

Section 4. Theatre art

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AN APPRAISAL OF COSTUME DESIGN PROCESS IN THE PRODUCTION OF ESIABA IROBI'S THE FRONDED CIRCLE

Abstract: Costume is as relevant as any other element in a theatrical production. However, in most productions, costume designers inadvertently embark on an undermining process that renders the communicative "grace" of costume ineffective. This work registers in the sub-consciousness of costume designers that costume is not just mere cloths but artistic interpreters, communicative-agents of a performance.

Keywords: *Theatre; Costume design; The Fronded Circle; Aesthetics; Performance*

Background. The deepest of satisfaction is derived after a successful practice of any form. The theatre is not only an art in its own right but it combines all the other art forms like music, dance, acting, painting and so on, and this makes it an ideal introduction to practical; art application. The art of the theatre may be understood to consist of two parts: the literary and the visual or more specifically the writing of the play and its presentation before an audience,

To this end, the theatre seeks to create visual and aural equivalent on stage for what occurs in the script and these the theatre acquires by making the ideas, characters, story and dialogue visible and audible by translating the playwright words into acting, music, dancing, costumes, make-up, scenery and lighting. To this end, Russel [1] posited that costume, as the re-creation of text, must always serve as play's dramatic action developing and enriching it, but never dominating it or distracting it from its flow and movement. Costume should be visual expression of the play's dynamic spirit and environment for the action.

Theatrical costume is as old as man and as drama developed out of the magicoreligious dances of early man, the elements of entertainment gained importance and theatrical costume became

concerned with aesthetic effects. Wilson [2] in Johnson [3] adds:

Virtually, every aspect of theatre has practical as -well as aesthetic requirement, and costume design is no exception. No matter how attractive or how symbolic, stage costumes must work, for the performers.

In art of costuming, the nature of the materials, their form and colour combine to indicate mostly by symbols: certain ideas. Cunningham [4] adds:

Costume is far more revealing than nudity for even primitive men discovered that a distinctive garb could denote a tribal chief... distinguishing one sex from other thus expressing ideas of social rank, occupation and sex appeal.

Costume which is seen as the invention of apparel and accessories for stage used to enhance the performance of actors by setting them apart from the audience and by distinguishing each other implies that designing costume for a stage performance is subjected to basic rudiments of costume design which is more than sheer making of clothes but an art. Therefore, the costume designer is expected to know that costumes are not just worn by actors for several reasons but that they are meant to convey a message.

This work therefore, draws inspiration from Johnson's view that 'the world in its current form has assumed a very sophisticated posture, such that clothes (costumes) are not just worn for covering the skin, but more so, to induce appeal' [3].

Therefore, in addition to this, this work seeks to lay emphasis on how costumes can be made so as to serve an aesthetic function in a stage performance appraising the costume design process of Esiaba Irobi's "The Fronded Circle".

Costume—A Discourse. At the beginning of man's history, skin or leaves were used as protection against enemies attack or as adornment. As times went on, man was later civilized enough to decide how to dress to suit his reason or dressing. With time, man became more interested in printing and adornment and looked at clothing as the most potent weapon on his self-expression and realization. He came to accept and embrace the status which clothing provided in relating man to his environment. Costume has been one of man's best means of communication and self-expression. It is also the cleanest means by which one can show his relationship to his community. Russel [1] confirms:

The two most obvious piece of expression in a society are conformity and rebellion and clothing speaks more clearly about than any other social class... Conformity gives security and relieves a person from thinking about why he chooses certain clothes for occasions. This picture of man's relationship to his society as expressed by his clothing.

There is no gain saying the fact that one's physical outlook is expected to determine whom and what one really is. Therefore, an understanding of the attire of a particular people will significantly illuminate whom the people are and their cultural disposition. In this sense, theatre being the mirror of the society has the same interpretation of costume as in life.

The influence of costume can be rated very high considering Pitcher's view point. Thus, costume is the essential tool used in achieving an effective role in a stage production. Enna [5] adds:

Costume is the oldest area of technical theatre. The costumier should study the

period and style of each character's costume. This is a very important aspect of design because, the costume express at first appearance a character's status, situation and relationship to others in a performance.

Costume which is seen as a very organic visual theatrical construction that enhances the character portrayed is seen by Wilson [2] as;

...the most personal because they are actually worn by the performers themselves... visually, the performer and the costume are perceived as one; they merge into a single image on stage. At the same time, costumes have a value of their own, adding colour, shape, texture and symbolism to the overall effect that is created on stage.

In considering the view of Wilson [2], it is evident that costume is an important area of theatre in that it reveals the geographical area of the wearer, it contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of that culture, and it goes a long way to contribute to a sense of belonging to that community. Costumes generally incorporate religious beliefs, political and socio-economic system and life styles.

Costume thus, includes all apparent misrepresentation of the wearer, it expresses one's mood, shows his/her values, proposes his/her attitude. The style of a people is partly based on its geographical location and his geography affects their mode of dressing.

For instance, in Nigeria there are different ethnic groups with different religious beliefs, political and socio-economic systems. Obviously the totality of the culture language, geography, history and environmental influences of these tribes has a major impact on the popularity of cloth types commonly used by the groups.

Ditto, theatre costume must be able to depict the situation or background of the production and mood. Costume must show the relationship of the characters of the play. To this effect, costume could be viewed as pictorial and visual art that speaks both visually and non-visually to the audience. Wolven [6] confirms:

Costumes...are moving scenery of a production, the strongest elements of visual scene that projects personality and individual emotions and it obtains the strongest audience focus.

Developmentally, the history of theatre

costume, from the Greek till date shows that there has been a shift in that costumes were once considered the duty and responsibility of the individual actor but are now being handled by experts. Costumes have been lifted to a professional and sophisticated status. We now have personnel like the costumier who ensures that each design is executed to suit style and concept of the production.

Etymological and developmental discourse of costume has proven that today, in that theatre costumes are not only employed for the purpose of disguise, or as communication aids or as aesthetic embellishment but accordingly to Iyowuese [7]:

...have grown into a complex of their own, charged with the lack of complementing other visual aids, such as lighting scenery and the theatrical production in general.

Theatrical Costumes: Theory, Principles and Applications. Costume is just one area of the theatre's 'visual systems' that affects the creation and reception of a play. Owing to this relevance of costume as a major determinant of theatre's 'visual system', costumes help reflect the themes and mood, styles and emotions of a play, as well as indicating the historical or geographic context of the production. In the light of this truth, Johnson [3] expatiates:

Costumes are worn by actors for several reasons... to show status of the character played, to distinguish sexes, to identify cultures and to depict the period of the production.

Like other aspects of creative arts, theatrical costume are tasking because of the practical skills required in its production. With much emphasis on costume ditto how costumes can be made towards serving aesthetic function in the production, there are however, some basic theory, principle and application which according to Johnson [3] are meant to "arrive at the most creative costumes for performances" Johnson enumerates several factors capable of aiding in costumes application to include:

- a. The creativity of the director in conceptualizing what he wants
- b. The interpretation of the director's concepts by the costumier
- c. The expertise of the tailor who handles the sewing
- d. The physique of the actor which allows for the costume to show

- e. The availability of a good costume designer.

The art and science of theatrical costumes have been notioned by different authorities but one thing remains obvious their functional essence in the theatre remain the same which is best summarized by Wilson [2] as:

... relevant to the theatre because ... set tone and style of a production, indicate time and place, characterize individual and groups, underline personal relationship ... meet the practical needs of performers and coordinate the total production.

Consumes in the theatre are always conceived visually. They are the visual arts and visual expressions of the play's dynamic spirit and environment for action. The art of theatrical costumes proposes that in theatrical production, costumes are not just worn but that actors wear more than just clothes on stage and the purposes of these clothes are not just to cover the human frame because, every stage 'costume is a creation of the theatre. Its quality is purely theatrical and taken outside the theatre it loses its magic at once' [8]. Payne [9] adds, "... theatrical costumes are often designed not to fit everyday use, but to enhance theatrical communication..." it is simply for role playing.

Role playing in Payne's art of theatrical costuming is that theatrical costumes are as personal as any other aspect of a character. Thus, not only should they be agreeable to the temperament of the wearer, but they must fit that part he is playing. In furtherance of this theory, Wright [10] demands that:

Costumes (must) fit the period, the season, the locality, time of the day, occasion and mood of the scene. They must have the correct line and colour to do the most for the character projection and for the individual actor playing the role.

Thus, each costume should be stage worthy, in that the lines and design are sufficiently exaggerated to carry over to the audience the message and the costume must be so designed that it can be worn with ease.

To this end stage costumes which is a unique element of the theatre is considered closely tied to the actor because they are directly used by the individual actor and capable of creating a character in the theatre as well as, help the audience have a correct perception and highlight on the personality of the character on stage is tied to theory, principles and applications which promotes

consciousness in the selection and arrangement of elements / principles of design.

Costume Design: Basic Requirements and Rules. Costume design is the fabrication of apparel for the overall appearance of a character or performer. Eubank and Keith [11] posit that:

Costume is specific in the style of dress particular to a nation, a class, or a period. The most basic designs are produced to denote status, provide protection or modesty, or simply decorate a character.

It is a tool to express an art form, such as a play or film script, dance piece or opera. Wilson [2] considers the ability to serve as a medium of expression under what he tagged as "objectives of costume design" which includes:

- a. Help establish the tone and style of a production
- b. Indicate the historical period of a play and the locale in which it occurs
- c. Indicate the nature of individual characters or groups in a play: their stations in life, their occupation, their personalities
- d. Show the relationships among characters: separating major character from minor ones, contrasting one group with another
- e. Be consistent with the production as a whole, especially other visual element.

Costume design acknowledges that costumes form a unique system of especial complexity since they are decided by the audience. The contextualization of all the aspects of design can radically alter how a costume is used and read. The word design is the appropriate and adequate word that gives a clearer description of the professional nature of technical theatre which costume belongs. Design in the theatre thus forms the visual world of the play text. It is the visual interpretation of the script and playwrights ideas and steps are facilitated by the costume designer's resources which according to Wilson [2] include:

- a. Line, shape and silhouette
- b. Colour
- c. Fabric
- d. Accessories

The basic requirement which is used in costume design are tape, pencil, jotter or measurement note book, scissor, needle, thread, razor blade, rulers, office pin,

drawing book and designing paper.

As a rule, costume design is influenced by the theory of theatre as a collaborative art. Thus, a costume designer is expected to work in together with other designers such as the director, scene and light designer and so on to ensure that their ideas blend with the overall interpretation of the play for the sake of unifying and harmonizing the visual elements of production. Above all, the theory of costume design posit that designing a costume for a production must be in tune with the three basic elements of design which are colour, texture and style which varies from one society to the other.

Summary of the Fronded Circle. The Fronded Circle, written by Esiaba Irobi [12] dramatizes the core African belief. Thus in the play, magic is oriented towards the extension of earthly life. In the play, Onwutuebe prepares a protective charm that enables him to extend his life on earth. With the charm, which he buried in an earthen ware pot in his yam barn, he is able to swap the live of his male children seven times that death knockd at his door. Each of the male children disappears whenever their father is sick and calls them to his sick bed' with some wired words.

However, with the death of his last son, Ndubuisi, one of his relations Onwudinulo in sympathy with Nwannediyha, whom Onwutuebe has mysteriously killed her five sons, connived with Diegwa and secretly they dug up and destroy the charm.

With no other son to swap his life with death surfaces and reduces him to a living dead, by paralyzing him from the waist downwards. The inability of Ikenya the native doctor to locate and destroy the pot of charm, which he prepared causes the already decomposing Onwutuebe to be thrown into the state of continuous dying and waking up.

In order to protect the family name from such a shame, Onwudinulo decides to use spell to compel the American trained musicologist and Onwutuebe's younger brother, Gilbert Afonne, whom he bears much hatred, to step into a ritual that makes him to confess Onwutuebe's crimes on his behalf, thereby ending his own life and that of Onwutuebe simultaneously.

The play is awash with ideas. It captures the impenetrable possibilities of the human imagination and action, in order to reveal the paucity of the world of reason, the overweening influence of inhumanity and irrationality, as well as to show how the

exigencies of earthly life frequently result to stunning and incredible experiences.

Functional Aspects of Costume in the Play. The functionality of costumes in "The Fronded Circle" is built round the round costume played in the production taking cognizance of the fact that the process of designing costume for a production is primarily to aid the visual appearance of characters, the characterization of the characters Oskar in Brockett and Ball [13], adds:

The transformation of the human body, its metamorphosis, is made possible by the costume ... Costume emphasize the body's identity or change it; they express its nature... they stress its conformity to organic or mechanical laws or they invalidate this conformity.

Thus, designing costume for the stage production of the Fronded Circle was meant to:

- a. Help to establish the style of the production
- b. Indicate the historical period of the play and its locale
- c. Indicate as well as establish the nature of individual characters or groups; their station in the play, occupations and their personalities
- d. Show relationship among the characters in the play. By this, major characters were costumed in contrast to the minor ones as well as groups in contrast to other groups
- e. Specifically, symbolically convey the significance of individual characters as well as the theme of the play
- f. Meet the needs of individual character, making it possible for an actor or actress to move freely; perhaps to dance or sing. This freedom also aided in the quick changing of costume to another
- g. Communicate the change in character development and age in the course of the stage performance
- h. Depict the time of the day
- i. Indicate the cultural background of the society associated with the play.

Considering the realistic approach the director used in the performance, costuming for the performance adopted a realistic approach reflecting closely what is indicated in the script. Costume also made strong stylistic statements and were practically noticed. It intensified, interpreted the mood of the play, the character and the dramatic situation. In consonance with Abanuka [14]

assertion that:

Literature is undertaken in the general background of people's culture to interpret the culture and emphasize some aspects... Uphold the culture... subsequently becomes part of the culture and in some sense, they interpret the culture.

Costume in a play like The Fronded Circle which demonstrates magic in terms of objectives as ostensibly used in Igbo society must determine strength and entertain spectators through extraordinary feasts, which will puncture natural laws and build normal sensibilities. For clarity, the appendix is a pictorial display of the costumes as worn by the characters.

Theoretical costume which according to Tompkin [15], "...is intended both to impress the audience and help performers impersonate a character, style of dress in any culture and period" were meant to transform with the principal consideration of characterization to express, communicate and inform about the characters status, situation and relationship to the performance at first sight.

Thus, considering Hartnoll [16] assertion that "it is possible for the theatre to do without a stage, but "acting" must mean assuming a character must mean dressing up". Costuming for this production were meant to communicate through the employment of colour, fabrics, lines and styles hence a pictorial display of the costume of major characters in the play.

Appraisal of costume design in Esiaba Irobi's The Fronded Circle. The costume plot otherwise called transcription chart, is a chart which makes the designer to note the costume and other accessories worn by each character, for each scene, and the various changes of the costumes on the characters.

The chart is made by dividing a large sheet of paper into squares and naming the squares via the name of the actors, their roles, character they are playing, the character's age, sex, garments worn, accessories, and foot wear.

This makes it simple for the costumier of the production to sort out the costume required for each scene and each actor to avoid mixing up. Below is the costume transcription chart for Esiaba Irobi's "The Fronded Circle".

Costume as used by actors are meant to aid in the easy interpretation of individual

character, establish time and place of the play. It also ensures communication of an actor's mood to the audience and informs the audience about his or her social and financial status, aesthetic value and the overall visual effect of the production embedded in each usage.

Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle* as directed for viewing in the little play house by Ernest Odunku on the 28th April with the help of its costume has a lot to do by way of communicating the play's non-verbal messages and also about its characters.

In the production of *The Fronded Circle* different actors wore different kinds of costume ditto other accessories, to depict different things, among such is the costume used by Onwudinulo which consist of a chieftaincy shirt, red cap, red beads and cowries horse tail and walking stick which is an indicator that he is a typical Igbo titled chief. His friend, Diegwu is draped in like manner which quickly communicate to the audience that the setting of the play is in Igbo land in Nigeria.

The play which paints the sharp contrast in religious and traditional perspective is aided in interpretation via costume. The relationship between Onwudinulo and Diegwu who represents the African traditional and Dr. Gilbert Onwutuebe, who represent the Western life style is made known to the audience through costume. Onwudinulo and Diegwu wears the same costume and Dr. Gilbert, a musicologist is costumed in shirt, jean trouser and shoes as well as his wife Gwendolyn.

Characters occupation as shown in the play was revealed through the help of their costume. For instance, Gwendolyn, a medical doctor was dressed in a lapcoat and stethoscope. Oku and Uka, the shrine acolytes were dressed in red and white skirts. Ikenga's role as the chief priest and the priestess as custodian of the village custom were ascertained through their costume.

Costume generally signifies styles or fashion of dress worn by characters in a play, its period, time, location of class with makeup, a conscious application of beauty or symbolic designs, mark on an actor/actress body and face for practical characterization depict the life style, culture, tradition, status as it were in the past.

In fact, the costumes worn by actors in the production are similar to those usually worn by the Igbos. When one looks at the costume design, he/she cannot fail to notice the

traditional costume of the Igbo depicted in the play. The use of costume like "Isiagu"- a velvety/velvet material, often with colours such as black, red and so on with design such as lion head, tiger head, moon, star usually worn over a pair of trouser or wrapper and complemented with accessories such as red beads, horse tail, walking stick, cap all form standard dress code of the traditional Igbo society.

As a cultural ambassador of the dress code of a society, costume design in the production communicated much about the Igbo culture and times in which they live considering that *The Fronded Circle* dramatizes the cores of the Igbo traditional belief system.

Thus, in boosting the play production of *The Fronded Circle* the importance of costume cannot be relegated. Carson [17] stresses that 'costume...is of a critical importance in theatre and the actor (production) who neglects it runs the risk of an unsuccessful attempt at the visual projection of the precise and carefully determined character concept.'

Costume must be designed and applied aesthetics to reflect the society in which it was worn or as a reflection of that society in view with the vision of the script, director, performance space and budget. Brockett and Ball [13] prove that:

In creating garments...keep in mind gender, social and economic class, activity climate, season as well as stylistic qualities. Costumes designer must work within circumstance dictated by the script, director, performance space and budget.

Costume designs which according to Eubank and Keith [11]:

Is the fabrication of clothing for the overall appearance of a character or performer... in a style of dress particular to a nation, a class or a period... produced to denote status.

Costume design as a tool to express an art form relies on four types of costumes which Grimball and Rhea [18] list to include, "historical, fantastical, dance and modern".

Thus, a play like *The Fronded Circle* that acknowledges the hypnotizing and diabolical effects of black magic its potent power using the Igbo race is interpreted using historical costumes associated to the Igbos.

Thus, in seeking to provide physical and emotional support to every actor through the clothing he or she will wear to enhance characterization and provide strong visual

support of the story, concept and context of the play as a whole, the following processes were involved.

- a. Providing a costume sketch and research material
- b. Considering the nature of the theatre, costumes were borrowed made and rented where possible, some costumes were sown. Thus, there was the choice of fabrics, trims and so on for the garments.
- c. Participating in rehearsals to understand how the garment will be used and to ensure that the proposed styles made in initial discussions will still work as the production develops,
- d. Attending the technical and dressing rehearsal.

An opportunity to ensure that the costume design process began with a careful study of the play text, *The Fronded Circle* by Esiaba Irobi. By this careful study, the action (what happens in the scene), time period (when the action takes place), the location (where the action takes place) and the number and identity of the characters in each scene were noted.

Upon noting these vital information about the script there was a meeting with the director where the director opted for a realistic approach for the production. Views were aired in regard to personal histories of each character, colour and nature of the costume.

Then was the research into the Igbo tradition and belief on the relevance of magic - Library materials, internet, articles and interviews aided in the research process.

Finally, the design was tentatively known. The costumes, its colours and styles were considered and, finding them fit for the production, were adopted. With this, the production was considered successful to a certain percentage.

Conclusion. The primary purpose for costume in accompanying other accessories is for role playing, to transform and transport actors into the world of the play's characters and the production in general. They are also employed because they give aesthetic appeal to any dramatic enactment. Apart from these targets, the potency of costume design process is very vital in any given stage performance considering its communicative value, a source of true communication.

However, in the said production "weaknesses" were registered in terms of colour, comfort and confidence. Considering

the character Onwudinulo, who exhibited a dubious lifestyle in the course of the play, giving him a white coloured chieftaincy way did not contradict his personality. White as a colour stands for purity and innocence but a character bent on destroying Dr. Gilbert should be draped with black or red coloured material. For Dr. Gilbert's wife, the short gown she wore when Dr. Gilbert carried out was not fit. This gown was not only inconvenient which led to her inability to move at ease but also could not cover her nakedness. It was so obvious that the audience members screamed when Dr. Gilbert carried her up due to the exposure of her panties.

Thus, costume design process involves considering the visual and aesthetic effects through the use of costume. It is against this background that this research work was undertaken to assess the processes involved in costume design in the stage performance of Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*.

Recommendations. Upon the establishment of the fact that every garment worn in a stage performance is considered a costume which can function as a storytelling tool, communicating subtle details of each characters personality and history quickly and economically to the audience, the reality of these functions which entails the costume design process is highly concentrated and creatively tasking. Hence, the following recommendations:

- The relevance of costume to any theatrical performance stands tall and this has been proven in the course of this work. It is therefore, recommended that they should be considered and made an integral part of any dramatic enactment.
- Upon this fact, costume design is an art as well as process. Hence, consciousness and carefulness are highly demanded in the course of the work.
- As part of the demanded carefulness and consciousness in designing, it is recommended that adequate attention should be paid to costuming considering that costumes are meant to complement the actor.
- Since theatre is collaboration, costume design process is determined by collaboration. By collaboration, it is expected that several and constant meetings should be introduced where other designers as well as the director who is the chief designer will paint a skeletal picture of the performance.
- Training of costume designers in the

art of designing for theatrical performance is also recommended. Considering:

- a. the relevance of costume to any theatrical performance stands tall and this has been proven in the course of this work. It is therefore, recommended that they should be considered and made an integral part of any dramatic enactment.
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- d. Since theatre is collaboration, costume design process is determined by collaboration. By collaboration, it is expected that several and constant meetings should be introduced where other designers as well as the director who is the chief designer will paint a skeletal picture of the performance.
- e. Training of costume designers in the art of designing for theatrical performance is also recommended. Considering the fact that experience pays off in design, theatre costumiers are expected to be tutored on the elements of design and its applications.
- f. Above all, costume designers should note that the design process begins with a careful study of the play text and ends after the stage performance. Therefore, commitment, dedication and determination is a core influence and determinants in costume design process and its measurement of application either makes or destroys the stage performance.

Having analyzed the position of costume in theatrical productions, treated the focus of this research study with emphasis on costume design process of the stage performance of Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*, and carefully suggested numerous ways and approaches to costume design ditto its processes, this research work can be said to have lived up to its expectations.

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