

FROM STAGE TO LIVING: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE STATUS OF THE MODERN NIGERIAN ACTOR

PREAMBLE:

The living actor is an indispensable feature of every dramatic performance. Modern technology may find ways to record his actions on film, and project his image on an enormous wide screen or reduce his creative activities to the living room television, his creation and interpretation, however, gives the theatre its special quality. Professionally speaking, the three theatrical media are stage, film and broadcasting (which for practical purposes mean television and radio). Allied media in which the average actor may find employment are nightclub, modelling and advertising. Here we shall limit our concern to the main media.

Acting on stage demands great versatility and projection. Stage actors are often called upon to do a wide variety of roles, frequently before a large audience. A strong penetrating voice capable of great subtlety is an absolute necessity. The actor should have a face that projects emotion without mugging, a body that moves well and a personality that without straining carries well beyond the footlight. Above all, however, the actor needs the great intangibles such as talent, presence and timing. On the other hand, we have the extremely naturalistic acting of film and television, which deals with the plastic elements of production such as the camera, boom microphones and monitors.

With the increase in the number of universities offering Theatre / Dramatic Arts as part of their degree and sub-degree courses, and the boom in the movie and television sub-sectors in the later part of the 20th century, acting has received tremendous recognition in contemporary Nigeria. In this paper, we shall reflect on this phenomenon and articulate some of the problems besetting the art.

Apart from the universities, the movie and television sub-sectors, professional acting in Nigeria also thrives in the National Theatre and the various State Art Councils. There exist also a few private production outfits that use professional actors in their stage performances, modelling jobs and advertisements. Despite this boom in the profession, and the attendant improvement of the lot of the actor, the art is still beset by a mortley of problems. These problems will be discussed under eight headings, viz:

The Absence of the Repertory System
 Lack of government Recognition
 Artisanship and Stereotyping
 Discipline
 Remuneration and Actors Employment
 Social Ties
 Theoretical and Experiential Poverty
 The Absence of the Agency System

The lack or presence of the above conditions has significantly influenced the working environment of the modern Nigerian actor. We shall examine these problems in the following pages.

The Absence of the Repertory System

One important feature missing in the business of professional acting in Nigeria, is the absence of repertory theatres. Apart from the early **Masks** of the Soyinka era at the University of Ibadan, John Ekwere's **Ogui Players**, the pioneering works of the **Yoruba Travelling Theatres** of Ogunde, Ogunmola and Ladipo, and the much recent efforts of the defunct **Peck Repertory theatre** in Lagos, the **Collage Theatre** Abeokuta, the Meki Nzewi experiment with **Modotels** in Enugu and a few others, the Nigerian dramatic medium, suffers from the lack of the repertory system such as those found in most advanced countries. Most professional productions in this country are done by groups brought together for specific plays. Often, the cast and crew are strangers to one another, and the entire production restricted to a few weeks of intensive rehearsals. In contrast to this, the repertory system involves a series of permanent production outfits with their own resident companies and production staff. Instead of working towards a single production, the company works towards a season of plays with new and old plays, offering a balanced diet. The advantages of the repertory system to the professional actor are obvious. It gives him some sense of security, and the opportunity to develop his craft by playing a wide range of roles in productions. The repertory system also trains the actor through the application of the time honoured system of apprenticeship. This is a kind of on the job training, consisting of much practice. It should be noted that in Nigeria today, neither the professional theatres nor actors trade union, make any provision for the training of young people who want to join the profession. This task has been left to our educational institutions. Corollary to the non-existence of the repertory system is the lack of recognition of the theatre artist by the establishment.

Lack of Government Recognition

In Nigeria today, the government accords the arts very little regard in its scale of official priority. This lack of recognition is further compounded for the Nigerian actor by virtue of the fact that his position in the artistic ladder is unfortunately and erroneously way down the base compared to those of his peers in the other media like visual arts, music and dance. It is not surprising for an observer to visit the national troupe and see them rehearsing dance drama and hardly the conventional drama. It is believed in official circle, that dance and music are politically innocuous, and that the art of the dancer rather than expressive art of the actor sells the nation's culture best. However, the experience of countries that have recognised the importance of the actor, and given him a pride of place in their entertainment and cultural policy can be instructive here. In the United States of America, the actor ranks among the best paid professionals and is accorded high recognition by the establishment. In India, popular actors are celebrated more than politicians and industrialists. Conversely, revenue derived from the art of the actor by these countries runs into billions of dollars annually. In Nigeria, however, this is not the case. In fact very recently, a popular Nigerian comedian Chika Okpala-*Chief Zebrudaya* (2002) had cause to lament about government indifference to actors. In his tribute to the late ace comedian Claude Eke-*Prince Jegede Shokoya*, he observed that if government took care of artists, Chief Eke would not have died the way he did, pointing out that the late actor overstressed himself in the process of fighting poverty (P.2). We can cite another example in this regard. The well-known actor, Pete Edochie (2002), has this to say on the lack of recognition by the government.

If the government decides not to recognise the industry it loses. I am an actor, I am more Celebrated than many politicians both within and outside the country (p. 16).

He goes on to buttress his argument on the loss of revenue by the government thus;

The government of Enugu state has decided to create an actor's village in Enugu. The moment this is done, all the film actors and producers who come to Enugu to shoot films may be required to pay some tax or something thus yielding the government some revenue (p.16).

Edochie's view is a hint on the need for the Nigerian government to tap the veritable source of scarce revenue available to it in the world of entertainment.

Artisanship and Stereotyping

Apart from lacking official recognition, the profession is weighed down with charlatanism and stereotyping. Acting in film and on stage in Nigeria today is dominated by styles and techniques, which border on the stereotype. The fad and mannerism of popular actors and producers are reproduced consistently in most of the productions. Whether one is happy or sad about this, it remains true, so totally true that even practitioners and scholars who publicly condemn the system nevertheless refuse to cast any actor who does not follow its basic precepts. A lot of people are of course, unaware of this but it is nonetheless true. Most often, in film and television dramas, the actor is cast largely on the basis of his relationship with the producer, director or some other top production staff. In Nigeria it is a common feature to take major casting decision without or before audition, because most of those who call the shots in the industry are more of artisans and traders and very much less of trained specialists.

No cry is raised in the theatre as strongly as that against type casting. The best of acting, it is often maintained, is the actor's ability to essay wide range of roles of varying ages, historic periods, dramatic characteristics and style. This encourages an actor to alternate between tragic roles and comic ones; from roles that are mere fitting grace to those that are challenging. Most casting in the professional theatre in Nigeria today is done by physical type. Consequently, a very minimal percentage of actors who appear for auditioning ever get selected. An actor's physical type begins with his physique, race and sex, none of which is ordinarily expected to be altered by theatrical make up. We can extend it further by including ethnic idiosyncrasies in the case of a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. This tendency to play known faces only, to the detriment of up coming talents, accounts for the various flaws of characterization which one finds in many Nigerian productions. Hence, we are wont to see actors like Kanayo o Kanayo and Ejike Asiegbu, artists in their thirties, playing the role of a thirteen year old secondary school boy. These cases stem from the fame of the individuals rather than any fair employment policy. This practice does not give room for the discovery of new talents, or afford the young actors the opportunity to grow. It will suffice here to say also, that among the practising and successful professionals, too much time is spent socializing and too little in study and rehearsals. In a situation like this, the neophyte learns little from them by way of new ideas and styles. The result of this state of affairs is superficial, imitative and vanity oriented

acting. Acting, it is generally believed must have standards, or it becomes more destructive than constructive for the actor.

Artistic Discipline

Another aspect of professional acting in Nigeria we shall reflect upon is discipline. Discipline here is personal, collective and intellectual. Artistic discipline is an important ingredient in the professional actor's attitude. In fact, discipline is usually considered the chief distinction between the amateur and the professional. In the words of the renowned actor trainer and theorist Stanley Glenn (1977),

All art require its own unique disciplines. Theatrical art is no exception, and it demands more perhaps, than most other arts because of its collaborative, interdependent nature. An awareness and conscientious application of such discipline is one of the integral and necessary components that comprise the complete actor (p.328).

Discipline means that the entire period between an actor's call up and strike, must be organised in such a way as to achieve maximum concentration on the production to the exclusion of everything else. Discipline for the professional actor, means that he is always on time not just usually, but always. It means he is always prompt and ready to do what he is asked to do, and that all of his instrument, voice, body, and imagination, are at the disposal of the director every moment he is on call. In the Nigerian performance plateaux it is not always easy to see this at work in a professional situation. This is as a result of the nomadic life of actors, most of who combine acting with other personal businesses to augment for the poor remuneration. Discipline in the field also has an artistic angle. We shall illustrate below.

A popular cliché in director-actor or actor-producer relationship in Nigerian theatre, especially the film, may be mentioned here. If you have been in any of the locations where these films are shot you would probably hear the director/producer telling the actor how to do it even when he is not motivated. The obvious silent answer to the actor's question of 'what's my motivation?', is often, 'do it that way because that is how a popular comedian or actor does it'. In a situation of artistic indiscipline like this, creativity and personal effort is sacrificed on the altar of copying acting nuances and idiosyncrasies of the already established stars. This scenario leaves the actor poorer in creativity, and if he dares apply a mind of his own, he is soon impoverished by a tactful exclusion from future

productions, his crime being only that he is too learned, or too principled. By the same token, the university trained professional, who hints on lack of discipline, suggests new ideas, or points out some artistic flaws, is often met with hostility from these artisan actors, directors, producers. Yet, one important aspect of the growth of modern acting in other countries has been the constant application of theory to practice, of scholarship to field work and the willingness to accept criticism and new ideas. The lack of artistic discipline, or at least the recognition of its importance, has kept the status of professionalism in acting on the pedestal level. With the seeming ignorance of most of the leading practitioners on the need for study, and constant study, they have found a strange solace in the formation of guilds (The Guild of Nigerian Actors 'AGN' was formed in May 2002 in Lagos). Guild formation while commendable, would suffer the same mercantilist fate as the profession itself if it is not ground in articulate ideas and principles, which have been time tested, and fashioned by those with the hindsight of scholarship and the experience of actors elsewhere in the world. The Guild of Nigerian Actors as it is right now, it would appear, sees its priority through the prisms of providing identity cards to the army of artisans and professional actors who can afford the membership dues. The more serious issues of actors' welfare, official legislation and remuneration have been glossed over, and left to lie fallow in the guild's constitution as mere letters of intent and legal aesthetics. We advocate for an actors guild which would see artistic discipline as an indispensable tool in the growth of its members and their profession. A guild which should formulate and protect rules concerning auditions, minimum pay, working conditions, the number of hours to be put in by the actor in each production, and the amount of money to be deposited in escrow. Other contractual matters which they can bargain for, include, actors insurance and the right to use only registered members for roles. We can summarize here that artistic discipline in the art of the actor, requires that he must adhere strictly to certain artistic conventions, as well as control his instruments in accretion with his job. These realizations lead us to the actor's employment and remuneration in Nigeria.

Actors Employment and Remuneration

That the average Nigerian actor is paid a starvation wage is a known fact in the business. Most live at a standard severely below the established poverty level. Furthermore, lack of money creates enormous problems for people, who not only have to live, eat and stay healthy, but must dress

well, look well and move around to auditions. This deprivation is one that most Nigerian actors are willing to put up with, at least for a while because they are pursuing their career. Sadly, however, the industry often thwarts their artistic hopes as well as their thirst for fame and comfort.

A Nigerian producer once told his cast of actors to 'forget art and make money'. Sadly most professional actors in the country live by this aphorism to the detriment of the art. As a result, a lot of commercial claptrap is produced and fed the audience.

Despite the scenario above, there are still those who believe that the professional Nigerian actor cannot do without the finesse and nuances that goes with the art. To this school, crass commercialisation robs the profession of the badge of an art. All we can say is that in the field today they are certainly actors who make money and art at the same time and also those who make money without making art. The second category accounts for the reason why we see certain group of actors overused on stage and in the movie productions.

Another phenomenon in the nation's entertainment sector is to have a follow-up of massive non-creative appearance for an actor who made it in a previous film. Relying on unknown faces is often considered as an invitation to financial disaster. Consequently those who call the tunes, as corporate sponsors and producers are all too eager to cast the well known but overused 'star' rather than experiment with an 'unknown commodity'. Thus, the avalanche of graduates of acting coming out of the universities finds it hard to break into the profession.

Another dimension to this 'star syndrome' is what we may call 'star delusion'. Star delusion is the tendency for actors to quote fantastic figures as their contract fee in an attempt to buoy up their worth. We can illustrate with the concern expressed by Norbert Young (1997), one of the notable players in the field. Young cautioned his colleagues against self-destructive practices such as the 'star delusion syndrome' In his words;

We should not be keeping quiet, allowing them (producers) to cheat us this way... why for example will someone who has not received ₦50,000 be claiming he got paid ₦150,000 (p.17).

Be that as it may, some producers claim to have paid top actors fees that fall within the top digit figures. Kenneth Nnebue (1997), for instance, is said to have paid his top actors ₦250,000 in the film *Glamour Girls II*. Nnebue's claims, however, contrasts with the views expressed recently by Madu Chikwendu (2002). Madu, a movie director, has this to say about

artist fees with regards to new developments in the industry;

The formation of guilds brought with it an increase in production cost, with popular artiste (sic) demanding as much as ₦75,000 per movie (p.32).

When this statement is placed against Nnebue's claims, we cannot but conclude that the histrionics of quoting fictitious figures which we have termed 'star delusion syndrome' is a feature of the Nigerian entertainment sector. This conclusion however, does not rule out exceptions. All we can say here, is that prime fees for the leading actors in the profession range between ₦50,000.00 and ₦40,000.00 per shoot. Figures such as one million Naira paid to actors like Nkem Owho, Ramsen Noah, Omotola Jolade Kehinde and a few others are a matter of media speculation. For the up-coming actors, the situation is worse. In films like *Izaga, Agbako, Slave, Emene, No More War and the Return of Ifenna* the numerary roles, got as little as one thousand Naira as artist fee. Faced with this situation, the lot of most Nigerian actors is not very different from that of an unemployed professional.

The burden of unemployment and exploitation of actors in Nigeria, weighs heaviest on women, for while they may comprise about two-thirds of the University students who graduate from theatre arts and its other related courses, they will receive only about one third of the acting roles available professionally. Although the status of women in the theatre has certainly improved in contemporary Nigeria, it hasn't improved much to the extent of taking care of the large number of female actors around. In stage performances women ordinarily comprise no more than one third of the cast, and on television and film their ratio to men may be slimmer. It should not be assumed however, that this sexism or gender discrepancy is merely a reflection of bigotry on the part of the directors or the producers. In the case of live stage performances, the cast of characters which a particular play requires dictate the sexual ratio of plays. For example, Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* with its large cast, has just one major female character, Hannah. The same goes for Emeka Nwabueze's *When The Arrow Rebounds* which has just one female character with a speaking role.

We can speculate here that for the female actor in Nigeria, the journey to self actualisation and professional security is quite a daunting one. Success for her must begin with the availability of materials which can accommodate her kind and afford her the avenue to express her creativity and earn a living.

Social Ties

Social structures, especially traditional family ties and system also add to the problem facing the modern Nigerian actor. On the first level he must be free from pressing domestic chores to audition for roles and to accept employment where and when offered. The important acting job can come at an awkward time, and can send him to an inconvenient location. In the usual case, it could come as the female actor is about to get married.

On the second level, the commitment of the Nigerian actor to his career means frequent slacking-off on other duties, particularly those to husbands or wives, children, relations and friends. Naturally, there is always a conflict of interest here. The actor, being a human being in a society, has friends, relations, family and all sorts of people whose plans and feelings will affect him. In his attempts to satisfy these competing demands, he often finds himself taking options that can cast him in the mould of a carefree, pretentious and glamour conscious individual. At the extreme he is seen as a person with little regard for social norms, especially those that border on morality and the domestic. This assumption misleading as it appears, has unfortunately projected the image of the actor as one who should seldom be entrusted with serious matters and who is often one with the illusions he portrays on stage or screen. This impression of the actor will persist as long as the society remains unenlightened and unable to differentiate the actor from the roles he plays in productions. Having said that, we shall next examine the question of theoretical information, experience and luck, intangible elements which have greatly defined and shaped the structure and image of success in the field of acting in Nigeria.

Theoretical and Experiential Poverty

Misconceptions of the art of the actor by the practitioners themselves have led to some of the problems the profession encounters in the Nigerian polity. These misconceptions, which are as a result of lack of creative experience and the absence of theoretical knowledge of any sort on the part of the Nigerian actor, who should educate the populace, has conditioned the public to view the profession with some level of indifference and suspicion. To begin with, Theatre as a field of study is relatively new in some parts of the country. Where it exists, parents feel reluctant to let their children go for a career in acting. Compounding this problem is the wrong notion that acting is mainly talent and nothing more,

hence, has very little need of study, This is a view bandied about by some practitioners, especially those who stumbled unto the field of production through apprenticeship and made it. A good example here is the female producer Amaka Igwe (2001) who glibly asserts,

...for me theatre arts is not something to study. In my family, nobody thought it as something to study (p. 17).

As a result of this abysmal ignorance on the importance of pre-professional study and practical training on the job, the business of acting in Nigeria, more than any other field of endeavour, is loaded with legends of success achieved by accident or knowing the right people in the right places. The dramatic form has glorified the neophyte who gets off the bus in Lagos or Enugu with little more than a travelling bag, and makes it. The amateur encounters a producer, celebrity or director, who struck by her artless quality, makes a few contacts and in minutes, transforms her into a superstar. It is important however, not to confuse myth with reality this is because making a successful career in acting comes with time. The recipe for success in the business, as Henry and Rogers (1986) put it calls for a "mixture of talent and study, plus hefty amounts of discipline and determination" (p. 22). Luck is placed last in the list of priority because there is nothing you can do to get it. Luck is a factor that can outweigh most of the rest of the qualities mentioned above, yet the actor may well be well advised not to depend on it.

Apart from luck, one can be born with a talent for acting, just as one may have a natural aptitude for writing, music or even engineering. In these fields, we recognise that to compete as a professional requires training. Singers practice long hours, musicians practice for lengthy periods, athletes work out tirelessly under the guidance of a demanding coach, executives hone their business skills at seminars and management workshops. Professionals in every field endeavour to enlarge their potentials through theoretical and practical enrichment, thereby improving their techniques. Likewise actors are expected to take classes to keep abreast with development in their profession, to know those ideas or style that are obsolete and those ones that should be retained and improved upon. More importantly however, a good class develops and invigorates the actor's body, imagination, sense of memory, emotional range, style, movement, timing, improvisational facility, speech and vocal variety. The need to be informed on what goes on in the profession, especially from more advanced dramatic traditions, can be illustrated with our last sub heading on the agency system.

The Agency System

The agency system of actor syndication was fashioned in America, and has been adopted universally by community of actors. However, as a result of little information on its dynamics, the average Nigerian actor sees it as a luxury or status symbol meant for stars only and not just for every actor. Very few Nigerian actors have agents or managers who take care of the business side of their career. Those who engage one, do so on quasi basis. Against this backdrop, when it is noted that the network by which goods and services are bought and sold in show business is an enormously complex one, then the need for an astute manager of the actor's affairs becomes more apparent.

Since the basis of every drama (stage and screen) is the primary performer, the actor's agent or his representative is an important feature in the growth of his professional career. The structure of a performance agency varies with the type of performance and the performer. Some specialize in models and product commercial actors, some in screen actors, and others in stage acting. The Nigerian performing plateaux needs the agency system so that the actor, who not being a business man, and frequently on tour or on location, would have someone to maintain an office and handle contractual matters. As a result of the economic hardship in the country, we recommend the central agency system. In the central agency system one agent and his staff, represent several actors. In this regard, big agencies with many clients can make themselves known to producers and offer to provide at no cost to them, the services of quality actors. The obvious financial advantage to the producer will give impetus to the growth of the central agency system. It is a known fact that in advanced countries, if an actor is to earn a respectable and consistent living in show business, he or she must acquire an agent. In the words of August Staub (1980),

...getting an agent is often a more important step for aspiring actors than getting a performing role (p.139).

If the agency system is institutionalized in Nigeria, it will command more attention of executive producers and other performing organisations more consistently and more frequently than individual actors. In this regard, the various guilds could help by insisting that producers should engage only actors with agents for major roles. Hence when a producer is seeking a certain type of actor, he notifies the agents, who are likely to

work hard to find the right person, for their agency's continued success depends upon providing quality actors for specific roles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can summarise thus, that acting thrives in Nigeria. However, getting an acting job in the country is a difficult accomplishment. Doing the job once you get it, while not at par with mathematical permutations nevertheless, demands concentration. Having to contend with production pressures, while at the same time worrying about whether he will have enough money to pay the rent, feed and take care of other personal problems, add to the burden of the actor, and generally makes the climate hostile. Be that as it may, one can attempt a projection on the future of acting and the actor in contemporary Nigeria. It is our view here, that if the industry tackles the lack of study and systemic tradition rooted in professionalism, and develops the capacity to accept and assimilate criticism and new ideas, and be less hostile to intellectual input, it will be on the path to solving most of the problems highlighted here. With the continued growth of the entertainment industry, coupled with the increase in the number of higher institutions that teach acting, one can postulate that rather than be cowed by the numerous problems besetting him, the Nigerian actor and his profession cannot but find ways of surviving the turbulence and ensuring a more prosperous and fulfilling future for his craft.

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