

SOLO PERFORMANCE OF DRAMA BY NIGERIANS FROM 1966-2012.

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Solo performance as an art form has historical roots that go beyond the classical Greek era. But despite its prehistoric pedigree that has inspired and fuelled the practice of this art in Europe and America, it has remained the neglected jewel in post-colonial Nigeria.

This is rather contradictory, because in all Nigerian ethnic groups, the culture of a lone ranger performing or telling his or her story alone before an audience is not a new phenomenon. Well researched papers on Nigerian oral story telling tradition have been written by Nigerian and non-Nigerian scholars in different fields of the art and the humanities. Patrice Pavis (1996:870) asserts that:

The oral storytelling performance is part of a long secular ancient tradition which has influenced western theatre practice by setting it against other pre-historic traditions such as Arab storytelling and African griot.

Pavis traces the history of one-man-storytelling art to the ancient narrative tradition. It is very obvious that both the art of Western and African soloists of the late 20th and 21st centuries have been directly or indirectly influenced by prehistoric oral narrative traditions. This is undisputable because of the theatrical leaning of the ancient story telling format. Storytelling as Brian Crow (1983:4) would put it:

[...] is a theatrical performance common to African cultural traditions which is closely related to drama and often contains dramatic elements.

Contemporary solo drama in contrast, differs remarkably from its traditional origin because of its true adherence to the essential rules and conventions that guide modern theatre and drama.

On this background this paper will attempt to discuss the historical trend in the development of modern solo dramatic art in Nigeria, from the earliest record of it to the present. Before placing our nation's soloists in their chronological order, the researcher desires to start by commending and eulogizing the bold enterprise of such pioneers like Wale Ogunyemi, Tunji Sotimirin and most of all Funsho Alabi whose legacy as a veteran of this art remains unchallenged. Their timely experiments in this subgenre of theatre have created the foundation and inspiration for other artists and scholars in this field. Studies by Baz Kershaw, Lee Miller and others have shown that the practice of art has remained the basis for all performance studies. As observed by Kershaw et al(2011: 63):

There would be no theatre or performance studies without the creative practices of performers and the many other kinds of talents that populate the performing arts. Yet the relationship between the academics who created the discipline and the practitioners who made the art has been mostly an uneasy one historically.

This study, thus, is an effort by a practitioner-researcher to demonstrate the interface between the world of creative practice and the world of critical analysis. Because of the peculiar nature of this work, the researcher will combine practice as research (Par) approach with the historical mode as methodological design for this study.

In carrying out this study, one has avoided using the term solo performance in its generic sense so as to exclude all the other forms of solo performances which are not the concern of this paper viz. solo performance of music (with Don Williams as one of its chief exponents), solo performance as stand-up comedy (exemplified by Ali Baba's brand of comedy), solo exhibition of visual arts and cultural artifacts (which has shot El Anatsui to international fame) and solo performance of comments and commentaries (Church Samson Akpan formally of University of Calabar, was an author of this kind of solo). For the purpose of clarity, this discourse will strictly focus on solo performance of drama by Nigerians, starting from the earliest record of it on the Nigerian stage to the present.

WALE OGUNYEMI AND BETTY OKOTIE

Available records on contemporary solo dramatic art on the Nigerian stage date back to 24th November, 1966. Wale Ogunyemi (1939-2001), though remembered as a Nigerian playwright, actor and director in the conventional sense of the word, has also won great acclaim as the first Nigerian to perform a solo drama on the Nigerian stage. Ogunyemi made his historic debut as a solo actor in Miss Betty Okotie's production of Samuel Beckett's mime play; *Acts Without Words* on the nights of 24th and 25th November, 1966, at the School of Drama University of Ibadan.

Okotie's production bill offers an interesting insight on the play's dramatic styles and thematic premise. As extracted from the bill: "*Acts Without Words* is an absurd theatre of gestures that show the bewilderment of man in an irrational world." (Okotie:1966). We must, however, note that Ogunyemi's significance as a pioneer in this sub-field of the theatre is due to the fact that he was the first modern Nigerian actor to enact a foreign solo text in this country. As an actor his interest in solo drama didn't go beyond ensuring that Betty Okotie's directorial design was effectively realized on stage. It was indeed Tunji Sotimirin, who eventually created Nigerian's first improvised one actor drama.

TUNJI SOTIMIRIN

It is interesting to note that it took eleven years after Ogunyemi performed Beckett's play for Nigeria's first indigenous solo drama to be launched. Sotimirin's full improvised play was first staged at the Second Anniversary of Bode Osanyin's Writers Resort in Lagos.

The drama *Molue* is a self based improvised montage in which the soloist presents a series of sketches that highlight the happenings in the ram-shackled municipal buses that shuttle passengers from one part of Lagos to the other. Its significance as an unscripted one-man show lies not just in its relevance as a social satire but also in its novelty as a work that inaugurates a new era of courageous departure from the

conventional mode of theatre practice in Nigeria. In his performance Sotimirin adopts the non-naturalistic approach to theatre in his style of appropriation. This enables him to manipulate all kinds of characters, time, place, objects and narrative elements which appeal to us even as improvisation.

In this play, the well couched utterances of the bus driver and the conductor do not only give background to the other characters in the bus but also indicate where and when the performance is taking place. The struggles of the bus driver and the conductor are not internal but external conflicts between them and passengers, hawkers, preachers and beggars on their *molue bus*. Like all episodic plays *Molue* has a disjointed sequence and its dramatic structure is deliberately fragmented.

Like celebrated mime artistes, a single object in Sotimirin's skillful hand has the propensity of being endowed with a variety of meanings. This is perhaps the very reason why Nat Osewale (1996:5) describes him as "... one solo comedian who can hold his own in the entertainment industry." Another less successful solo improvisation by Sotimirin is Gboromiro (1987).

FUNSHO ALABI

In 1988, barely one year after Sotimirin was launched, Funsho Alabi, a multi talented actor on the sponsorship of U.S.I.S, embarked on a tour of Nigerian universities with his own solo- *Martin-Luther-King-Remembered*- a dramatization of selected speeches of the legendary black American civil rights activist, which was described by Martin Aginam as:

A montage of loosely connected speeches structured around the theme of struggle for equality and social justice, but lacking in externalized dramatic conflict.

The theatrical virtuosity and dexterity which he displayed during his performance of this historic and biographical solo, set the tone for growth and popularization of one-actor plays in Nigeria. His excellence as an actor, made him easily renowned not only as the king of solo but also as the chief exponent of the solo theatrical form in Nigeria

Alabi's artistic skills were so profound that he could turn even a non-dramatic piece into an excellent theatre. Till his death in April 2006, no Nigerian actor had the courage to contend with his extra-ordinary prowess as the king of solo. Alabi did not stop at *Martin Luther King*, in August 1989, he staged a full blown improvised solo play entitled "*Escape from Drugs*" which is premised on the consequences of drug addiction in our family and among our youths in particular.

The main focus of the play is the inappropriate behaviour of a young student (Bracy), whose attempt to overcome his problems through drugs landed him into more serious problems. *Escape from Drugs* made a huge impact on the audience because of its fine story line, Alabi's excellence on stage as an actor and his extraordinary manner of stirring tender and melancholic emotion in us (the audience). Beyond their novelty values, Alabi's major solo plays (*Martin Luther King* and *Escape from Drugs*) attracted

more attention in Nigeria than the works of any other Nigerian soloist. Other less successful solos created by Alabi are *Black by Black* (1990) and *Aids* (1990). Alabi's dynamic performances inspired and inculcated a sense of self confidence in a few other Nigerian actors. Like the researcher (Mbajiorgu), Hafiz Oyetoro, among others.

GREG MBAJIORGU

Mbajiorgu joined the band wagon of soloists in 1991 during his National Youth Service Corps in Calabar, Cross River State. It was there that his *The Prime Minister's Son* was staged as a full length improvised drama. After that, he toured all the states of Nigeria without sponsorship. In 2000 the seasoned improvised play was transcribed and published.

The *Prime Minister's Son* is a satiric theatre endowed with narrative and non-narrative elements of performance. The title of the play is a metaphor that illustrates Nigeria's complexities and contradictions with regards to the question of its wealth and poverty. Through the use of expressive skills, the solo actor becomes the only visible and predominant character that appropriates various roles and establishes different settings and atmospheres without the use of scenery. John Cairney, in the following statement, captures the main objective of the actor-dramatist:

All the dramatic intentions of the story are realized through one person... the actor is the final hand to the work and the only *raison d'être* for the whole undertaking (2001:184).

In the *Prime Minister's Son*, the vocal impersonation technique becomes the actor's strategy for signifying multiple identities. Without transformation of voice, complex and detailed body language, it will be difficult to live up to the task of embodying the different character's in the play.

In addition to *The Prime Minister's Son*, Mbajiorgu in 1996 scripted a documentary solo *The Hero of Heroes*, a dramatization of selected speeches, poems and statements of Rt. Hon. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, which was staged as a command performance with background choral figures on the eve of the burial of Dr. Azikiwe the first president of Nigeria.

HAFIZ OYETORO AND TUNDE AWOSANMI

In 1995, Hafiz Oyetoro and Tunde Awosanmi joined the one-man theatre circuit by launching, at the university of Ibadan Arts theatre, their jointly improvised solo *Godogodo* which was directed by Awosanmi and performed by Oyetoro. *Godogodo* is a series of solo sketches that attack the vice of military leadership. It centers on the oppressive activities of such past Nigerian military leaders such as Gen. Ibrahim Babangida and Gen. Sani Abacha.

In 1999, Awosanmi and Hafiz Oyetoro produced another improvised solo entitled *Sergeant Rogers*. This was also directed by Awosanmi and performed by Oyetoro at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre. Through this hilarious solo, they exposed the deadly activities of Sergeant Rogers. According to Awosanmi:

Sergeant Rogers is it not just a metaphor for a certain syndrome we are already familiar with; the one on trial is he not a mere scape goat? Just one out of a legion of others. We reason that there is a Sergeant Rogers in the mind of most of us. Not this alone, all governments in the past, while they lasted, did they not breed their own Sergeant Rogers?

This solo is documentary, historical and biographical in nature, because it is based on real life events and the confessions an army officer (Sergeant Rogers) made at the Oputa Panel.

BAYO ALAWIYE AND COMPANY

Following the success of *Sergeant Rogers*, the University of Ibadan arts theatre witnessed yet another solo production in 2001. This time it was a production of the published version of *The Prime Minister's Son* directed by Dele Ogunsola and performed by Bayo Alawiye with Roselin Okoye and Funke Oluwu as background choral figures. As reviewed by Sanayon Olaoluwa (2001:15):

The Trioka of Ogunsola (the director) Alawiye (the actor) and Okoye/Oluwu (the choral figures), deserves special commendation for inaugurating another dimension in the "self-apprehension" project of the theatre. Perhaps by the time others transcribe and publish their works, the new theatrical form would become well established in Nigeria.

INUA ELLAMS

Eight years after Alawiye and Ogunsola re-invented *The Prime Minister's Son* at U.I, Inua Elams, a London-based Nigerian, emerged as an enigmatic solo dramatist and performer in the United Kingdom. Ellams spent most of his formative years in London and Ireland. Like all the other dramatic soloists discussed in this paper, Ellams is a multi-talented artiste. His works merges visual art, spoken word and theatre. He came to limelight with his first solo play entitled *14th Tale* which had its world premier at Arcola Theatre, Dalston, London in 2008. According to Ellams (2008):

The play is a free-flowing narrative that dramatizes the hilarious exploits of a natural born mischief growing from the clay streets of Nigeria to rooftops in Dublin, and finally to London.

In this single-actor play, Ellams, brilliantly recreates the characters that punctuate his upbringing with his rich dramatic and poetic skills. As observed by Simon Mundy, (2009):

14th Tale does full justice to the richness of Ellams's cultural heritage with soaring Shakespearean cadences and exuberant physical presence that evoke the land of his birth. *14th Tale* was part of the British Council's showcase in Edinburg in 2009 and it won a Scotsman Fringe first award.

Ellams's second solo play untitled was first staged in London in October 2010. Its premiere coincided with Nigeria's 50 years of independence. This solo play was also taken on a tour of major theatres in U.K. Like *The Prime Minister's Son*, Ellams solo plays are published. Below is Ellams artful summary of untitled:

It is a magical realist story set in Nigeria and England, of identical twin boys separated at infancy. In a quarrel after the marred naming ceremony, the mother grabs the titled child and flees, leaving the unnamed brother to lead an impetuous, chaotic, blasphemous existence until the spirits of the land take their stand.

Following the success of this play, Ellams, in February 2012, launched another solo play entitled *Black T-Shirt*, which was first staged at the Liverpool's Unity Theatre. *Black T-Shirt* as summarized by Ellams is:

a solo drama about two foster brothers building a global T-shirt brand. On their journey from a market in Nigeria to a shop in China, Mathew and Mohamed discover the consequences of success. The play tackles capitalism and exploitation, as well as sectarianism and homophobia in present day Nigeria (2012:1).

Just about four months after the release *Black T-Shirt* in London, Punch Newspapers announced Taiwo Ajai-Lycett's intention to go solo. According to Akeem Lasisi (2012):

Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, an acclaimed international actress and a veteran Nigerian actor-trainer, granted a press conference, declaring her intention to embark on a solo-performance project of Okot. P. Bitek's classical narrative poetry entitled *Song of Lawino*, with herself as the solo-actress and Niji Akanni as the artistic director.

While the long awaited Ajai-Lycett/Akanni collaboration remains in our awaiting list, Benedict Benebai, a young Nigerian playwright and Senior Lecturer at the Niger Delta University, Wilberforce, has written and produced his first solo drama entitled *My Life in the Burning Creeks*.

BENEDICT BENEBAI AND COMPANY

This play, *My Life in the Burning Creeks* by Benebai, which stars Benson Kaka (a third year student of Niger Delta University) as the sole actor is currently on tour of selected venues in Nigeria.

My Life in the Burning Creeks: premiered on the 14th of March 2012 at the Niger Delta University Auditorium, is the first Nigerian solo with thematic focus on the social and economic crisis in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Our effort to ascertain why he flagged off a tour of selected cities in Nigeria after its world premiere yielded the following response from the playwright:

The topicality of the play's subject matter, and the overwhelming reception it got at the Niger Delta University, informed the decision to embark on a tour of selected cities. The creation of this play was made easier by the support offered by Mbajiorgu. *My Life in the Burning Creek* is a solo spectacle which stayed on the stage for one full hour with the aesthetic assistance of a choral ensemble. It was directed by Kanese a lecturer and choreographer in Niger Delta University. The minimalist style of the play which enhanced its sense of stage economy and theatrical intensity, made the performance truly electrifying, coupled with the solo actors artistic adroitness in the interpretation of language and mood (2012).

In a nutshell, the play dramatizes the Niger Delta sad tale as it affects youth unemployment. As Femi Shaka puts it:

It explores the theme of general neglect of the region, the oppression of its people, the discrimination they are subjected to in their own region...the play drags the government and the multi-national oil companies before the court of national and international public opinion, regarding the ecological despoliation of the region.

So far the word 'actor,' one-man, soloist or "one person" has been used in a neutral sense to accommodate both male and female practitioners. However, it is necessary to point out that on the Nigerian scene at present; there have been very few female solo performers in the real sense of it. The researcher, thus, advocates the importance of the female soloist in the overall performance context and to state that Nigerian/African one-person female performances are desirable and should be encouraged. With the entry of Benebai, Ellams and, hopefully, Ajai-Lycett (whose solo project is still in the making), this seemingly spurned art form will gradually find its way into the mainstream of Nigerian theatre practice. Perhaps, the seeming lull in the flourishing of this sub genre of drama lies in the fact that it is a fallow area of research in Nigeria, unlike in the West, with a plethora of ready materials and vibrant practice.

Thus, this compels us to revisit the gains of this approach in the face of theatre decline, especially in this era in which Nollywood and production of multi-cast theatre have exacted grandiose demands on the theatre industry. The one-man performer, hence, comes to the rescue. New entrants to this fold cannot wait any longer to heed the clarion call. Who will be the next to up the ante?

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