

THE ART OF SOLO PERFORMANCE:
A STUDY OF FUNSHO ALABI'S *ESCAPE FROM DRUGS*

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to re-examine Funsho Alabi's Experimental solo production, entitled *Escape From Drugs* with the intention of discovering the theatrical and dramatic techniques that facilitated his realisation of this interesting solo play. Through observational research methodology, this paper hopes to establish a solid theoretical basis for subsequent studies of this form of theatre practice in Nigeria.

Solo performance is a play or drama by one actor who enacts or interprets the role of one or several characters alone on stage. It is a minimalist theatre based on a written or an improvised script. According to Louis Catron (2000: 1-2), "Solo production illustrates the power of one – a solitary performer presenting a theatrical experience as richly vibrant and varied as multi-character plays. It has a carefully honed script with a beginning, middle and end and an actor impersonating a character; it may bring to life a historical or totally fictional character or even an autobiographical story; it may be a drama or comedy and it may be a story of one person or it may involve a number of other characters that the actor evokes in the audiences imagination – but there is only one actor"

Solecism is the unique identity and nature of this art. This approach to theatre is guided by the *less is more* (a minimalist concept originated by the poet Robert Browning and made popular by Architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe). This concept or idea was subsequently adapted by painters, sculptors, poets and theatre artists for artistic productions in their respective fields. As explained by Catron (2000: 33), "*Less is more* urges artist to pare away materials that are merely decorative, eliminating what architects call "ginger bread" (exterior mouldings that adorn Victorian homes) and, equally for theatre, reducing or eliminating elaborate scenic, costume, and lighting design elements.

The goal is restraint, removing excesses to live an elemental beauty of form that matches purpose". This minimalist approach that advocates the elimination of all non essentials and focusing of attention on just the character and the story is a twentieth century art movement that stresses the financial and aesthetic importance of economy and compression. Economy and compression is very important. As Robert Cohen (1981: 83) puts it:

... when scenery changes and number of characters are held to a minimum, the costs of production are minimized as well. But beyond that, compression and economy in play writing (or improvisation) serves to stimulate intrigue and focus audience expectation. Economy and compression actually leads to intensity and dramatic intensity is one of the theatre's most powerful attributes.

Having given a brief explanation of this art and its theoretical premise, it is equally important to remind us that the practice of solo performance precedes Robert Browning's theory of *less is more*. Studies by Jordan R. Young (1989) and Louis E Catron (2000) has shown that the origin of solo performance is traceable to the pre shaman era. Even our recorded history of theatre shows that the individual performer helped to establish theatre in ancient Greece and Rome.

The solo performer was also a formidable force to reckon with during theatre's hiatus when the church strongly objected to the practice of theatre. Despite all anti-theatre pressures of that era, we had nomadic story tellers and solo entertainers such as the *Minstrels*, the *Lusores*, the *Histrions*, the *Ioculatores*, the *Scopes* or *Jesters*, the *Gleeman*, the *Itinerant Goliards* and several other kinds of solo performance. Although this form of theatre is not strange or new in Nigeria, what readily comes to the mind at the mention of the word "solo performance" is the horrible dreary talk shows of many stand up comedians that are predominant in our cultural scenes today. This paper however has no interest in such static unconnected comic talk-shows of stand up comedians reputed for its frivolous subject matter.

The concern of this paper is the exciting, vibrant, lively, pure theatre of Funsho Alabi that has opened our minds to the power, beauty, multi dimensionality and economic potentials of a true solo production. The researcher's objective, thus, is to critically review Alabi's *Escape From Drugs* with the intention of discovering the peculiar theatrical techniques that have greatly facilitated the realization of his unique form of theatre practice. In this regard, it is the researcher's hope that this study will equally help in establishing the theoretical basis for subsequent studies of Alabi's *Escape from Drugs*. Because of the laboratory nature of Alabi's art, the observational design was adopted as a strategy of inquiry. The researcher did not only study the live production and the video recording of *Escape From Drugs*, significant data were equally gathered through extensive oral interview with Alabi as well as through various public and private libraries.

Brief Professional Background of the Artist

Funsho Alabi's interest in acting dates back to 1979 under the direction of J.D Bullock (the then principal of federal government college, Kano). Then in secondary school, Alabi participated in several college drama presentations. After high school, he studied theatre arts at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where he obtained a B.A degree in 1983. From 1983 till April 2006 when he died, he was one of Nigeria's notable and respected freelance actor-directors. He played lead roles in over fifty different stage and screen productions. His first solo performance (*Martin Luther King Remembered*) had its world premiere in 1988. His other interesting solo performances are *Escape From Drugs*(1989) and *AIDS* (1989). Alabi's one man shows are mainly geared towards educating and conscientizing his audience.

A Brief Introduction of the Play

Escape From Drugs is a typical narrative theatre. In this performance the predominant character, who is the only visible character, enacts the story of his brother (Bracy) through the use of narrative flash-back techniques, the lone character on stage explores both the presentational and representational approaches in enacting the story

of Bracy's past drug life, the tragic consequences of Bracy's drug habit and Bracy's present state of guilt, repentance and self realization.

Alabi's Sketchy Plot Out-line

1. Bracy' brother introduces the play with few anti-drug songs.
2. He makes few introductory remarks about his drug addicted brother (Bracy).
3. The dramatic circumstances that led to Bracy's initiation into hard Drugs.
4. How Bracy loses his dream girl because of drugs.
5. Bracy's misconduct in the exam hall and the consequences of his stupid actions.
6. The scenario in which Bracy indulges in petty stealing because of drugs.
7. The enactment of how Bracy assaulted his Mum.
8. How Bracy finally deserted home.
9. Bracy's subsequent initiation into an Armed Robbery Gang as a driver.
10. The bloody operation where Bracy's gang shed the blood of innocent citizens.
11. Bracy's escape from arrest and his mysterious survival from a major auto-crash.
12. Bracy's sorrow and pain where mum gave up her last breath.
13. Bracy's confessions and lamentations.
14. Ends with a Dirge

The success of Alabi's *Escape From Drugs* as a performance is not determined or measured by the above jottings, but by the improvisational skills, experience and proficiency of the actor. Alabi's plot out-line is a product of his imagination and it is from this that his skilfully improvised performance emanates. In other words, his solo performance is conceptualized and realized in the context of performance and not as a literary text.

Alabi's working out-line is necessary only at the early stage of his improvisational experiments, when he is still battling to internalize the story sequence. In the passage below, Funsho Alabi throws more light on how he conceptualizes his plot out-line, and the processes through which it materializes into a full-blown performance:

First there is a flash of idea, the driving force of a flimsy plot, then I scribble down the skeletal sequence on a paper. As I ponder on the raw guideline, a more graphic scenario begins to form in my mind. At this stage, the key point, the skeletal note on paper is modified and retained as my secret code or password that connects me to the detailed scenario in my mind. Then, I enter into the more practical phase of my work – the rigorous improvisational stage.

(Alabi: personal interview, 2001)

Having watched *Escape From Drugs* over and over again, one is not in doubt that the performance can be transcribed and published for educational purposes. The big question is whether the published version will retain the vital life and natural context that characterized the improvised one. The answer to this question is obvious; an improvised theatre lives as an enactment on stage and not on paper. According to Isidore Okpewho (1990): "When a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourished, he has given in but a mutilated bit of reality". It is on this ideological premise that Alabi perceives his work as performance and not as literature. In the words of Alabi (2001): "Improvisation makes sense to me as performance. It loses its intensity and originality once it transforms into a text". The fragile out-line of *Escape From Drugs* is the only driving force for Alabi's performances.

Just like the interactive performers, Funsho Alabi employs improvisational technique as one of his strategies for generating sensible and complex words and actions on stage. His body, voice and inner resources are the indispensable tools with which he creates and sustains the performance. In the words of Garry Izzo(1997:28) "actors carry the stage on their back. All the essential elements needed to make theatre happen are incorporated into their characterization and made active

through improvisation. They are not dependent on any exterior support system to aid them. Actors must create the illusion of reality with their body and their voice. They must gather focus and hold their audience". Izzo shares the solo actor's view that such responsibility will liberate the actor's imagination and transform him into "a well-grounded master of his art" for him, the creative stage actor is the one who is imaginative. This creative actor whom he refers to as an interactive actor is both an auto-dramatist and director of some sort. Thus he declares: "No where else will actors learn to be responsible for their work, and no where will it be more readily apparent when they succeed or fail"(Garry Izzo: 1997 : 59) Although there are similarities between solo acting and interactive acting, there is still a clear dividing line between the two. Interactive acting is inspired by the playwright's text, while the solo actor is the originator and creator of his own story.

Structure and Form in Alabi's *Escape from Drugs*.

As observed by Louis Catron(2000:40) "The one-person play varies in structure. It may be as carefully plotted as a multi-character full-length play, with conflict and complications that create building action. Alternatively it may be a brief character sketch or a mood piece that seeks to evoke emotion". Funsho Alabi's *Escape from Drugs* is a good example of a full length plotted solo play. Louis Catron in his book *The power of one.....*, listed for us some of the essential characteristics and qualities of the plotted solo play:

The structure of the plotted monodrama resembles that of multi-character play. It usually contains essential elements of plot, such as inciting incidents, foreshadowing, exposition, point of attack, complications and reversals creating rising action, and a climax. The characters face a major conflict between significant choices. For example, he or she might be considering marriage, divorce, suicide, abortion, and issues involving drugs, dropping out of school, quitting a job, dealing with troublesome relative, or the likes. A significant aspect of the plot is a conflict that affects the character now, giving the play a sense of the present not past, and giving the

character a highly important vested emotional interest in the outcome (Catron, 2000:40)

Alabi's predominant character (Bracy's brother) is confronted by problems resulting from his brother's drug life. His story about Bracy is sequentially arranged in a linear point-to-point story telling order. There is no formal breakdown of dramatic events into scenes and acts. The story is outlined to flow smoothly; its uninterrupted flow is expected because the locations, where the events in the story took place are imaginary locations that are improvised in an empty space. This makes it possible for Alabi to sustain the story line without breaks except for necessary intervals of songs and silence, and since the whole play is structured around The Narrator (Bracy's brother), he remains the sole dominant character in this performance and the only handle that guides us through the "realities" of the situation, incidents and events of the play. It is through The Narrator's perspective or subjective point of view that we perceive the actions and inactions of the other unseen characters in the play.

As mentioned earlier, the narrator is telling the tragic story of his drug addicted brother, Bracy (the invisible central character in the story) whose conscious and subconscious action dominates the story line of the play. But despite the fact that Bracy is the central character in the story, it is from The Narrator's perspective (not from Bracy's Perspective) that we perceive the actions and reactions of all the other characters. Because of the narratological techniques adopted for the play's performance, only the narrator can be said to be truly independent. All the other characters are dependent on the narrator who gives life to them.

The structure of *Escape From Drugs* encourages a perfect blending of "dialogue", narrative, monologue, mime, songs, silence and movement, a practice which Patrice Pavis(1996 :371) traced back to "vitez's vendredi ou la vie sauvage": "what we cannot act, we tell; what cannot be fully told, we act!". According to Pavis (1996:371), "this technique which allows for the dramatization of non dramatic materials compels the audience to use their imagination to conjure the environment as is described by the storyteller.

In *Escape From Drugs*, Funsho Alabi explores two forms of reality: the inner reality of the various characters in the story and the ulterior reality of the actor-dramatist. The Narrator in *Escape From Drugs* is compelled to identify with the sentiments, philosophy and ideology of the Actor-dramatist(Funsho Alabi). In other words, The narrator guides our perception of the entire story in a manner that suits the Actor-dramatist. Apart from providing authorial direction, The Narrator unifies the other characters in the performance by giving them deterministic idioms that define their roles. The Narrator also unifies the various incidents in the play; he unifies time, theatre exists only in the present tense, it is The Narrator that recalls the significant past that interprets the present and evokes the sense of the future. Louis Catron also commented on solo dramatists' ability to evoke a sense of the future. As explained by Catron "...the play is dramatic because of a sense of future. Where is it going? What will the character do? What's going to happen?" Catron also thinks that the solo play should not simply tell us about the past but should: "seek to show us what is happening now and what this action will lead to" (Catron, 2005:3) a careful study of both the live presentation and video recording of *Escape From Drugs* reveals that the progressive drug induced misbehaviour of The Narrator's brother (Bracy) is the propelling factor that ignites the sequence of tragic happenings in the performance. The more drugs Bracy takes into his system, the more damage he does to himself and the people around him.

Escape From Drugs is highly innovative in the sense that it is a one-actor presentation that subsumes the multi-character demands of a full length performance into the multi-dimensional potential of a single actor. Alabi's work is unique because it is an improvised-full-length uninterrupted presentation that is enacted by a single actor who occasionally switches from one character to another, from dramatized narrative to a strange and interesting technique of dialogue. Unlike Tunji Sotimirin (another notable Nigerian Solo performer), Alabi does not change costumes during his performance.

Language in Alabi's *Escape from Drugs*.

Language, according to Mel Shapiro(1997:24), "is a principal tool of both the playwright and the actor. Using words is to the actor what using the body is to the dancer....language creates a style as well as a form to contain the play's content. Put very simply, it is what the actor acts. You can act to silence and you can act to movement alone". Louis E. Catron also sees language as one of the secrets of the solo play. As gathered from Catron (2005:5):

Another secret is language. The solo play is "drama of words" Jane Martin, author of *Talking With*....is a master. She gives concrete words specific images and marvellous details. That's one of the problems beginners need to solve when writing a solo play. They think all they have to do is a turn on the faucet and write stream of consciousness. But that leads to very talky works, ideally, the playwright will weigh each word, each phrase, each sentence just as carefully as a poet. The adage of "murder your darling" really applies here.

Catron here is talking about the scripted solo play, but although Alabi's *Escape From Drugs* is not scripted, it is still a typical play of words. This performance is sustained by simple prose narrative, monologues and one-actor dialogue techniques that emerged from a rigorous and protracted improvisational process. Apart from the long narrative speeches of the story teller in *Escape From Drugs*, the speeches of all the other characters in the play are relatively short and precise. That of The Narrator is justifiably long because he is the source through which we experience and encounter the main character and other characters in the play. Alabi's long narratological lines are systematically interlinked with intervals of monologues, songs, movement, mime and monopolylogues (a kind of dialogue played by a single actor). This form of dialogue is employed as theatrical means of representing the words, actions and behaviour of the other characters that The Narrator encounters directly or indirectly.

In Alabi's performances, songs are also employed, not just as a means of expression but also as an aesthetic way of highlighting the mood and the subject matter of the performance. Alabi also employed

language as a strategy for achieving effective characterization. For example, Bracy's use of ghetto slangs whenever he is "high" helps a lot in establishing his drugged state of mind.

Character and Characterization Techniques in *Escape from Drugs*.

Bracy in Alabi's *Escape From Drugs* is a full blown character, he is far from being ordinary. It is interesting to observe the series of drug-induced negative actions and its consequences that compel him to finally reject drugs and turn overnight into a repentant anti-drug crusader. Achieving group dynamics is part of the beauty of drama but the nature of the solo play makes this almost impossible. Funsho Alabi's performance of multiple seen and unseen characters is one interesting technique for creating a sense of group dynamics on his empty stage. In *Escape From Drugs*, we see Alabi shifting from one role to another or evoking the presence of "other unseen characters" on stage. This is achieved through the solo actor's evocation technique, an approach to one-actor dialogue which Alabi employs to achieve the effect of dialogue even when only the figure and voice of one character is seen or heard by the audience. The other characters in the dialogue are unseen and unheard but the audience can perceive their supposed responses or actions through the suggestive utterances and actions of the visible character on stage. Below is a brief transcription from Alabi's improvised performance that shows how this technique of dialogue works on stage.

Narrator: (as Bracy)

Bobo shone.

What's up men

I see you after exam.

I mean after.

I am sorry Sir.

It's my friend Bobo Shone.

My pady mi ni Sir,

Sorry Sir, I won't disturb again.

Okay Sir,I will start after writing my name.

Am very sorry sir, it is this stubborn questions,
I pamed it and it entered.(Strange laughter)
(Sudden change of mood)
Excuse me sir, paper...I want some paper,
(Angry) what do you mean?
Give me some paper; I want some paper...
It is not your business what I have done with it.
Just give me another paper!

Louis Catron has this to say, about this technique solo performers employ to achieve dialogue on stage:

The solo play can evoke the presence of other characters who are present although unseen. Ruth Drapper, who I think of as the grand Mother of solo play, quite often peopled her plays with a number of people. They weren't Exactly there, but the audience saw them anyhow. Evoking the presence of invisible others is a neat Trick. (2005:4)

The character evocation technique is not the only technique explored to establish other characters and their words in *Escape From Drugs*. Alabi equally employed the shift technique in his performance. The shift technique is the solo actor's device for alternating between the roles of two or more characters in a scene. At one point, the solo actor is playing character "A"; at another he shifts or switches over to character "B" or "C". Alabi employed this technique in his performance, particularly in the encounter between Bracy and his mother. At one point in that scene, we see Alabi as The Narrator, then he becomes Bracy and after a while he transforms and becomes Bracy's Mother. Effective enactment of the words, actions and behaviour of different characters by one actor is not an easy task, because changing frequently from one role to another, from dramatic narrative to dramatized dialogue is a very

strenuous artistic exercise. Greg Mbajiorgu also discusses the challenges of solo acting and its demands on the audience in his introductory note to *The Prime Minister's Son*. According to Mbajiorgu (2000:vii-viii):

Transforming the visual aspect of dramatic action to the purely psychological, demands a lot of task on the part of the single actor. A very high level of imaginary and perceptive instinct is required to enable the audience cue to the psychological level of the performance and thus, overcoming the constraint of scenography in sustaining dramatic action. For a one-man theatre, the appropriate scenography is psychological rather than physical. The lone actor is expected to internalize the scenographic aspect of the story in order to express its psychological essence. This level of performance will no doubt force the audience to live up to their own task: the audience should be part of the strategy for producing meaning in the theatre.

For Alabi's *Escape From Drugs*, physical changes in terms of costume and stage properties are not required. In fact, on-the scene make-up is unnecessary because it will be outrightly illogical to worry about spectacle and general details of the character's physiological background such as age, facial features, etc, since solo plays are intellectual and psychological plays designed with a single actor in mind. While most theatre scholars see this lack of spectacle as solo theatre's greatest disadvantage, Charlotte Lee and Timothy Gura (two notable performance theorists) have taken a contrary stand on this issue. According to Lee and Gura (1992:283) ".....although spectacle is part of drama, the spectacle need not be the fact of a staged production".

On this question of spectacle, Alabi had this to add: "As a solo actor, I have no business bothering about the reality of my scenery or stage activities". This is understandable because the solo performer's theatre should not strive to be realistic in anyway. According to Lee and Gura,(1992:283) what is important to the solo performer is "not what goes on in front of the audiences' eyes but what goes on in the audiences' mind. The audience help in creating the scenographic elements using their imagination".

Funsho Alabi's scenes are not presented scenographically to his audience, and because of the technical constraints of this form of theatre, Alabi portrays the significant life of the dominant character who represents or suggests the action and inactions of all the subordinate characters that he encounters using the solo performers narrative, dialogue and evocation techniques.

Also it should be noted at this point that Alabi's overt reliance on improvisation did not start with him. This technique was popularized by the Italian comedians called Commedia dell'arte. As reiterated by Effiong Johnson, the commedia dell'arte group is not even the only company of actors in the past that relied strongly on improvisation. Thus he recalls: Most experimental groups such as Joseph Chaikin's The open theatre, Jerzy Grotowski's The Poor Theatre Peter Brook's The Immediate Theatre and Richard Schechner's The Performers Group, to mention but few, approach performance or arrive at play productions mostly through improvisation (Johnson, 2005:131)

The Power of Alabi's Solitary Body and Voice

Essentially, Funsho Alabi interprets his self-oriented play with nothing else but his body and voice. Like all solo actors, he electrifies the empty space not only with his physical body and voice but also with his creative energy, his performance intensity, his charismatic stage presence and power of concentration. As rightly observed by Lee and Gura (1992:264):

The solo performer works alone in a playing space that is reduced to the boundaries sketched by one body and one voice. He succeeds only by training his body and voice to bring the world of the play to life. Each choice he makes measures his sensitivity, acuity and accuracy as a solo actor. Each choice testifies to the work done or not.

These scholars do not see the limitation of the solo performer's body as any constraint. For them, the actor's frame doesn't have to be as large as the stage, what matters ultimately is the magnitude, power and

significance of what he does on stage. Other peculiar aspects of Alabi's art are the power of Alabi's voice and the interesting and complex rhythm of his well sustained speeches. In this performance (*Escape From Drugs*), Alabi combines the individual speech rhythms, the emotional tension and anxiety of different characters he enacts in an alternating manner. These alterations in style and manner of speech and voice production are what Lee and Gura (1992: 28) qualifies as "...changes in content, stylistic approach, linguistic technique and grammatical\syntactical changes.

Silence as a Strategy for Achieving Theatrical Effects

An interesting strategy which Alabi employs for achieving theatrical effect is silence. The artful and occasional patterning of silence is noticeable in *Escape From Drugs*. Through this strategy or device, he achieves emphasis and variation in dramatic tempo. Silence, according to Lee and Gura (1992:283), "...has the power to elevate the pause to a dramatic force that can be ominous and poetic at the same time". This was most clearly illustrated in the scene where Bracy's Mother dies. For about a minute, Bracy finds himself in a traumatic state of silence before finally breaking into tears. Another theatrical device employed by Alabi in his performance is the use of Narrative Flash-back Technique.

The narrative flash-back technique was very useful in realizing his story-based solo performance. The sequence of events in *Escape From Drugs* were properly blended because of this technique. Bracy's brother who is the Narrator, employed this story telling device as a means of unifying the story of his brother's past and present life, without this technique it will be impossible and non plausible for Alabi to unite past and present events in a one hour thirty minutes show. Having discussed Alabi's *Escape from Drugs* performance, its basic form, structure, language, style, character and characterization techniques, it will be proper at this point to reiterate that solo performance is not really a new art, and although its current form is different from what it used to be in the past, some of its basic techniques and artistic elements are still traceable to the ritual practices in the pre- historic era of the Shaman, the

Greek classical era of Thespis and The Age Long Cultural Tradition of African Griots, Minstrels and Story Tellers. What is apparently new and innovative is the sudden outburst of scholarly interest in the art and practice of solo performance.

In conclusion, this study advocates the need for greater academic interest in the video documents and theoretical fragments of the Late Funsho Alabi's eighteen years of solo performance experiments in Nigeria. This is necessary because his many years of independent approach to theatre practice, opened our eyes to the fact that the solo performance form is the most economic and affordable means of sustaining live theatre practice in a developing country like ours.

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