and technological modifications. These factors have defined and improved the practice of theatre and have resulted in a more flexible approach to creating theatre, especially in contemporary society. Today, the emergence of regular theatre is strongly tied to the need for interaction and communication. That is, the theatre functions more strategically and alternatively as a channel of communication using audio-visual elements that the audience is used to. Universally, theatre audiences in the world today, due to the exposure to several media technologies, have developed a media and aesthetics-inclined vocabulary which necessitates a shift in the creation of the contemporary performance. Therefore, this places an obligation on the contemporary director to engage contemporary techniques in directing the contemporary performance for the consumption of the contemporary audience. Though these techniques can be subjective to each director, they have unequivocally formed parameters for creating contemporary theatre.

Hence, this study interrogates Olumide Oki's technique in the interpretation of *Night of Ijalo* to identify the currencies to be considered as possible methods for the creation of contemporary theatre performance.

A change remains the most constant element in every human endeavour without exception to theatre practice. The theatre today is a product of several modifications and is still relevant due to its adaptability to change. Although "the theatre has weathered the storm of several changes and has sustained its relevance, the cycle of change never ends" (Neikirk, 2015, p. 37). From the times of the Duke of Saxe Meiningen in the nineteenth century, theatre directing has become a regular phenomenon that entails the holistic organization of the artistic and overall framework of a theatrical production to be handled by specific persons called directors. Mark (2016) records that "Meiningen was noted for unifying productions. He established the idea of ensemble playing, the coordination of various components of an acting company, so that a unifying impression might be created (the total performance)" (p. 15). In the same vein, Ramli et. al (2021) give a fundamental description of the director as "the one, who makes the first contact with the script, understands it, and then relates its central message(s) to other members of the creative team according to their respective departments for the script to come alive" (p. 3743). The foregoing perspective gives a true but basic definition of the job description of the theatre director and this has been practised religiously since the evolution of directors in modern times as practised by modern theatre directors like Konstantin Stanislavski, Chekhov, Antoine Artaud, Brecht, Meyerhold, and Grotowski, among others. Subsequently, in more recent times, as the job description of the director extends from the artistic coordination of the creative team to the realization of the playwright's vision, the technique to create the performance expands. In the words of Ledger (2019), "Directors became figures who increasingly created theatre not just on aesthetic forms, but in the context of their cultural or political intentions, and how world views might inform artistic choice" (10). That is, directors became more intentional and

particular about the method of interpreting the story than mere presentation of the script and coordination of the team. Bonet and Schargorodsky (2015) connect this shift to the widespread of media technologies and the dynamic inclusion of these elements into mundane activities. They capture it succinctly that “the appearance of new forms of communication and entertainment such as cinema, television or the internet with all possibilities for digital interaction. These are said to have influenced the process of the ‘gestation, construction and delivery of the live show’” (p. 41).

Thus, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been other directors who are passionate about revisiting the methods of creating performances to increase the possibilities of making performances with a contemporary feel. This includes directors like Robert Lepage, Elizabeth LeCompte, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Jeff Bender, Ryan Miller, Bolanle Austen-Peters, Tayo Isijola, Festus Dairo, Olumide Oki, and a host of other directors, who began by introducing newer techniques into performances to enhance interpretation and boost audience’s understanding of the dramatic story. They have revisited the standards for performance creation and extended the frontiers of directorial interpretation to include the conscious use of aesthetics and media technology to enhance communication and interaction with the contemporary audience. Although the application of these techniques differs from director to director, the demands of the contemporary world and the taste of the media-savvy audience have placed contemporary theatre directors on a compulsory search for newer and more relatable ways to create the performance.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As against the regular conventional theatre, the theatre today presents a shift in technique, form, and style of creating performance. This study engages Lehmann (2006) seeks to explore the likelihood of recreating theatre by harnessing the provisions of the media. Vanfleteren (2008) explains that post-dramatic theatre “requires not only another way of creating but also another way of looking and analyzing” (p. 2). This explains that post-dramatic theatre is targeted at revisiting the methods of creating performance by introducing newer ways to approach performance. It highlights the need for a break away from conventions and the usual *modus operandi* of creating performances into a more recent method through a deliberate dialogue with contemporary trends and advancements like the inclusion of media and current technology. Hence, post-dramatic theatre explores a connection between the theatre and the ‘changing media’ by emphasizing the possibilities of harnessing the ‘mediatized culture’ (Lehmann, 2006, p. 1). Therefore, post-dramatic theatre gives a vital bedrock for the discourse on the need for a renewed directorial arsenal for directors in contemporary times as it pertains to the technique of interpretation, as presented in this study with Olumide Oki’s production of *Night of Ijalo*. *Night of Ijalo* presents a biblical adaptation of the narrative parable of the 10 virgins and the principle of waiting diligently. Domiciled in Aiyeloja Kingdom, it centres around 10 ladies (Adelola, Ewadunmi, Iyunade, Chibundu, Chinobim, Margaret, Adaolisa, Dinatu, Rahila, & Saratu) from the major tribes in the typical Nigerian society, who were the allegorical representation of the virgins as captured in the pages of Matthew 25 verses 1-13.

Alakola receives news of his appointment as the master of ceremony for the prince’s royal wedding procession. His friend, Adio is elated as they celebrate together only for Alakola to realise to his irritation that Adio's joy is not at the news but the promise of good food. When the announcement for the royal procession goes out, drastic decisions begin to take place around the kingdom. Three ladies from the northern

kingdom refuse the advances of their suitor in favour of remaining pure for the ceremony. Others from the east, west, and central kingdom do the same.

Meanwhile, plans kick off fully for Prince Adelowo's wedding procession in the palace as Alakola prepares to anchor the event. He announces the regulations for the procession especially, the importance of the lighted lamp that the selected maidens must carry.

Simultaneously, in another kingdom, an event is also taking place. The rejected suitors return to report to Olorogbo, the age-long enemy of the Aiyeloja kingdom and the king. Olorogbo who has been desiring to have the maidens of Aiyeloja Kingdom for himself is angered at their rejection. He hatches a fresh plan to have total control of the maidens by making them miss the procession. Soon, Eku Emo comes with false news that the procession has been cancelled but the ladies choose to reject the information and keep waiting nevertheless. Eventually, the maidens slowly get tired of waiting and they begin to fall asleep, and Olorogbo, who had never stopped spying on them, is overjoyed at this new development. Unfortunately, the royal procession finally starts with much singing and funfair, and the maiden jerks awake at the voice of Alakola, the wedding anchor. Surprised at their laxity, they prop up themselves quickly only for five of them to notice that they have it worse - their lamps had gone off while they slept. These five beg the others for extra oil but unfortunately, they were denied the right as everyone had to cater for themselves at the moment. As a spontaneous response to the situation, the five maidens without oil decide to go out to buy from vendors but by the time they would return, it was too late as the prince had already taken the other available five maidens with him and shut the door to the rest five, hence, leaves them into the hands of Olorogbo, who is ecstatic at the unfortunate portion of the five who missed the procession and leads them away into agony.

By failing to wait patiently for God and getting carried away by the affairs of the world, there is a high tendency of wandering into the nights of Ijalo. Ijalo sets in after the gates have been shut and then there is darkness.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRE**

### **Directing the Contemporary Theatre**

The gradual departure from the regular theatre conventions especially in the twenty-first century which was a result of experiments to recreate theatre birthed a refurbished kind of theatre that is compatible with recent times. The 'contemporary theatre' could attract different definitions, but in the scope of this context, it is "the most recent modus operandi which the theatre is already adapting to as the world is evolving" (Olatunji, 2021, p. 13). Pavis (2016) describes it as "...a form, an aesthetic, a practice that stems from a break, a turning point, a period or an experience that have not yet been overtaken or questioned. . . . In current critical practice, contemporary theatre is quite simply what passes for modern, or even hypermodern, what presents innovative or experimental forms and works of art (p. 41). In the same vein, Dubovskaya (2020) gives an elaborate opinion when he reveals the following:

Contemporary theatre is no longer attempting to imitate reality, by doubting it or reflecting everyday life. Reality is better addressed by cinema or photography. Instead, the theatre aims to create a special reality. Back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the famous French director Antonin Artaud noted that the theatre gives an ephemeral but true world, the world tangential to the real. On the other hand, there is an obvious need for a renewed artistic arsenal. (p. 101)

The foregoing explains contemporary theatre as such that is defined by the undertakings of recent happenings and trends. This provides an underpinning for the radical experiments and inclusion of external media forms into the live performance. These changes which include the proliferation of media technology and the wide increase in knowledge have adjusted audience taste, boosted the practice of theatre, and defined the theatre-going culture today. Hence, these changes have also redefined the director's technique in the interpretation of the dramatic story and the creation of theatre in a contemporary world. Thus, these modifications have led contemporary theatre directors to carve out suitable techniques that could meet the standards of the contemporary world and also enhance their creativity.

Though there is no one way to direct contemporary theatre, and like Pickering (1981) states that "there are many directing techniques are there are many directors, and many directors even vary their methods to suit the special problems that are presented from script to script" (p. 170). Moreover, there are homegrown theatre directors, the example of Oki (2023), who have created techniques that have been found compatible with the trends and demands of contemporary theatre. His directorial technique is hinged on several elements which shall be critically examined in the next section of this study.

### **Directing the Contemporary Theatre: An Analysis of *Night Ijalo***

Creating contemporary theatre is a more technical and creative endeavour as it requires a high degree of ingenuity and originality. Hence, the director of contemporary theatre is saddled with the responsibility of fashioning a technique that will place his performance side-by-side with the aesthetic taste of the contemporary audience, and also make his production compatible with the demands of the contemporary world. Thus, for the contemporary director, the fabrication of a technique comes with the deliberate use of elements that are marked as quintessential for the success of any contemporary production. In the production of Oki's *Night of Ijalo*, the director experimented with the use of certain elements which formed his technique for the successful interpretation of the dramatic story. He engaged these elements with a degree of intentionality to generate the desired results. These currencies shall be highlighted below:

### ***Aesthetic Communication and Audience Attention***

The audience forms a quintessential element of a theatre performance. However, due to the exposure to several media elements as technology advances, sustaining audience attention in the theatre becomes a real business. The reality remains that today's media-savvy audiences are not used to seeing theatre in its raw form as it was on the Greek stage. They expect that since technology has been so integrated into their daily lives, the theatre, in this case, should not be an exception to accommodating technology (Neikirk, 2015, p. 3). Hence, the art of creating theatre in the twenty-first century requires a dynamic technique that can meet the taste of the audiences, trap them in the world of the play and effectively communicate to them in the best ways they can understand. Fundamentally, communication in the theatre could mean engaging verbal and non-verbal elements to send and convey messages; however, more particularly, aesthetic communication denotes the deliberate use of aesthetics as a strategic means to communicate messages. Thus, these aesthetic elements could be packaged in audio or visual forms in the delivery of the live show. In an interview with Oki (27 April 2023), it is revealed that

Audience attention is very important because the reality is that if you lose your audience from the beginning because of your scene changes, the messages

wouldn't sink. You should be intentional with building momentum from the beginning into the climax so you don't lose them. What I do is plan the audience's attention and the scene change from the beginning. Sometimes, I even see feelers as instruments that could be used to pass across messages.

As the director of *Night of Ijalo*, Oki (2023) classifies audience attention as a basic element for interpretation that should be put into consideration from exposition, where the story is still being introduced to the audience and they are still trying to get a grasp of the entire plotline. Similarly, he discloses the use of the media to be central to audience attention and should be used generously as far as audience attention is concerned (Interview with Olumide Oki, 27 April 2023). It is a media-dominated and aesthetics-driven world, hence, for productions to interact successfully well with the contemporary audience, media and aesthetics should be considered as vital vehicles for effectively conveying messages. As exemplified in the performance understudy, the methods/instances through which aesthetic communication was engaged for the sake of audience attention shall be highlighted below:

**Dialogue and Music Prerecording.** Sound is germane in the presentation of the live show. Predominantly, the theatre is a seeing place that engages the use of visuals complemented with audio elements to effectively communicate its message. Significantly, from the early beginnings of regular theatre, effective communication between the actors performing in amphi-theatre spaces and the wide audience was a herculean task. This is due to the nature of the theatre spaces and the technical knowledge available at the time. Subsequently, with the introduction of proscenium theatres in the renaissance, dialogue communication could leverage the use of in-built theatre acoustics which allowed the actor's voice to be trapped within the perimeters of the hall, and these acoustics remained effective as long as the actor's raw voice is unrivaled among other sound elements. However, with the introduction of media elements which include video and other mixed-media elements, the actor's raw voice became ineffective and needed to be amplified to match up with these elements which were external to live stage performance.

However, Oki (2023) offers a newer perspective to sound amplification in performance by introducing dialogue and music prerecording to provide the audience with a media-friendly and undiluted aesthetic experience. Although prerecording the dialogues and music negates the spontaneity of the live theatre, in the bid to meet up with the expectations of the media-savvy audience, Oki (27 April 2023) engages this as a stratagem for better communication. He reveals thus,

I wouldn't say I engaged pre-recording because I wanted to see the end from the beginning, but a situation whereby the audience will hear the dialogue clearly and wouldn't miss out on any message. *Night of Ijalo* is an eschatological piece and we cannot afford to lose the audience, so they needed to hear the words. And then, we understand that as sight is powerful, so also is sound which informed the use of background sounds, music, sound effects, foleys, and others to drive the emotions of the audience.

From the foregoing, the director understudy identifies the use of prerecording to be for the sake of clarity in communication. Admittedly, the natural voice of the actor which comes with a lot of huskiness often gets lost in transit, and though this could be controlled by the availability of acoustic theatres and the intentionality of the actor to hit the consonants distinctively during lines production yet, what Oki did was to forestall the challenges attached with natural voice projection and the unavailability of acoustic theatre spaces by prerecording the dialogues to preserve the texture of the dialogues and

music, control the volume to a satisfying degree, and also help in the conveying of the audience into the world of the play through the application of foleys, sound effects, and music. In the same vein, he introduces another objective of the prerecording when he reveals that

...the idea again was that once I hit the play button, the entire play will run from that moment through to the end. So, in the recording, there were places where I knew there could be a delay in scene change and sorts, then, I added extra sounds to cover up for that to sustain the seamless journey. That is, the essence of the pre-recording is to drive the participants to ensure we move together on this journey from start to finish. (Interview with Olumide Oki, 27 April 2023)

Therefore, the prerecording of dialogue and music was to forestall the problem of excessive time consumption which is often common with stage productions, and to also offer the possibility of having a seamless production especially when the actors display great mastery of the cues and the scenes have been interlinked to provide a good synchrony.

**Dialogue Transcription and Subtitle.** Still in the same vein of giving the audience a superb aesthetic experience, and sustaining their attention, the director introduced the concept of offering subtitles to the ongoing live-action. The actors' lines are transcribed and projected spontaneously side-by-side using projector screens for the benefit of the audience. Although the actors are also given smaller screens faced to the stage to serve as feedback for their prerecorded lines where necessary the audience is of utmost priority. With this technique, the audiences not only get to watch the actors move but also get to match the lines being said with what is being displayed. In some cases, dialogues rendered in other languages like Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa were subtitled and displayed on the screen to ensure synchrony with the audience and avoid unnecessary disconnections. Oki (27 April 2023) discloses that this technique was majorly for emphasis. He agrees that contemporary audiences are fond of interacting with audio and visual elements daily, thus, he opines that the "media is very important to capture the attention of the audience. By following the play as it happens and reading the subtitles, the audience is engaged, their concentration will be high and distractions/discussions will be reduced" (Interview with Olumide Oki, 27 April 2023).

**Spectacle.** In the words of Neikirk (2015), "spectacle is attraction" (p. 3). The phenomenality of the theatre in contemporary times has shifted greatly from the (re)creation of illusion and interpretation of the script to the methods of creating illusions and believable realities. Thus, what defines theatre today is not the mere presentation of music, dance, drama, and actors moving across the stage but the methods of displaying such actions and getting the audience attracted through the deliberate use of glamour. Hence, contemporary theatre is a theatre of glamour that prioritizes spectacle in communication, and this can be achieved through visual elements, the example of lights, interactive costumes, set design, and movement, to mention a few. Ododo and Fanyam (2021) categorize this as the elements captured in the *mise en scène* of actions which refers to the materials or tools used in assisting the actors in their interpretation and communication of the dramatic story. The materials make up "the cardinal propelling spectacle of all actions in the theatre" and convey the message in a way that captivates the attention of the audience (p. 444). Oki (27 April 2023) buttresses the application of spectacle to include both audio and visual elements by citing the example of lights as used in the performance understudy which was used to heighten mood, and then the strategic use of all kinds of music which include rap; hymns; old school; chants; among others to appeal to the taste of all kinds of audience.

### **Mediation and Mediatisation**

The proliferation of the media coupled with the advancement of technology has redefined the way humans interact with each other. Subsequently, people get to spend more time on their devices as the easy accessibility to technical gadgets and the increase in consumers' technical know-how has made business transactions flexible and more interactive through the use of 'on-demand' networks and online markets. These developments have placed a demand on the theatre to ride with the new developments in digital technology through the employment of multimedia staging techniques to be in sync "with the global trends in the world of show business" (Gren, 2011, p. 1). Mediation and Mediatisation are two different but connected realities of contemporary theatre. "As mediation is the art of transmitting or broadcasting from one mechanism to another, mediatisation, on the other hand, is the adoption and application of several media forms within a single medium" (Olatunji, 2021, p. 20). Thus, mediatisation in theatre performance as used in *Night of Ijalo* refers to the application of external media elements like sound amplifiers, projectors, recorded sounds, foleys and sound effects, and others into the live dramatic action. Conversely, as with the case of mediation, it has been contested as to whether or not live theatre can thrive online, however, from the rapid shift from physical space to virtual spaces, it is clear that there are more audiences in cyberspace than the few hundred or thousands seating in a hall. From a realistic perspective, "what can be done is live streaming to bring our productions to a wider audience. For instance, if 1,000 audience members are watching on-site, about 100,000 can be watching online because it is live and it stays there (Interview with Olumide Oki, 27 April 2023). Mediating to others, who are not present in the theatre space through social media networks like YouTube and Facebook can be another alternative to reach out to more audiences beyond the physically present ones if the theatre must keep thriving among the congested spaces of the media.

### **Timing and Transition**

Audiences are known to be fickle and have a very short attention span, especially with the multiplicity of skits and short entertaining videos on social media spaces like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook reels, and YouTube shorts. This has set the standard for the attention span of the audiences on their visit to the theatre. One of the significant features of the theatre is its spontaneity which conditions the actions to happen at the spur of the moment. Unfortunately, this spontaneity which is not always controlled affects the timing of the production by making it discomforting especially when it drags excessively. The excesses of spontaneity coupled with the dissipation that comes with scene change usually anticlimaxes audience interest in the ongoing live action and also affects the rhythmic flow of the entire production. Consequently, once the audience loses interest in an ongoing production due to the excessive delay in scene change or uncertainty in the duration, the production stands the risk of showing empty seats towards the end. Therefore, timing and transition remain an essential part of the contemporary theatre performance, if audience attention is to be considered. Oki (2023) agrees with the foregoing by prioritizing the need for dynamic transition in performance. For him, he constructs a 3-step approach to mitigate this problem. "First, is the creation of multiple acting areas. As exemplified in the production of *Night of Ijalo*, the scenes were distributed in the performing space in proportion to composition. Some scenes took the main stage, while some others were played at the orchestra pit, the right and left sides of the stage, and the aisle" (Interview with Olumide Oki, 27 April 2023). This ensured that the actors, who are playing to the prerecorded audio, play out their scenes without



delay. Conversely, he suggests the use of narrations to fill the gap and prepare the audience for the next scene and then gives his final recommendation to be the use of interludes through dance or music.

## CONCLUSION

The contemporary world has been greatly affected by the proliferation of media technologies and the constant change in consumer tastes. For the theatre, these developments which have necessitated a modification in the delivery of the live show have also required directors, who are saddled with the responsibility of interpreting the script and creating the performance to deliver media-inclined performances in a media-dominated world for media-savvy audiences. Hence, to effectively fulfil his enterprise, contemporary theatre directors, the example of Oki as typified in *Night of Ijalo*, are expected to fashion out techniques capable of enhancing interpretation and delivering contemporary theatre. As exemplified above with the performance understudy, the director, Oki presents some elements necessary for the creation of a contemporary theatre performance. By placing emphasis on factors such as 'aesthetic communication and attention' through dialogue and music prerecording, dialogue transcription and subtitle, and spectacle; 'mediation and mediatization'; and the effective use of 'timing and transition', the director not only displays a mastery of the use of these elements but also recommends that these factors if employed, are capable of becoming currencies that can redefine the approach of contemporary directors to performances, stimulate the perception of contemporary audiences in viewing these performances, and also lead to the creation of an overall phenomenal theatre experience.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

*We hereby wish to declare that we do not have any conflict of interests to disclose. However, we declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.*

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

*Olalekan F. OLATUNJI contributed in writing the original draft of the article, data conceptualisation, creation, and validation, research methodology and visualisation. Abayomi C. OJO worked on the editing and general review of the research article.*

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