

CHAPTER 6

AUDIENCE AND AESTHETICS IN AFRICAN STORYTELLING AND BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATRES

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Introduction

As a philosophical discipline, aesthetics has been defined variously, by scholars of diverse orientation, who in the process, have found a highly dynamic phenomenon which tends to bend to the dictates of periods and is subject to several interpretations. From even a layman, it is possible to get an impression such as “aesthetics deals with beauty and what is beautiful in Nature.” This may not be wrong, since some scholars do see it as that which is good while others sees it as just an appreciation of a work(s) of art. To a great majority of people, the consideration of significant form or pure form of art in terms of its beauty and truth.

The search for a new function for the theatre – since the art cannot afford to be static, especially with the advent of science – has continued unabated. Old dispensations were being challenged; new dispensations were being explained and defended. The trend was moving towards an ideological war – away from the diverse lines of realism as conceived and propagated by dramatic theorists. Conventional plot was losing its status in the process and modern experiments were determined to carve an entirely new formula. Theatre was moving – at last – to the theatrical and could be used either as show-window, pillory or rostrum as Brecht did, using (his) different plays. Illusionism was at last at the peril of banishment from the theatre.

The basic principle of the epic theatre as defined by Benjamin (89) “is a theatre in which the audience is shown that it can happen this way; but it can also happen quite a different way”. Piscator tended to make his theatre grossly 'mechanical' and this opposes Brechtian vision of a theatre;

That man can be changed by his surroundings
 and can himself change the surrounding world...

Not of course if man is viewed as something mechanical (14).

From the foregoing, it can easily be seen that the form of the epic theatre meant quite different things to different exponents. Piscator's exploitations assimilate readily to the modernism of the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century while Brecht's works interestingly disclose distinct features of a 'post-modern' cultural and theatrical practice (14). The influence of Piscator on Brecht (and vice versa) cannot be over emphasized. His experiments as variously discussed above, point to the fact that he intended to turn the theatre into a forum synonymous to a parliamentary session and this could have had some convincing influence on Brecht's idea that theatre must not only become a tool of social engineering, but also a laboratory of social change. His drive was a theatre away from the "Aristotelian" or "dramatic" forms of representational theatre, which conjures up an illusion of real events before the eyes of the public and leaves them purged of emotions, relieved and refreshed. And Brecht believed that, "For them the theatre will be a mean of mental refreshment in the same sense as a good meal, which is consumed with enjoyment, provides physical refreshment, but leaves no lasting trace behind" (107).

To him, this audience will have remained uninstructed and unimproved, whereas the art of the theatre is more than a mere article of consumption. The theatre should provide mental foodstuffs to be gobbled up and then forgotten. The audience should not be made to feel emotions, but instead, be made to think, and this is an impossibility in the realistic theatre which affords them neither time nor the detachment to sit back and reflect in a truly critical spirit on the social and moral implications of the play (Scene by scene) all because of a powerful illusion of reality. He abhors the idea of the spectator seeing the action entirely from the actor's/hero's point of view, but from the 'own' point of view.

Brecht's only answer to this is that the spectator should be made to realize that he is not witnessing a real event 'at this very moment,' but merely sitting in the theatre, listening to an account of things that have happened in the past, at a certain time and in a certain place. The events in 'epic theatre' are presentational with no pretence or re-creation of the present, but strictly a 'historic' theatre, a report of past events – which are extended to this present – striving to free both critical faculty of the audience and the play-Wright from narrow and rigid conventions and openly admits that "theatre is theatre," and not the world itself.

It approximates the lecture hall to which audience come in the expectation that they will be informed, and also the circus arena, where an audience watches performers exhibit their special skills, without fear of identification or illusion; all in a bid to give a kind of pleasure felt at the discovery of new truths, the exhilaration at the enlargement of understanding.

Most of the storytelling theatrical performances take place in the open courtyards of the community chiefs, or the village squares, under the watchful eyes of the moon. The choice of the performance night can be easily associated with an age-long custom which has been enshrined with time. The scenes are sometimes spoken or sung and sometimes mimed. To Okpewho, "...the moonlit square has for countless generations been the setting for songs and stories whose primary intent is more to entertain..." (2)

Although the art work referred to herein has to do with craft objects, the assertion still holds some validity for a literary or theatrical work of art. In the realm of interpretative criticism, aesthetic and metaphysical implication, and artistic functions ought to be the target in the study of traditional elements in contemporary African literature. There is something aesthetic in the skills with which African and European writers exploit the (aesthetic) opportunity by incorporating traditional elements into the plays they write. This, in the writer's view, is a fact that they are contributing something original to world literature.

The African Storytelling Theatre

The African storytelling theatre is a dramatic performance in which the performer is completely at liberty to create and interpret. The several devices incorporated represent the aesthetic principles of the tale telling, and are tools for his creativity. They form the standard against which he is measured, and the success or failure of his tale as a meaningful and entertaining performance rests on the criteria.

The extent to which oratory is valued in African societies is well known and needs no elucidation here. But since aesthetics belongs to the context of art appreciation and deals largely with the clarification of certain basic concepts used in thinking and talking about works of art, as well as setting up the criteria by which to judge works of art, it is necessary to appreciate the beauty in the African storytelling theatre, which indisputably thrives on orality.

African theatre in general has developed without major restrictions placed upon it by physical limitations or time barriers as in its European counterparts. It is noteworthy that the moonlight play always evolves from the tradition of storytelling and response. Despite the influence Aristotle has had on the art of the play-wrights, in Africa, as in any other place, the restrictions are discarded as there are some exponents of purely African playwright, combining the diverse elements of entertainment and communication – the extra-textual modes like dance, music, mime, masquerade, song, etc.

In harnessing these diverse elements, the concept of art is easily divided into three, viz: artist, work and audience. The artist is a chronicler of a people's history, the voice of a people's conscience, the stimulator of ideas and activity. This is a role familiar to the playwright (and the audience). He continues the tradition of Senegambia griot: as the story-teller, he is the sensitive point in his community, in the view of Chinua Achebe. When he speaks, he re-educates and regenerates, in fact, he recreates. The agenda of social engineering must be incorporated into the performance, from which the aesthetic experience would be felt and gained. An aesthetically pleasing performance is one in which the performer expresses his feeling well and in which the emotions are shared by the audience.

Everyone is a performer in the storytelling theatre, though one person may have more skill than the other, everyone has at least, a tale that he can tell. But there are prerequisites to the performance; these are the teller and the tale! There must also be an audience. In performance, the moment the individual teller begins his/her tale, he/she metamorphoses into an actor on stage and the voice of tradition – whatever his age. At the end of the tale, he recedes back into the audience, and another takes his place. Whoever is on the stage, the mental activity, as the performing artist, is critical, in order to communicate the aesthetic experience which is manifested in their ability to establish or demonstrate personal or group preferences. Once a right to choice is exercised, man has started or demonstrated his aesthetic taste.

However, the universality of taste does not rule out the possibility of its variance from culture to culture. For Nwoko (12), "Taste is the aesthetic phenomenon that can be said to have kept the world effectively divided into cultural groupings". He also contends that for anything to become aesthetically pleasing, it has to be good, through and through. Aesthetics in another way is the positive

essence of an experience of beauty and goodness. The objective and the subjective schools of aesthetic thoughts see the aesthetic value from divergent points. While the objectivists judge the quality of the work of art to determine its aesthetic value, the subjectivists see the latter in the relationship between the object and the observer. For the objectivists, "Both for the immediate aesthetic judgment and for the philosophical analysis of such judgement, the nature of the artist need not be considered" (Jessop 272). The objectivists give little or no consideration for the artist, but to the judgement of beauty, based purely on the object itself.

Since the audience plays an active role in the storytelling theatre, suffice to say that the major vehicle for the participation by the audience is the emotional attitude towards the appreciation and judgement of a work of art. Aesthetics is therefore a factor of the physical representation of the object which can be perceived through sight and touch. At the same time it also exists in the mind of the spectator. The two dimensions of aesthetics come to mind at this point – the intangible and the tangible. It is tangible when a physical state of reception is involved. Emotionally, one is even satisfied, with the knowledge that it will be a lasting source of pleasure. But the experiences in love, sympathy and kindness, which come about through association or relationship with another person, become intangible.

The strongly accepted aesthetic relationship in the African society is for something to be as good as to correct a bad character, etc. Nwoko believes that anything that is good is beautiful, but not everything that is beautiful is good. The determination of the beauty of the storytelling theatre depends on the cultural background of the object as well as the spectator. The audience invariably is treated to a feeling of (an) immediacy, a forthrightness, a freshness and a keen sense of delight, particularly seen in the common determination to undertell the touching, the outrageous and the amusing.

With the marriage of all the elements -of creative raw material, narrative potential, music and song, structure and composition, acting and character, performance: space, scenery and lighting, and special effects - the storytelling in performance is an aesthetic object on the premise of sublimity. The grandeur of harnessing the various embellishments, incorporating the audience into the performance, etc., leaves an immortal effect on the spectator, impossible to resist. Longinus is known to be the first theoretician to make a case for an art of

the sublime, the profound and the beautiful. One of the standards is the posterity and classical element of a work of art. That the storytelling art has become a classic, as it were, needs no further elucidation, hence its inherent sublimity, which is highly aesthetic in nature.

For illustration, there is an almost favourite tale in most dramatic literature, “of a certain young and beautiful girl who would not accept any man as her husband. Her parents became so angry and worried that they warned her they would turn her out of their home – if she did not agree to marry someone soon. She however replied that she had not yet seen any man who appealed to her.

On a certain market day, she went as usual to the market to sell oil. As soon as she got there, she saw an exceptionally handsome man and immediately decided that she would be his wife. She abandoned her oil and approached the man, who told her it was impossible for him to accept her offer. She would not be refused, and she therefore, followed him on his way home.

As they went, the man sang to her:

- | | | | |
|-----------|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Man: | Elepod'ehin o | - | Oil seller, please go back |
| | Me le s'oko re | - | I cannot be your husband |
| Response: | Dehin o, meed'ehin! | - | Go back? Not I! |
| Man: | B'oobad'ehin | - | If you don't go back, |
| | Wad'odoaro | - | You'll cross an indigo river |
| Response: | D'ehin o, meed'ehin | - | Go back? Not I! |
| Man: | B'oobad'ehin | - | If you don't, |
| | Wad'odoeje | - | You'll cross the river of blood |
| Response: | D'ehin o, meed'ehin | - | Go back? Not I! |
| Man: | Elepod'ehin O | - | Oil seller, please go back |
| | Me le s'oko re | - | I cannot be your husband. |

Response: Dehin o, me le d'ehin - Go back? Not I! etc.

As the young man was singing, he cast off, piece by piece, the beautiful clothes he wore, and in the end, even his flesh, until he was nothing but a skeleton. But the (disobedient) girl saw it all as a trick and still followed across both rivers – indigo and blood – until the erstwhile young man became a Boa constrictor and proceeded to swallow her. Only then did she panic and yell for help. Fortunately for her, a hunter heard her cries and came to her rescue. He killed the Boa and releases the girl, who there and then agreed to be the hunter's wife.”

In performance, the above tale is an aesthetic experience, in sublimity. There is a similar story, with variations, included in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*) with its somewhat universal appeal, though it is not always possible to judge a work's universality. This is because the individual is the smallest unit of a minority and can therefore hardly expect to impose his aesthetic will on other people who form the great majority in society.

In the words of Jacquette, art works of many kinds can be regarded as instruction kits for more complete aesthetic experiences (15). The intellectual and emotional capability are fused, and focused on the artifact itself, whether music, or drama on stage. Aesthetically, the element of proverb, for instance, among other things, serves to delineate character, and carries some environmental colouration, serving to define (as a parameter) a unique cultural milieu. Likewise, proverbs serve to aid the theme, which varies from culture to culture, and from experience to experience, and from diverse settings.

Brechtian Aesthetics

Brechtian epic theatre is the broadest and most far-reaching experiment in great modern theatre, and it has had to overcome all the enormous difficulties that all vital forces in the area of politics, philosophy, science and art have had to overcome. His obsession has always been with the interaction between man and society. By focusing his attention on the destructive effects a rotten system may have, he has vociferously pointed out man's potential to change the society. The system he has thus established is based on the recognition that the theatre must depict the world as something which can be changed. This is why he harnessed the theatrical theories and ideas of his time – and even before him – to evolve the epic theatre, where the distance from a negative emotion, like distance from a tragic drama, produces a peculiarly aesthetic sense of environment. The mind or

rather the thinking faculty, continues to play a central role.

The arts have always provided a man-made source of aesthetic experience, an imitation of a creative process in nature. A good work of art validates the contention that “the process of creativity is often pleasant, and the exercise is definitely most satisfying.” Like the African storytelling theatre, the striving of the epic theatre is the provision of entertainment and instruction, largely in conformity with the bourgeois revolutionary aesthetics, of which great figures of the Enlightenment as Diderot and Lessing readily come to mind (Bentley 99). To them, the theatre is a place for both entertainment and instruction, as elements of instruction, rather than detraction from the audience's amusement, actually give depth to it.

With expressionism coming with aesthetic gains to be exploited, though vastly enriching the theatre's means of expression, Brecht seized upon the fact that expressionism was quite incapable of projecting the world as an object of human activity. Speech, costumes (technical aids), stage design, et al, are all integrated in the work of art (or 'Gesamtkunstwerk') and are presented before the spectator as a bundle of disparate elements. The song, the dance, and all other elements have an aesthetic function. The presentation of this bundle in a dialectical framework, gives rise to our aesthetic experience, from the complexity and discontinuity. After a genuine Brechtian production, every receptive audience leaves the theatre and takes home the feeling that his eyes have been opened, as when he first deciphered the alphabet, or as if he had himself learned to try out a new art.

Each production of any of his works is a serious undertaking, just as Witt contends that “With some resemblance to a ceremony; but rather the propagation of culture and enlightenment necessary for the further existence of humanity” (117). Brecht does this conveniently with the aid of the powerful, basic Gestalt of wonder, one of his brilliant discoveries. Brecht was a master of contradictions, of opposites. And this forms the source and power of his work, as it was of his personality. Humour and tragedy, exile and rootedness, the Bible and Existentialism, material and spiritual power, Communism and Democracy, peace and violence, science and art, (107) are all the specialized forces of our time, which he broke through; ignoring the fact that these forces could not often be unified, he harnessed same for the purpose of aesthetics.

The aesthetic experience in relation to the audience has simultaneity with the creative act. Any mistake whatsoever can be quickly corrected by the narrator, and he may also change or modify the development of his tale in accordance with its expression of approval and interest. There is a sort of liberty inherent in this style; for instance “Where the narrator is permitted a degree of freedom and originality, the audience reaction may become an important factor in the creative process in verbal art” (Bascom 71).

Brecht as a German poet, playwright, and dramatic theorist, argued from a Marxist perspective that dramatic productions should not strive to create a mystified environment in which the audience forgets (or agrees to provisionally forget) its environment. Instead, according to him, directors and actors should strive to remind the audience of the artifice and artistry of the performance, calling attention to the processes of acting and production that underlie the film. With the advantage of that detachment, the audience and performers can enact the kind of independent resistance to dominant ideology that fuels political resistance to established power, hence therapy. Whether or not they have shared Brecht's political reasons for their artistic choices, many film directors have countered the Hollywood style by employing Brechtian principles to create alienation effects that emphasize the artificiality of film and acting.

The Audience and Social Function of Art

Art, or more concisely, every work of art has a social function. Art is never a-social because it always serves a particular group, no matter how restricted it may be (Bartide 99). The greatest potential of drawing man together with a cohesive force, and the cohesion of the community is ensured in art, thus: Enhancing the lives of men, providing entertainment and invoking a sense of order. Art fulfills our need for purification, for commercial activity, and an intense social urge to commune with the artist (Traore xvii).

Traore does not fail to acknowledge the efforts and significance of theatre sociologists and sociology, respectively, which endow the functions of the theatre with a status of symbiotic relationship. The theatre is an outgrowth of the society, and in turn, functions with same, to reflect, expose and translate the totality of human expression, while reaching out the sum total of life. Through Hegel, we agree that “Art reveals the truth to man's conscious mind through a tangible medium,” (Traore 63) and one can capture the function or essence of art.

Art and the progress of art are now determined by the revolutionary overthrow of all past traditions. The only tradition to be honoured and preserved is the tradition of breaking with tradition, or as one critic phrased it, “the tradition of the new” (Adler 364). Without much criticism, Brecht did exactly the above to the conventional theatre tradition and evolved a new approach. When the play is converted into a performance, the stage is transformed to mean an area of co-operation with the audience. With the collaborative efforts of all other artists, epic theatre is also capable of influencing life, in whatever way, to create a new form of stage art. According to Rosenberg, “Art is the product of an etiquette, and to neglect its conceptual framework and reduce it to its physical data is an act of barbarism” (13).

Brecht's Epic theatre was similarly a product of an etiquette of a post-modern cultural and theatrical practice. His humanistic sensibility oozes through his plays and in performance, every artistic means at his disposal are utilized to prove his point. The epic theatre in itself is an embodiment of aesthetic theatricality; what with the strips of events of data projected in the background in form of the montage, used as aid to the story being narrated. The arrangement of the scene is with aesthetic consciousness to the taste and choice of the audience. His language is made up of four elements, for instance, the popular slang of the south of Germany; an anti-metaphorical poetry of concrete colours, textures and images; bureaucratic jargons and Anglicization and exotic expressions (Esslin23). In essence, the epic theatre appeals to the sense as well as presents some truth to its spectators. It should be however noted that aesthetics is not only for the delectation of the senses, but with some utilitarian disposition.

The array of costumes, the revolving set with all the scenes already arranged, are all meant as vehicles of aesthetic experience. Epic in itself is an art of the sublime as posited by Longinus, and in as much as epic theatre has been identified with the classical epic, it also has some valid sublimity. Though the Longinusian sublimity is aimed at transporting the mind beyond the ordinary realm, so that one feels and experiences some contentment, the epic theatre is devoid of the emotional – that is total participation of the spectator. He is expected to see and feel in order to pursue a change to his condition. Nevertheless, the level of grandness in the epic theatre is not in doubt. The new possibilities of experience which his dramatic theory brought were and are still extraordinary.

There is a level of eclecticism in his ability to evolve in theatrical form and content so uniquely Brechtian; His techniques of allegory, song, impersonation, humour, visible theatrical invention, are all there to illuminate the seriousness of the choice facing men, in an aesthetic manner. The rational juxtaposition of realities through the prismatic concavity of his 'The V-Effect' *Verfremdungseffekt* (Alienation effect) is as well part of his aesthetic thrust.

Through the epic procedure and Brechtian characterization, the African storytelling theatre shares a point of divergence. The delicate, strong, poetic but not decorative dialogue is diversified with songs that expound the text, but do not heighten the emotion. There is a rich texture of witty exchanges, mock 'naïveté' speeches to the audience and, as already stated, Asian theatrical conventions. Brecht himself does not deny his exposure to traditional Chinese theatre, which is nurtured on ritual and folklore just like the traditional African theatre.

Ultimately, the tapestry of events presented by both theatres to the spectator is almost always aimed at lifting up the souls of the latter. In the views of Etherton and Magyer, "parts of the visual quality of traditional performance lies in the integration of the visual aspects of a particular performance with the sacred grove, the compound, etc." (467).

The same can be said of the Brechtian epic theatre as it gives the designer the liberty to provide concrete and particular background for the action, in an aesthetically valid framework. Good aesthetics, to Nwoko, is like the experience when the palms of the hands are washed clear with soap in clear water and dried with a clean towel. It is then wiped clean and dried on a dress. The dirt on the hand was merely transferred from the palms into the dress and therefore, remains in full view of spectators – a spectacle uglier than the dirty hand show (19).

The plays themselves treat a wide range of themes, subject to the cultural inspiration of the playwrights. In this, the universality of the theme is a matter of cultural relativity. The various elements require the colouration and distinctiveness of the experience and setting, and let me add that this is with a view to the sake of continuity.

Conclusion

Brecht created 'Epic Theatre' which consists of the plot viewed in a sporadic manner as there is very insufficient cause and effect of the character progress and scene sequence is collective (Benjamin 6). On the other hand, the alienation effect identifies with explanation, impartiality, neutrality and it gets around feelings. Brecht attempted to succeed distancing in so many ways as he made the action representative, cruel and complete. The action for Brecht is direct which lacks the conclusion as every scene sequence is concluded inside it and it is dramatically understood to stop the misconception feeling. So as a result in Brecht's 'Epic Theatre' adaptation, Brecht not only aimed to aggravate the audience into changing culture by reconsidering mutual theory, he also wanted the audience to see the characters in the theatre performance as part of a bigger and further essential unity. He used his 'Alienation Effect' ideology to that influence.

The African storytelling theatre in its divergence from the epic heavily relies on the elements of: (i) Creative raw material (ii) Narrative Potential (iii) Music and Song (iv) Structure and Composition (v) Acting and Character (vi) Performance: space, scenery and lighting (vii) Special Effects. Utilizing history, folklore, poetic and simple language; episodic, fluid, short, independent plot, characterization from subject's actions, detached and representational narrative, audience sitting round the hearth, or in the village square, setting not elaborate, lighting from moonlight and bonfires; laced with *idan* (magic) effect, the performance inspires audience participation for an aesthetic experience.

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