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REHEARSING *THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI* AT THE LITTLE PLAYHOUSE: A BLEND OF ARTISTIC VISIONS

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The period of rehearsing the play is the period of equipping the performance with everything desirable about it.

Effiong Johnson

Abstract

The success or failure of any theatrical performance depends greatly on what happens or did not happen at the rehearsals sessions. It is during rehearsals that the director, who is described as the Master Artist is given the creative mandate to carry out an interpretative expedition on the playwright's vision. During this operation, the playwright's vision is usually blended with the director's vision to satisfy the appetencies of theatre audience. Since the audience members are usually not formally expected to watch the rehearsals of theatrical performances; the director inexcusably becomes the predictable representative of his audience members. This therefore, lays a necessity upon the director to see the rehearsals with the curious eyes of his audience members and the director must equally taste the rehearsals' proceedings with the uncompromising tongues of his prospective audiences. The task of blending the various artistic visions of any production, especially in an educational theatre environment where

productions are usually underfunded, places great demands on the dexterity of a director. This paper analyzed the strategies that Sunday Umanah explored to blend artistic visions in rehearsing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* at the Little Playhouse, with a cast of over one hundred and twenty (120) students. It was discovered that the success or successes at rehearsals' floor, depended more on the director's approach, his understanding of the demands of the script and ability to manage individual differences. These become necessary taking into consideration the challenges of space and time in the Little Playhouse.

Introduction

The arts of rehearsing plays for stage performances in most cases center around the personality of a director. In the Little Playhouse for instance, where directors are given the liberty to direct their plays of choice; it is obvious that the choice of play by any director is usually arrived at after a careful consideration of the prospective audience and rehearsal demands. No director thinks of doing a play without thinking of his audiences. "A play should be chosen for the audience and not because it offers opportunities for the director to display his talent" (Nelms. 23). And in addition to considering what his audience members would like to watch, the director must also answer the question whether the rehearsals period available will allow him the opportunity to package the kind of spectacle his audience expects. Nyatuame and Bello place emphasis on rehearsals period because of the enormous task that a director is expected to carry out during the period. To them, the director uses the period of rehearsals,

to discuss his or her vision, character motivation and interpretation which will help the actors begin to see their characters in terms of a unified understanding... indicates movement such as entrances and exits and position actors on stage (p.64)

The period of rehearsal is quintessential to the success of any production. After the basic arrangement is done, the director needs conducive rehearsals' moment to effect the following vocal abilities of his actors; projection, articulation modulation and enunciation. These abilities contribute to what Effiong Johnson refers to as Expected Standard of

Delivery (ESD). He goes further to explain why lines and effective delivery of lines should be given due attention. According to him,

the play is not for them (directors), but for the audience whose composition comprises the English man, the English trained professor, students of English language, communicators and critics... for the sake of these ones, lines have to be well rehearsed and well delivered for the play to be well-received (p. 183).

In rehearsing of plays at The Little Playhouse, the director needs to be prudent with the use of "time" and "space", because The Little Playhouse of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, is not only small as the name implies, but is about the only official rehearsal space available for both departmental and students' productions. The rehearsals of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, directed by Sunday Umanah and supervised by Margaret Akpan for 2013 theatre workshop production were interesting and challenging. The director needed more than an average directorial skill to blend his vision with those of the two playwrights (Ngugu wa Thiong'o & Micere Mugo), using one hundred and twenty cast members.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi: A Conspectus

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is a protest play written by the duo of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae-Mugo. It is the literary expression of the playwrights' displeasure over the misconstrued colonialist writings about the Kenyan Mau Mau movement. The play is woven around the circumstances surrounding the trial of one of the celebrated leaders of the mau mau revolution - Dedan Kimathi, who was viewed by his people of Kikuyu and other Kenyans as a freedom fighter, against the colonialists' depiction of Kimathi as a terrorist. In their preface to the play, the playwrights reveal the muse that preoccupied their thoughts thus:

the play is not a reproduction of the farcical trial at Nyeri. It is an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement (Ngugi, Mugo 1976).

The play celebrates the character of Kimathi as a man of great courage and commitment. Kimathi's unusual determination and avowed commitment to social justice elevates him beyond the mortal realm:

Woman: Kimathi will never be alone. No bullet can kill him for as long as women continue to bear children (p.21).

This optimism by a woman in the play confirms that freedom fighters though killed physically, would live forever in the minds of the masses. The play advocates that the struggle against injustice ought to be a collective resolve. We see Ngugi and Mugo employ the use of both the youths and women to further the struggles against the colonial oppressors. The greed of African Elites and their disregard for the interest of the peasant masses is greatly condemned in the play. The potency of grassroots mobilization is evident in the play with the intermittent use of vernacular, thereby addressing the soul of the masses:

Woman: uuu-u! Nduri ici ni Kii giki?
Johnnie: simama kabisa! Good. Passbook
Woman: Ali pasi?
Johnnie: Ndiyo, passbook. Wapi passbook? (pp 8-9)

Indigenous dances, music, songs, and mime are effectively used in the play. The play chronicles the various stages of trial that the colonialists made Kimathi to pass through. Interestingly, every stage is met with an adamant Kimathi who would not settle for anything less than the total emancipation of his people. To Kimathi, the oppressive tendencies in the play and wanton destruction of lives are both obnoxious and repugnant.

Kimathi: (angry) This kind of imperialism vermin makes my blood boil with hate (addressing the soldiers) Did you come all this way many thousand of miles across the sea, over the air, along way from your home, to kill our people so that Lord so-and-so might drink other people's blood in peace? (p.64)

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is a play in search of justice where injustices abound; a play in search of peace where crises abound. Even in the Kangaroo Court, faced with death penalty, Kimathi remains resolute, determined and optimistic. When given opportunity to say something before the sentence in the Court, Kimathi explodes:

In the court of Imperialism! There has never and will never be Justice for the people under Imperialism. Justice is created through a revolutionary struggle against all the forces of Imperialism. Our struggle must therefore continue (p.82)

The play creates a sense of awakening on the oppressed masses not to give up until freedom is attained. The strength of the struggle in this play, draws from some Marxist phrases and terms that the playwrights embellished Kimathi's last lines with: "*we must be vigilant...*" "*welcome comrades*", "*we now must open new fronts*", "*against oppression and exploitation*". "*...we must plant seeds for a future society*", "*rise, rise workers and peasants of Kenya*", "*our victory is the victory of the working people and long live Kenyan People's Defence Council*". The play is a clarion call to order amidst eminent disorder.

Textual Vision

The play text is an embodiment of the playwright's vision. It brings together in a rather creative manner, the message that he has for his readers. At this point the message is on general notes, intended to reach as many as can lay hands on the text; it is a reflection of the playwright's pre-occupation. The playwrights draw from the happenings in his society. And as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o would put it, the writer –

has got to be an observer and at the same time a part of him is committed, committed to the situation. He must be wholly involved... and at the same time, he mustn't allow the involvement in that particular social situation to impinge on his judgment or on his creative activities (p.128).

So, a playwright's vision entails –observing what happens in his society, getting involved and making comments where needs arise. Ngugi wa

Thiong'o states further that every writer is a writer in politics and that what he or she cannot do is to remain neutral (204). Atakpo and Umanah highlight the various playwrights' visions to include:

Soyinka's attempt at reproducing some impossible, inhuman and oppressive characters he describes as Africa's one time Super Heroes in *A Play of Giants*. Ola Rotimi's story of the unjust treatments meted to a group of lepers and their struggle for human identity in *Hopes of the Living Dead*... Uwemedimo Atakpo's resolve to fight the consistent demand of Niger Delta people's right to a fare share of their natural resources in *Watering the Hard Ground*... and Ubong Nda's avowal of hatred for a political system that allows a minority few to 'commandeer' the resources of the State at the detriment of the populace in *Khakligbada*. The list goes on (p.74).

Performance Vision

Ownership of performance vision is traced to the director, who is saddled with the responsibility to create or recreate a three dimensional spectacle from the textual vision of the playwright. In a copious citing of Sheldon Chenega; Onyonyor and Wekpe agree, the director must be able to grasp the inner rhythm of the dramatists work, conceive setting, lighting, acting, movement, costuming etc in harmony with their rhythm and at the same time, stamp the complete result with his own individual genius (152). Chenega states further that "no two directors will aim at the same result". The tendency is always there for each director to follow his personal instinct while juxtaposing his vision with that of the playwright's. Effiong Johnson's assertion concerning the function of the director and the malleable nature of a playwright's script is apt;

The director is the interpreter of the playwright's script. The playwright's point of view in the script or his vision may or may not be sustained by the director... A script can assume a fresh new dimension in the hands of a director, especially in the hands of the auteur director who merely uses the script as the beginning point of his directorial interrogations towards attaining a vision of life. (pp. 60-61).

Johnson holds strongly that after a script must have been donated by the playwright, it was the duty of the director "to take over the script,

read it to the point of elastic comprehension... based on his interpretative argument and what he deems most apt for the audience per time, he settles on a vision" (p.61).

Blended Vision in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

Works of arts basically require a blend of some sort. The blending could be of materials as in the case of a painter; where different colours are blended to have desired pictures. The blend of this paper, however, has to do with visions, and Johnson identifies the basic kinds of vision viz the playwright's vision, the director's vision and the society's vision, which could also be referred to as the audience's vision. Here, since we are discussing rehearsals where audience members are not officially allowed to watch, it is pertinent to state that, the director's vision is viewed as the consummate of two visions: that of the director and the audience which he (the director) represents at the rehearsal floor.

As far as theatrical performances are concerned, the blending of visions takes place during rehearsals and it is the exclusive function of the director. It is during moments of rehearsals that the director takes advantage to adjust or embellish the playwright's vision, the actor's vision and designer's vision to satisfy the vision he has for his audience members. Put simply, a director is the "interpreter – blender", who uses the actors and designers at the rehearsal floor to interpret and blend the playwright's vision for the consumption of his audience.

From the forgoing, it is evident that the importance of rehearsals to any stage performance cannot be over emphasized. Ofonime Inyang opines,

The rehearsal period is an intense artistic session, where a director's conceptualized vision of a production is experimented, using all the creative and intellectual resources available with the actors as pivots of this communication process. (p.73).

To achieve the above, the director uses a specific directorial approach or amalgam of approaches to enforce his vision. A directorial approach is the instrument of blending that the director depends on during moments of rehearsals.

Directorial Approach

In directing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* at the Little Playhouse, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, the director – Sunday Umanah, engaged his "still-experimenting" directorial approach: *creati-reactive approach* (CRAPP). The *creati-reactive approach* (CRAPP) borrows extensively from African Total Theatre Aesthetics in content, but process wise, depends greatly on the creative reactions of artists at the rehearsal floors. This directorial approach encourages the director to first submit his proposal at the rehearsal floor and allow his actors and designers the opportunity to make their creative reactions before he (the director) applies it.

CRAPP acknowledges the expertise of other theatre collaborators and gives them opportunity to contribute (but with the director's navigating role), to the emerging theatre spectacle which Ubong Nda asserts to include, "traditional dances, songs, ceremonies, props, costumes, acting/performance, dialogue engagement and others, which are capable of attracting someone to want to be part of the viewership of a theatrical enactment" (54).

Choice of Play

Two factors prompted the choice of the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* for the Theatre workshop experiment in the Little Playhouse University of Uyo, Uyo. First was the need to do an East African Play with the thematic preoccupation of survival instinct. The director being fully aware of the prevailing condition of the Nigerian state, developed deep passion and urge to give hope to his audience members despite the subsisting despondent index. The character of Dedan Kimathi in the play readily presents a mental engineering effort to those who feel they are totally helpless and are already resigning to fate. Another factor of attraction was the view that a play of mass struggle like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has the capacity to accommodate the over one hundred and twenty (120) available cast (class) members.

Appointment/Auditions/Casting

The director started with the appointment of stage managers, props & house managers into his auditions panel. The director and his

panel used four days to carry out general auditions of the entire class members and three days to effect special auditions for the roles of Kimathi Wa Wachiuri, Shaw Henderson, Jonnie and Woman. The success at getting the right people to play these leading roles, greatly contributed to the success of the production. The challenge in casting was as a result of the fact that it was a year one class, first semester students who have just been admitted and their creative abilities not hitherto known to the director. Here, the creati- reactive approach of the director came to the rescue. As the rehearsals progress, the director kept discovering who among the class members will play a particular role better and students who got clear understanding of the play while rehearsal was in progress, volunteered to play roles they think their creative abilities would carry. It took almost three weeks into the rehearsals' tenure for casting to be duly effected.

Rehearsals

The rehearsals tenure of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* made judicious use of sixty six hours, (eleven hours per week) in the Little Playhouse/dance studio/garden theatre. Below is the schedule:

Mondays: 4pm-8pm at the Little Playhouse (4 hours)

Wednesday: 6pm-8pm at Garden Theatre (2 hours)

Fridays: 4pm – 6pm at the Dance Studio (2 hours)

Saturday: 7am–10am at Little Playhouse (3 hours).

Total: Eleven hours for six weeks = 66 hours

It started with the reading rehearsals which took place immediately after the auditions exercise. At the reading sessions, cast members were challenged to make public their observations, comments and contributions which were duly integrated into the production process to align with the director's vision.

After the reading rehearsals, the director divided the cast members into smaller groups, to generate appropriate songs to be used for mood creation, tempo sustenance and intermezzi during scenes changes. This lasted for three days. Because of the nature of rehearsal space in the Little Playhouse, the director took the rehearsals in phases and appointed group leaders who led various sessions. Introduction of dances into the production made for separate dance rehearsals.

Also, to make for faster scenic changes and in view of the numerous cast members at disposal, the director invented the use of "human flats". Human beings were used as backdrops for subsidiary scenes. Trees in the forest that served as the operational base for Kimathi and his colleagues were also composed with human images. After about four weeks of scenic rehearsals, all the scenes with their technical embellishments were brought to artistic whole for 'dry run' rehearsals which ended with dress and technical rehearsals before the production proper.

Challenges/Recommendations

The challenges of rehearsing plays in the Little Playhouse, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo could be summarized under three considerations:

1. The space capacity of the Little Playhouse is inadequate for rehearsals generally and worst for a production of over one hundred and twenty cast members like we had in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.
2. The two make-shift venues for rehearsals - the Dance Studio and the garden theatre have their peculiar short comings. The Dance studio is very small with poor ventilation and inadequate lighting. The Garden Theatre is open so cannot be used during sunny and rainy periods.
3. In addition to the smallness of the Little Playhouse in size, the place is also used as the main lecture Hall for Diploma, Degree and Graduate Students of the Department. Therefore, the space cannot be free for rehearsals until all lectures must have been completed.

In view of the above thereto, we wish to recommend as follows:

- i. The School Management should as a matter of necessity, provide a standard theatre where rehearsals could be held comfortably.
- ii. The Management should provide the Department with a lecture hall so that rehearsals could happen behind the praying eyes of non-production members.
- iii. The Dance Studio should be restructured to also accommodate rehearsal' purposes.

- iv. Shade cover should be installed in a section of the garden theatre to protect artistes from the scorching sun and rainfall.
- v. Very importantly, the Department should think of cutting down the number of productions per season. We think that if the number of productions is reduced from fifteen to say – six or seven; each group will have enough time to rehearse.

Conclusion

The task of blending the director's vision with those of the playwright's, and actors/designer's demands a sense of thorough understanding from the director, who drives the blending process. And in a production that involves dialogues, dances, songs and acrobatics, like was the case in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*; the director must also develop capacity to see to it that every accoutrement is artistically blended to give the needed spectacle.

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