

THEATRE IN THE VANGUARD OF COUNTER-TERRORISM IN THE COMPUTER AGE¹

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Abstract

This was the text of a Lead Paper presented at the 2018 Conference of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) hosted by the Federal University of Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE). Addressing the broad theme of Theatre in the vanguard of counter-terrorism, the paper situates the discourse within the context of the computer age which has revolutionised human communication on the global stage. Theatre, the paper argues, has always been deployed in the service of the human society, from inception, as against the contentious aesthetic theory of art for art's sake. The paper traces the artistic intervention of theatre in human affairs from its close collaboration with the religious persuasion of the Classical Greek society, to later involvement in politics and other societal imperatives, propelled by the supersonic speed of the Information Age driven by computer technology. The paper urges all the participants at the conference to deliberate on the how and why theatre can collaborate with technology to defeat the growing scourge of terrorism in the global space.

The theatre has never existed for its own sake. Right from inception, it was part of a religious ritual, combining profit with pleasure in the Classical era and, in the worst-case scenario, capable of offering pure entertainment, with no tendentious import. Thus, the incestuous aesthetic principle of art for art's sake, quite amenable to poetry, has no place within the purview of theatre, which has always existed primarily for the sake of society. From age to age, and from one society to another, theatre has always found itself being pressed into service for a variety of reasons, ranging from religious indoctrination to social mobilisation, and political propaganda. The church and the theatre are easily the two oldest

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human institutions which have been in close, sometime conflicting, interaction over the years, resulting in the interminable tension between these two strange bedfellows; a conflict between the sacred and the secular, which has partly been resolved on the altar of Christian theatre. Today, the epicentre of conflict has shifted from religion to politics, and the theatre is now involved in a running battle between political institutions and governmental establishments, ranging from autocracy to democracy, from despotism to populism.

SONTA 2018 focuses on the social responsibility of Theatre in combating terrorism and insurgency, which are the greatest menaces currently ravaging the world. Although the scope and intensity may vary from place to place, there is no country in the world today that is completely free from this social scourge, which is all too often driven by selfish ethnic religious or political considerations. As against the pure literary art which draws its patronage from the literate class, the theatre is capable of being more effectively deployed as a socio-cultural or political weapon in the service of the community. Examples of this phenomenon abound in history. Aristophanes, the archetypal Classical comedian, employed Old Comedy to lampoon Socratic ideals and the political duplicity of his time. Medieval Church revived the theatre for the purpose of vivifying religious doctrines and promoting proselytisation. Bertolt Brecht, that great German author of the epic theatre, placed his experimental art at the disposal of political activism and communist propaganda. Even Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, popularly known as Molière, overtly ridiculed the follies and foibles of his day, which brought him in open confrontation with the then powerful theocratic authorities. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o suffered a spell of incarceration for performances which were considered inciting or treasonable by the government in power. Closer home, Wole Soyinka deploys his literary arsenal against religious and political chicanery in such memorable pieces as *The Jero Plays* and *A Play of Giants* (see Umukoro 2012b for a critical comparison of Molière and Soyinka.) Hubert Ogunde, in the 1960s used his Concert Party to expose and confront political corruption and perceived ethnic marginalisation of the Yoruba race in his satirical piece, *Yoruba Ronu*, and suffered political persecution in the process. In apartheid South Africa, dramatists such as Athol Fugard, engaged in sustained artistic guerrilla warfare with the brutal regimes of Botha and his fellow Afrikaner presidents in such plays

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as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*. These are representative dramatists, belonging to a long list of agitprop artists, who used the theatrical weapon to fight social injustice and political repression. The immediate challenge today is how to use the theatre to checkmate the rising scourge of global terrorism.

Before delving into that challenge, a brief insight into insurgency and terrorism would put the issue in a clearer perspective. Terrorism is the adoption of violent tactics to pursue a socio-political agenda or embark on systemic genocide or ethnic cleansing. It assumes a form of suicide bombing, kidnapping, assassination, and all manner of massive destruction of lives and property. Although it tends to be local in its *modus operandi* it has a global network which ensures cross-border operation when necessary. Terrorism has now emerged as a massive threat to global peace and well-being.

The international terrorist organisation under Osama Bin Laden, *Al-Qaeda*, perpetrated the monumental calamity of September 11, 2001, in which the US World Trade Centre in New York was brought down with massive destruction of lives and property. Some 2,750 people were reportedly killed in New York City alone, 184 at Pentagon, and 40 in Pennsylvania (as passengers just struggled to take over one of the hijacked planes, resulting in a fatal crash). The Islamic terrorist group known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has continued to haunt the Western world with sporadic attacks and sustained threat of massive violence which keeps the international community in a perpetual state of tension, fear, and uncertainty. Back home, Boko Haram, the retrograde terrorist movement, has unleashed a spate of attacks on soft targets in Nigeria with heavy casualties, under false and misleading Jihadism. The Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009, when a radicalised Islamic terrorist group raised up arms against the people and government of Nigeria. Over the years, it has metamorphosed through different stages, and has split into splinter groups, with a weakened central command structure, which has reduced its operation to sporadic guerilla attacks. But, like a scorched snake, it is even now more deadly and more insidious, still capable of launching major attacks on the Nigerian polity and threatening the stability and continued survival of the country. Terrorism and insurgency are clear indices of a failing state which, if not checked, are quite capable of bringing about a nation's ultimate collapse. The Federal Government's efforts to annihilate the notorious movement deserve to be complemented by all agencies and groups, including SONTA. The logical question is: what powers does the theatre have in the face of bombs, bayonets, and bullets?

The old platitude has it that the pen is mightier than the sword. But, we are now in the computer age where the pen has been replaced by the laptop, and the bomb has taken the place of the sword. In the face of these new realities the statement should now read: the computer (i.e. the laptop or palmtop) is more potent and deadlier than the bomb. While the bomb depends on its massive explosive power to cause maximum physical damage, the computer operates in an insidious manner to destroy the psychological basis of brute force, complemented by the penetrating reach of the social media. The terrorist bomb operates within a limited physical range, but the artistic message carried by the radio waves has unlimited reach in a world that has shrunk into the global village of McLuhan's dream. So, one way by which theatre can counter terrorism is to align with the proverbial communicative power of the computer in disseminating its carefully crafted artistic message, aimed at destroying the terrorist base. But that task will prove quite daunting for the following reasons:

Terrorism pre-dated Boko Haram insurgency. Historically, we can trace it to October 19, 1986 when that fine epitome of journalism, Dele Giwa, was felled by the very first parcel bomb (in effect, the first terrorist bomb) to be exploded in this country. It was aimed at silencing investigative journalism and it sent the chill down the spine of many a journalist (see Umukoro, 2012a). Since then many more have gone the way of Dele Giwa, including our dear Bola Ige (largely for political reasons), through high level conspiracy which involved the Nigerian security agents, operating as governmental agents of death. Till date, none of those series of mysterious assassinations has been uncovered, as if the perpetrators came from outer planet and disappeared into infinite space immediately after. The unproved claim has been made, now and again, that Boko Haram has a mole within the government establishment, thus putting the terrorist group a step ahead of the security agents. Was it not strange that the Chibok and Dapchi girls were kidnapped in broad daylight with several trucks of vehicles operating for hours, and passing through routes supposedly saturated with police and military checkpoints, where innocent commuters were, and are still, being regularly extorted from pole to pole? And all that during an emergency period! The Dapchi girls but one (Leah Shaibu) were brought back a few days later through the same route, and the abductors even had a short interaction with the parents (possibly granting a press interview to the

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bargain) before gallivanting back to their base, possibly in Mars, where Leah is being kept. Who is fooling who? With all the best intentions in the world, it must be stressed that the war against terror will achieve little or no result as long as the government lacks the political will or the military capacity to fight it to a standstill.

Another sore point to consider is that technology is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. Just as it enhances the communication process, it is also found extremely useful by the terrorists in their deadly operations. We are veritably in the Communication and Information Age. It is also the Computer Age where virtually all human activities are aided by the use of computer. And so, both positive and negative activities employ Computer Aided Devices (CAD) to achieve results, and the terrorists equally have access to this facility. Bombs are now safely guided to their targets with deadly accuracy, using computers, while security information can be shared by the terrorists through the phone and other computer devices. Thieves are now capable of coordinating their activities through electronic communication, while the owner of the house is also capable of seeking for instant help through the same means. Nevertheless, the advantages and positive uses of the computer far outweigh the negative values.

In combating terror, the theatre has to employ all its communication arsenals, represented by the different theatrical modes, transcending stage arts to the screen art of the cinema, television, and the video film, not leaving out the radio with its greatest rural reach. A multimedia approach is thus advocated for effective theatrical communication. The objective should be to create a series of plays which speak to the theme of counter-terrorism and which can be adapted for the various media for the widest possible reach. Terrorism is a great menace which calls for an equally radical approach to counter. It is totally different from conventional warfare that is fought out on an identifiable battlefield; rather, it is a form of guerrilla war which is fought out on the psychological realm of intelligence and espionage, always ensuring that one is one step ahead of the enemy, with emphasis on prevention rather than restoration; that is, on being proactive rather than being reactive.

A guerrilla warfare, which terrorism undoubtedly is, calls for a guerrilla theatre with unconventional rules of engagement. According to an encyclopaedic source, Guerrilla Theatre

is a form of guerrilla communication originated in 1965 by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, who, in (the) spirit of the Che Guevara writings from which the term *guerrilla* is taken, engaged in performances in public places committed to

"revolutionary sociopolitical change"...Guerrilla (Spanish for "little war"), as applied to theatrical events, describes the act of spontaneous, surprise performances in unlikely spaces to an unsuspecting audience. Typically, these performances intend to draw attention to a political/social issue through satire, protest, and carnivalesque techniques. Many of these performances were a direct result of the radical social movements of the late 1960s, through mid-1970s. Guerrilla Theatre, also referred to as Guerrilla performance, has been sometimes related to the agitprop theatre of the 1930s, but it is differentiated from agitprop by the inclusion of Dada performance tactics (*Online Encyclopedia*).

Thus, the defining features of guerrilla theatre are ridicule, spontaneity, and unconventionality, typical of the unconventional method of terrorism and insurgency themselves. Such performances, carried out in several parts of the city (possibly simultaneously for maximum impact), can draw the attention of those in authority to the displeasure of the citizenry over unpopular policies and events. Satire is a key element whereby certain personalities and situations are lampooned in a subtle manner.

Some scholars have advocated the Guerrilla Theatre concept as the option for dramatists in a totalitarian state, where brutal oppression against opposition is the order of the day. Two of such scholars are Professors Femi Osofisan and Alex Asigbo in their Inaugural Lectures. In his 1997 Lecture at the University of Ibadan entitled "Playing dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of Terror in a Post-Colonial State", Femi Osofisan highlights the great risk to which contemporary dramatists are exposed in a typical African post-colonial nation, analogous to the fatal risk which a goat faces in the den of a hungry lion. Much later, in the 24th Inaugural Lecture of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, delivered in 2013, Professor Alex Asigbo would seem to have stumbled upon the solution to the dilemma earlier posed by Professor Osofisan. His Lecture, entitled "Fighting from the Trenches: Nigerian Playwrights and the Task of Nation-building", counsels that in the face of state terror, the Nigerian playwright is best advised to fight from the protective trenches and avoid a direct, frontal, and possibly disastrous confrontation with a regime that is both brutal and brutish. For both scholars, discretion is always the better part of valour, and he

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who fights and runs, lives to fight another day. Hence, in combating terror, the theatre artist should avoid playing into the hands of squeamish and unscrupulous authorities.

In concluding, I wish to underscore the basic issues before the paper presenters at this conference. First, to determine the precise focus of the paper within the broad framework of the overriding theme of deploying theatre in the service of counter terrorism in a contemporary democratic polity. Second, to determine the options available to the theatre in combating terror, ranging from revelation and condemnation of the criminal activities, to the rehabilitation of their victims. This should be reflected in the different stages and aspects of the theatrical engagement: scripting, designing, directing, acting, along with relevant performance aesthetics. Some of the plays of Femi Osofisan tend to display features of counter-terrorism. For instance, *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* underscores the need to pay attention to the enemy within in dealing with the enemy without because, as the saying goes, the insect that feeds on the vegetable leaf actually resides within the leaf. Also, some of the plays submitted for the recent (2018) NLNG Prize for drama, such as Obari Gomba's *Guerrilla Post* (one of the eleven long listed plays), and Soji Cole's *Embers* (the winning entry), address the issue of violence and its physical and psychological effects on the immediate victims. Akinwumi Isola also identifies a group of modern Yoruba plays as 'protest plays', which he defines as

those plays that attempt to decry the poor economic condition and the political powerlessness of the working class. Some of the plays also discuss aspects of corruption, exposing it for condemnation (Isola, in Yemi Ogunbiyi [Ed.], 2014:499).

Some of the identified plays in this category are: *Rere Run* by Oladejo Okediji, and two of his own plays, *Koseegbe* and *Aye Ye Won Tan*, which focus on different social problems. More of such plays in both English and the indigenous Nigerian languages will be required in the fight against terrorism and all forms of insurgency.

The obstacles in the way of Theatre as a weapon of counter terrorism need to be realistically appraised, and possible solutions proffered. The hurdles include financial limitations, official censorship and self-censorship, corruption and outright political repression. International collaborations with foreign funding agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO can help alleviate the financial burden. Such collaboration existed between 1991 and 1995 when UNICEF funded some community theatre projects in select Nigerian universities (see

Dasylva, 2003:197-213). Today, the focus has changed, and the Nigerian Theatre now requires foreign aid to fight terrorism and internal insurgency. Also, the choice of language in a multilingual polity such as ours is a crucial factor, which can be addressed through the paralinguistic idiom of theatrical communication, and a robust translation policy put in place to promote the linguistic accessibility of relevant texts. These are some of the pertinent issues which this Conference should address during the brainstorming sessions of the next couple of days. At the end of the of it all, a final communiqué is expected to be issued, to sensitise the public and the government on burning contemporary matters of concern to the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), including ethnicity, religious intolerance, corruption and terrorism. On this note, I hereby wish all participants at SONTA 2018 happy and fruitful deliberations.

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