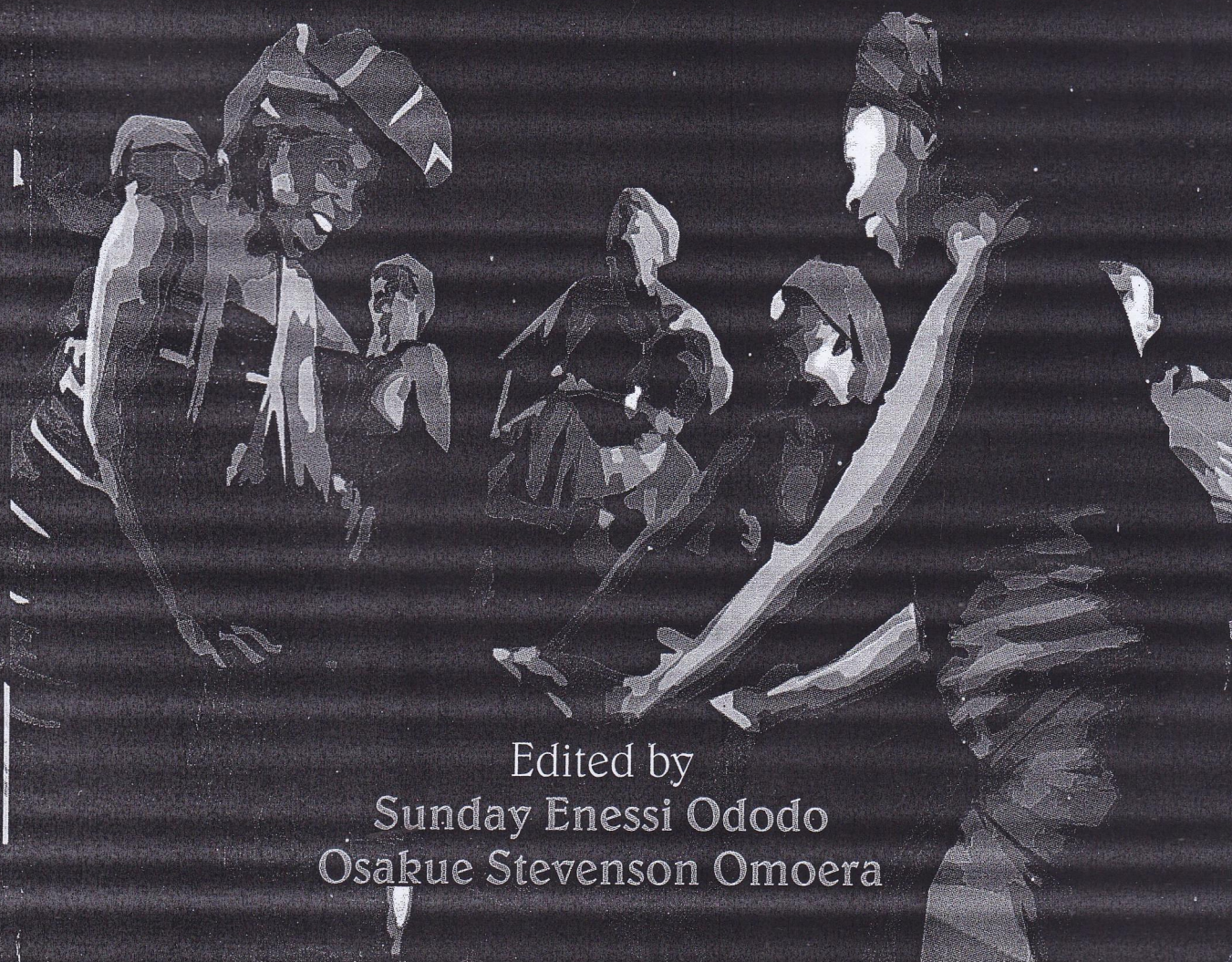


# THEATRE, MEDIA AND CULTURAL RE-ENGINEERING IN NIGERIA

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An Ovation of Excellence to  
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Chapter

37



**Challenges of Scenery Construction in UniUyo's  
Little Play House: Itoro Ituen's *Ufok Ete  
Ekpenyong* in Focus**

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**Abstract**

Scenery is one important element of stage performance whose function cannot be overlooked or overemphasized. It defines the performance space as well as support the design concept of the director. This is why a keen attention must be paid to it by the artistic director and technical designers. This chapter, which is on the challenges of scenery construction in the University of Uyo's Little Play House (UniUyo's Little Play House), was to determine the extent the stage space could be used for scenery construction needed for production of Itoro Ituen's *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*. The play needed the construction of a mud house on stage. Traditional craftsmen were employed to help in the

construction of the skeletal framework of the scenery, before the mud was applied. The performance space/stage did not really support the execution of the proposed scenic design for the production. Hence, this chapter recommends, among other things, a conducive environment to support the successful construction of the scenery for a production of that calibre in order to achieve the desired aesthetics excellence.

**Keywords:** Challenges of scenery construction, Uniuyo's Little Play House, *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*, Performance space

## Introduction

As an art form, the theatre requires a congenial environment for its performances. This means that before the audience gather to watch a performance attempts have been made to convincingly depict the environment of the performance. The theatre we use today, which is often equipped with the latest technology, owes a lot to what evolved over the centuries. Oren Parker and Harvey Smith argue that "the theatre today, along with all arts, is experiencing a time of rapid change" (3). Consequently, theatre design has shared in this experience, as there has been steady and stunning innovation for visual effectiveness. Thus, the stock scenery of the past has been replaced with scenery specifically designed for each production.

The Western tradition of theatre began in ancient Greece. Oscar Brockett claims that, "theatre in the Western world can be traced back to ancient Greece and especially to Athens, usually considered the cradle of Western civilization" (59). The Greeks built open-air theatres. The open-air theatres were first, a circular, flat orchestra pit located in the hollow between two hillsides, though it was later changed to a semi-circular structure. A small wooden hut, called, a *skene*, was introduced. This hut or skene house was located just behind the playing area. The skene was a wooden building where the actors could change their costumes. It was also used as a house or temple or any other part of scenery. Brockett asserts that, "since skene means hut or tent, the scene house probably developed out of some temporary structure intended originally as a dressing room but later incorporated into the action by some imaginative playwright" (32). Brockett further states that, "the scene house probably served as a formalized background for all plays, even those set in woods, on seashores or outside caves" (64). Hence, the skene also served as another hidden stage, because,

at times some of the actions went on inside of it.

Generally, it is believed that, the first traditional scenery appeared in ancient Greece around the time of Sophocles. At first, images were painted on the exterior walls of the skene. This led to painted scenic panels, called, *pinakes*, which were much like modern scenic flats, and eventually to the creation of the *periatoi*, a three-sided pivoting triangle with a different scene painted on each side. Robert Cohen clarifies this when he states that “the pinakes said to be invented by Sophocles, were painted panels that seem to have been placed between wooden (and later stone) columns of the skene” (83). Brockett notes that: “it is true that this scene house had three doors, a large central doorway flanked on either side by smaller doors – all opening onto the acting area” (64). In addition, the scene house was not architecturally joined to the auditorium; the spaces called *paradoi* at either side between the skene and the auditorium were used as entrances and exits for performers and, perhaps, by spectators before and after performances.

In the same way, theatre was very important in the lives of the Romans. Theatre was another way of keeping people busy and happy, so they would not plot against the emperor. The Romans copied everything about the Greeks. They borrowed Greek ideas and improved on them. Brockett confirms that,

As a people, the Romans are noted for adopting the ideas and practices of others. But they were neither indiscriminate nor unintelligent borrowers, for of all the people who came into contact with the Greeks, only the Romans embraced Greek artistic forms. (53)

In fact, much of the architectural influence on the Romans came from the Greeks and theatre structural design was not different. Like Greek acting space, the Romans tend to have a roofed house, called, the *scaenae frons*, another name for a skene at the back of the stage. Cohen affirms that, “a long narrow stage backed the orchestra and was itself backed by an elaborately decorated wall, known as the *frons scaenae*, with doorways providing entrances to the stage” (109). These were the earliest beginnings of scenic construction.

However, Molinta Enendu contends that, “the desire to see the show must be satisfied in the mutual interest of the audience and the showmen... provisions must be made to satisfy this desire for excellent visual perception of the production” (239). Theatre design is primarily concerned with enhancing the experience that the audience could have



at a performance. Parker and Smith agree with this position to the extent that, "the design area is aimed at stimulating an intellectual or emotional response in the audience" (71). In the theatre, the general concept of design may be attributed to a costume designer, lighting designer, make-up artist, sound designer or scene designer. These designers help to create, influence and express the actor's environment.

Scene design, like other kinds of creative design, is the creation of a form to fulfil a purpose or function. The function of scene design is obviously linked with the dramatic form which it serves. However, scene design is the strongest visual element that supports the spoken word of any dramatic form. In this regard, Parker and Smith state that, "the function of scene can be more clearly revealed by looking at the dramatic form of the play itself, thereby illustrating the relationship of scenery to the action of the play" (18-19). In any production, the total visual effect is the sum of all the elements that depend upon being seen to make their impression on the audience. The scenic background is the largest and most obvious visual element that supports the dialogue rendered by the performers. Scene design is not limited to designing of the background of a performance, it also includes planning of the quality and intensity of the light that reveal the scene, the selection and styling of the furniture and set dressing, the consideration of the actor's costume as well as the colour used, etc.

Moreover, since productions are rarely designed by fewer than four designers, each area of design is directly influenced by the others and creates the total atmosphere for any theatrical production. Parker and Smith further clarify this point when they noted that, "they (designers) must be collaborative in nature for their individual design is only part of a complex whole" (11). Hence, they must be able to bring meaning and visual significance to a stage picture through imaginative and creative qualities. The scene designer is responsible for the visual appearance and function of the scenery. He or she extends the director's production concept into a complete plan for the visual aspect of the production. He or she must be aware of the necessary movement of the actors and directing techniques which would help him or her "to create a proper environment to support the action of the play" (Parker and Smith 16). Thus, the scene designer must be able to create the best possible setting or scenery for a production that will serve both the playwright and the director's interpretation of the play.

Achievement of excellence in stage performance will require proper harnessing of technical elements by both the technical designer and

the artistic director as well. In view of the fact that, design is expected to sustain the interest of the audience members for long, at least as long as the performance lasts, adequate attention should be paid to stage design. However, some theatre designers are not aware of this technical aid, its functions and advantages in designing for contemporary theatre performances; hence, they produce aesthetically deficient works, especially in the case of educational theatres. This chapter, therefore, examines the challenges in the construction of scenery with particular focus on the stage production of Itoro Ituen's *Ufók Ete Ekpenyíng*. It further looks at ways of improving theatrical productions or live stage performances through the skill/art of proper scenery. Arising from the need to build proper scenery for the stage production of *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*, we had to move into the rural areas to gather required materials for building the scenery.

The relevance of this work lies in its aim to present or reveal the import of scenery design to stage performance. Not only does it X-ray the challenges encountered in building the required scenery for this production but stretches to give the prospect for further research/study. Hence, it provides for the literary/theatrical artiste and scholar, an area of future research and serves as a backup material.

### **A Synoptic Analysis of *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong***

The play, *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*, is written by Itoro Ituen and it is a satire which X-rays the life of a landlord by name Ete Ekpenyong who is into the business of admitting tenants into his dilapidated house where nothing at all is good. He is only concerned about the rent the tenants pay which he uses on alcohol and other frivolities. He has some silly, inhuman set of rules that govern his house in which no sane or even insane human being can survive or cope. He authoritatively lords over all the tenants and one dare not move a muscle without being asked to quit. He does not send his children to school in spite of all the money he has because he sees no benefit in providing them with education. He regards spending money on education as a waste. So, his children fight themselves and even curse him on some occasions. Bad times befall him when his tenants conspire to pack out of his house because of the unhygienic conditions which he paid deaf ears to. *Ete Ekpenyong* had decided that his son would be a hunter like his best friend. One fateful day, he decides to visit his friend, the hunter to finalize their deal, but a downpour accompanied by a massive wind



collapsed his house. On his return, he meets his building in ruins. One can only imagine how frustrating and devastating it was.

In a broader context, the play speaks to the problem of tenancy in our various communities. It shows a man who is not only interested in the rent paid by the tenants, but also in frustrating their lives simply because he has an edge over them being the landlord and so he has the leverage to exercise whatever authority he has over the tenants and that comes to play in the set of rules governing the house. Desperation can drive anyone to any extent and a clear case is seen in the play where one of the tenants, Monde, came to live in the house. No sensible person would want to live in a house where the landlord is a dictator. Imagine rules like no cooking without telling the landlord, no eating of egg or drinking of milk, no visitor can use the toilet and the tenant cannot use the toilet more than once in a day. He must be told before doing so and the toilet must be washed seven times a day. He built the toilet very close to his room so he could properly regulate its use despite the health hazards involved in a pit latrine being close by. The tenants were to pray very loudly in the morning, for him to know they are not witches or wizards. They were not to look healthier than any of his family members. They cannot buy a new dress without paying their rent. A man cannot marry a wife and bring her in to live with them in his house. All tenants must pay their rent weekly. They must tell the landlord what they want to buy before they buy it, and so on.

In studying and analyzing this play, one can relate the landlord to leaders that make rules for their citizens without thinking of the effect on the citizens. The worst part is that they make these rules and they do not even adhere to these rules themselves. The play not only underscores the issue of tenancy, it exposes the wickedness of some of our leaders that exploit us as their subjects and expect us to feel good about it. Ete Ekpenyong believed educating his children was to waste money, rather his son should be a hunter and his daughter should wait for a husband in due time. The same is the case in our society today in which our leaders instead of investing in education, would loot money for their personal aggrandizement allowing people to wallow in poverty and get exposed to various environmental hazards.

### Scenery in *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*

The play's setting is a traditional one. To convey the desired message, the director employed the Emilè Zola's Naturalism technique, which brings everything to its natural state. The director had to break grounds and go against odds to build a mud house on stage with all of its fittings, including the local mat that is used for roofing, plantain stem and cocoyam stem so that the wind would not blow off the roof. It was not easy creating some eye catching effects in the construction of the scenery, especially with regard to the rain scene. After brain-storming with the technical crew, materials like pipes, shower caps and a hose were bought. The crew fastened the shower caps to the pipes and hung them above the stage. The contraptions were then connected to the hose attached to the particular pipe that pumps water from the ground and not the one that supplies water to the building so that the pressure would be high enough to push the water up to where the pipes were hung on the stage. It was as though it was not going to work at first because out of the five shower caps that were fastened, the water gushed out in about three at first, but after some adjustments the 'rains' rained everywhere and that gave the desired aesthetic effect.

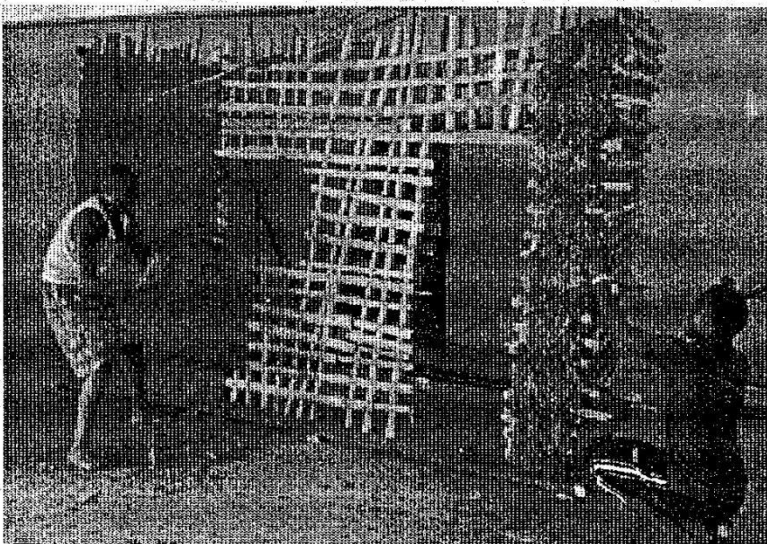
Constructing the mud house was very challenging. After thinking of what could possibly be used to hold the bamboo sticks together since they would not stand on their own and since the stage floor is not sand that could be dug to pitch the bamboos, the crew improvised by *nailing rafter wood to the stage floor to form a base and also to give the dimension of the house*. The crew further nailed the bamboo sticks to it, tied them with ropes to hold them together before the mud was applied. While the setting up of the skeleton of the structure was ongoing, some crew members were outside mixing the mud so that immediately the bamboo fitting is done, the mud too is ready for use. Although some persons sustained injuries in the process because of the harmful objects in the mud, but everyone was undeterred as everyone was caught up in the spirit of seeing to the success of the first indigenous stage performance for the 'season' in the Uniuyo's Little Play House.

Since the base that held the bamboo sticks together was not that strong and deep-rooted, the throwing of the mud on the bamboo sticks made the structure to tilt to one side because of the heaviness and pressure of the mud. The production team was struck by fear as they thought that the structure was going to collapse. After much

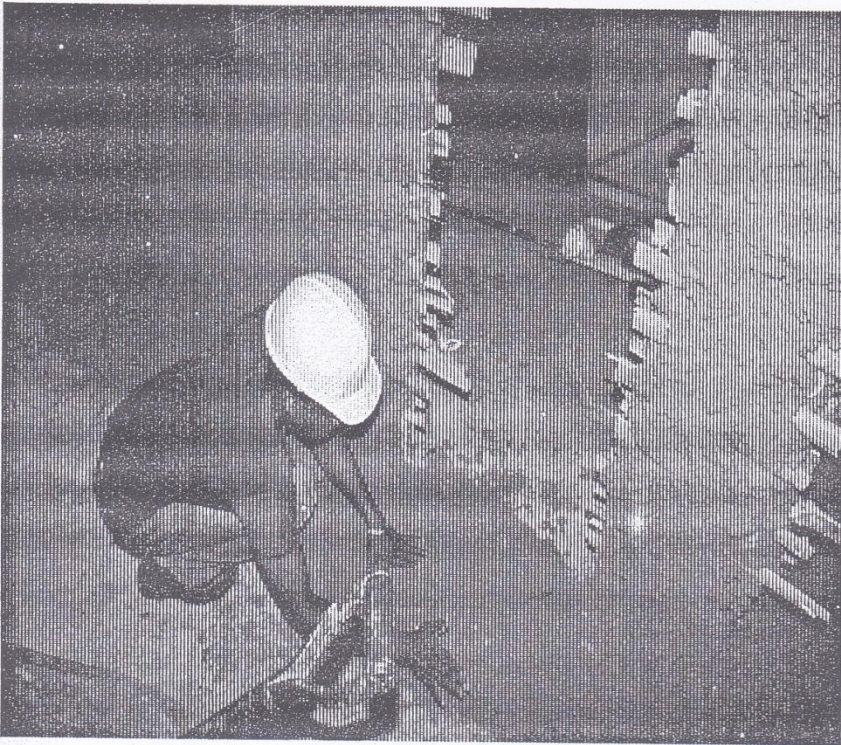


consideration; a strong rope was tied to the structure and linked to the stage wall which now firmly held it and prevented it from falling. This was not visible to the audience. The tilting of the mud house was not altogether a bad idea as it added colour to the performance. It was in consonance with the personality of Ete Ekpenyong and the nature of his house as described in the play script. The roof of the house was made from the traditional mat made from palm tree leaves. The mat was purchased about a month prior to the production to make sure it dried out to become brown instead of green because the description of Ete Ekpenyong's house is not a new one. It is rather old and has a lot of deficiencies such as cracked walls, leaking roof, etc.

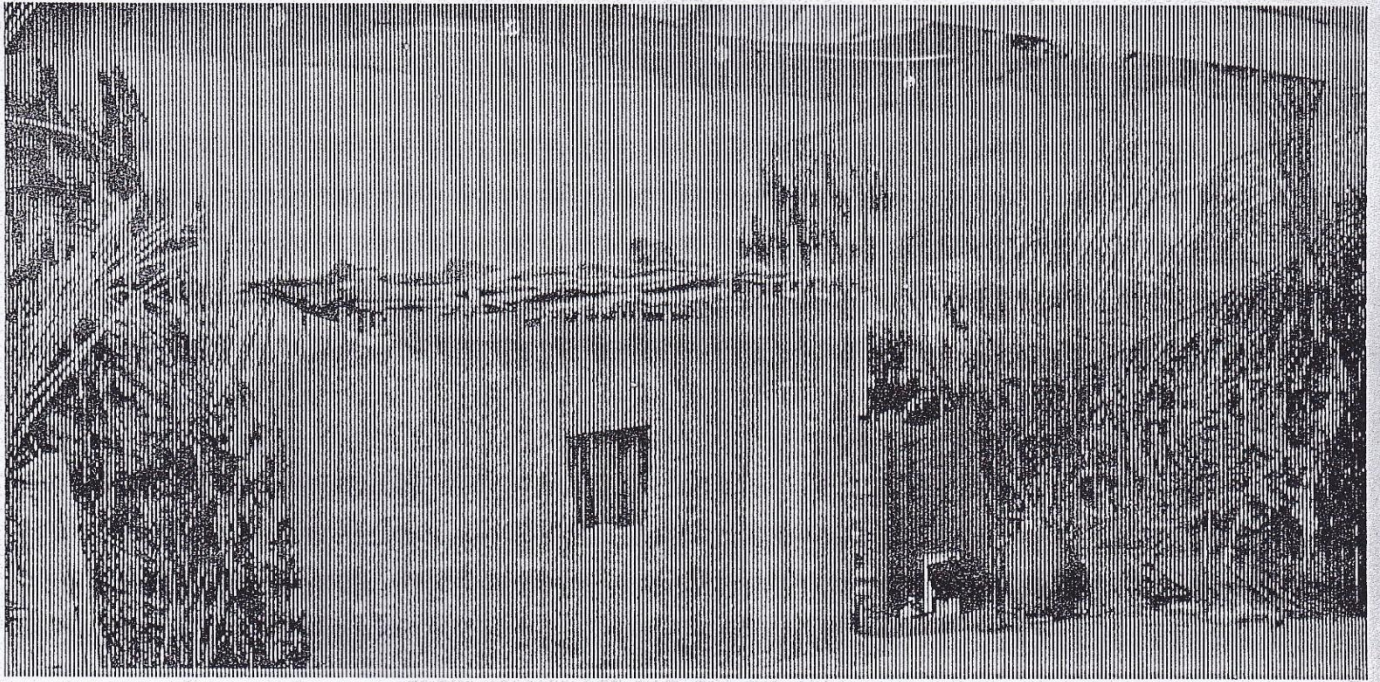
Constructing the fence of the house was also very challenging. It was extremely difficult for assigned crew members to get dried plantain, coconut and palm tree leaves which were used in that construction to give it the traditional ambience. In the course of gathering these materials, some people sustained injuries because of the spikes on the palm tree leaves. Some people carried the materials on their heads, some on the shoulder while others dragged some materials on the ground. However, because of the distance from where these materials were fetched, almost everyone sustained some injury. Also, the crew had to go into the bush to get 'live' trees to decorate the stage in order to achieve an overall aesthetic balance. Scouting for the 'right' trees was a big task on its own and conveying them to the performance venue was another. We sought for ways to hold them down on the stage and since the stage had no good base for them, we tied them to some points where they were not visible to the audience. The scenery really depicted the village/traditional setting, and coupled with the dramatic actions, the message of the play was duly communicated.











Skeletal views of *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong*

Other challenges include the following:

- a) *The Performance Space*: the performance space in which the play was enacted was the Little Play House of the University of Uyo, Uyo. The small stage space hampered the creativity of the director as per what he had envisaged for the production. Hence, the scenery had to be literally 'squeezed' to fit into the available space.
- b) *The Nature of the Stage*: The production required a mud house, but the floor of the stage which is wooden did pose a big challenge. For a mud house to be erected a wooden stage is not required. It is the bare ground that is required so that the bamboo sticks that will be used to form the skeleton of the house can be properly pitched. In the same way, the construction of the fence and the pit toilet was quite herculean.
- c) *The Scene Designer*: Since the production required a mud house, the technical designers in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, had no sufficient knowledge on how to build one. However, help came from a traditional craftsman skilled in the building of mud houses. That was an extra cost and stress on the director since the scenery building was not a day's job. The director had to pay overtime for the labour for four (4) days.



- d) *Materials for the Scenery Construction*: Setting was naturalistic to reflect the play's period. The stage properties and the scene design materials had to be properly sourced. This meant travelling far and wide to get them. That alone had its own cost and stress. The technical crew was exposed to a lot of hazards. Some of them had never climbed palm trees but they had to in order to cut down palm fronds to be used. Some other props had to be borrowed from some nearby villages. It was difficult to find something that resembled a light to reflect moonlight for a particular scene called *mbre offiong* (moon light games). However, after much wracking of brain, parcan light was improvised. A carved object that looked like a crescent to give the resemblance of moon was used successfully. Because of the tediousness of the work involved in getting the materials for the production, a lot of people sustained injuries.

### Prospect for the Scenery Construction

Having examined the various challenges encountered in constructing a set for this production, it is pertinent for a performance of this nature, to use a convenient space that would support the successful construction of the scenery by the director and the technical designers like the 'Garden Theatre', an open space/field, etc. The Garden Theatre is a larger space in the Department of Theatre Arts, compared to the Little Play House. With such a space, the initial concept of the production as envisaged would have been achieved in terms of building three mud houses but the Garden Theatre has a big water tank and a rig which posed a problem for traditional scenery. It would have hampered the successful erection of the three mud houses. In addition, using the Garden Theatre would have strained the actors' voices marring articulation. This is so because the Garden Theatre has no provision for acoustics. Furthermore, if three mud houses as envisaged by the director were to be erected, they would not have been ready for the production because different plays were performed every night and the set had to be ready. Again, it would have become too expensive as everything that was used for the erection of one mud house would have multiplied by three.

Lastly, it would have been difficult to give the sound cues since the console or the control room is inside the Little Play House and the sound designer will not be able to see what is going on in the Garden



Theatre to be able to cue accurately. An open field would be suitable to execute the performance as it would surmount all the challenges faced except for voice projection in which a Lapel microphone could be used for every member of the audience watching the performance to hear every single word. The Lapel microphone is a small/tiny microphone that is pinned to the actor's costume around the chest region. It is mostly not visible to the audience members but it is powerful enough to pick every single word the actor says on stage. It is comfortable to use as it would make the actors to relax and not bother about their projection.

## Conclusion

The scenic background is the most imposing visual unit in a production and as an art form, its main focus or function is to support the dramatic action. The scenery depiction must be in consonance with the interpretation of the dramatic story. For a traditional performance like *Ufok Ete Ekpenyong* which must have a 'feel' of the traditional ambience, much work is required to give it the aesthetics 'bite' required to support the dramatic actions. It is important, too, to keep in mind the challenges discussed in this chapter in order to have an environment suitable for appropriate scenery construction.

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