

COST-EFFECTIVE MECHANICS IN FEMI OSOFISAN'S ADAPTATIONS
OF SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

*That theatre practice in Nigeria has been at a low ebb owing to lack of financial support since the 1980s is no longer news. In recent times, innovative theatre practitioners have exerted effort in taking theatre beyond the confines of the ivory tower in order to restore it to the daily life of ordinary Nigerians. Many of available play scripts hardly make it to these emergent theatres because they are very expensive. As such, the directors of these new theatres are forced to generate their own plays, a situation that still persists, suggesting that most established Nigerian playwrights have not seen the need to create plays that can compete with, say, Nollywood and stand-up comedy, in cost-effectiveness and less cumbersome stageability. Through the analysis of form and deployment of cost-saving theatrical devices in Femi Osofisan's two recent adaptations of William Shakespeare's plays – *Wesoo, Hamlet! Or The Resurrection of Hamlet* and *Love's Unlike Lading: A Comedy From Shakespeare* – this essay highlights the manner in which playwrights can create scripts that are appropriate for a bankrupt theatre tradition like Nigeria's. The enquiry is qualitative in approach, specifically deploying textual analysis with a view to identifying the deliberate use of certain theatrical devices to make plays less cumbersome for stage presentation. By using Osofisan's adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, this essay posits that it is possible to reduce stage plays that are potentially expensive in their production into ones that require minimal cost. It then recommends that the engendering of less expensive play texts will greatly enhance the resuscitation of theatre practice in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Cost-effective Mechanics, Adaptation, William Shakespeare, Femi Osofisan.

Introduction

A New York Times article by Patrick Healy compared production costs between two theatre houses, Broadway and West End in New York and London respectively, and arrived at a number of observations. The major one is that stage plays and their daily running costs are higher in Broadway than in London's West End. For instance, Healy mentions that the revival of Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* at London's West End in 2011 cost a little less than six hundred and seventy dollars, with an additional sixty five thousand pounds as weekly running costs, whereas the same production would cost a little less than three million dollars if staged in Broadway. In the 2010/2011 season, Broadway produced a total of twenty-five stage plays at the stupendous cost of over sixty million dollars or an average of two and a half million dollars (Davenport par. 8-9). The total cost of operating these plays over four hundred and twenty six playing weeks stood at a hundred and eighteen million dollars, an average of a little less than two hundred and eighty thousand dollars (Davenport par. 11).

It is obvious from the foregoing that funds for stage productions still exist in the West. This is not so in much of Africa, especially Nigeria, where live theatre performances have gradually withdrawn from public life. This decline coincides with the introduction of SAP¹-driven economic policies of the country's military dictatorship in the 1980s. Since then, other different forms of economic woes have necessitated the unavailability of capital for funding the arts. Thereafter, theatre retracted into the safety of Universities where students perform plays as part of their academic training. In recent times however, vestiges of live theatre can still be seen especially in Lagos where theatre entrepreneurs have devised ways in which performances can be made cost-effective. For

¹ Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), an IMF-World Bank initiative sold to Nigeria's military rulers in the 1980s which for a number of misapplication and insincerity culminated in the further impoverishment of the citizenry instead of alleviating poverty as envisaged.

now, these new theatres are involved in low-budget plays mostly written by the producers themselves in order to save cost. This implies that mainstream playwrights are yet to find a footing on this new stage. Hence, unlike in London West End, established Nigerian playwrights rarely find their plays being put on stage by emergent stage directors.

It has not always been like this. Prior to the SAP era, plays were staged successfully on the Nigerian stage and patronage was high. Practitioners who put money into theatre productions were able to recoup their investments. Since times have changed, Bertolt Brecht's advice is pertinent that as time flows "methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters...." Therefore, in order to represent the new reality "the means of representation must alter too [... because] what was popular yesterday is no longer so today, for the people of yesterday were not the people as it is today" (qtd. Freeman 63). The implication of this statement is that for a resurgence of theatrical activities in the country, theatre practitioners do not have to wait for things to improve, but we do need to rise to the occasion by inventing ways to scale existing hurdles. This can be done in so many ways because by its nature, theatre can re-invent itself in multiple and varied dimensions in order to convey its message. It is for this reason that John Freeman postulates that:

Theatre, since the time of Aristotle, has pursued nothing so much as notions of unity, coherence and consistency. Like the well-practiced liar that it is, it knows that one slip will lead to disaster: one misremembered line and the fourth wall it has so painstakingly constructed will tumble into the stalls. (56)

Hence, in pursuit of its primary objectives, theatre in Nigeria can re-package itself in very cost-effective mode and one of the ways of doing so is through playwriting. One Nigerian dramatist who has successfully written very stageable, low-cost plays is Femi Osofisan who is one of Africa's foremost playwrights with over fifty plays in his dramatic oeuvre.

Many scholars see Osofisan as an African writer who writes his plays with Brechtian techniques, while others have found in his works, a preponderance of traditional African mechanics of theatre making

(Amuta 1989; Gbilekaa 1997). It is believed that a reading of his dramatic texts shows "roots in Yoruba culture as is evident in his utilization of Yoruba concepts and materials" and that the "most influential of the cultural elements in Osofisan's plays is the festival" (Awodiya 35-36). Indubitably, African tradition, especially that of the Yoruba, is a regular feature of most of his plays but about his imaginative use of this, Erin B. Mee observes that to "ignore the performance elements" in his works is "to ignore crucial aspects of the hybridity of his plays" (315). Suffice it to say that his plays are diverse in both content and form. They are also often designed with an eye on stage presentation due to their detailed stage directions and suggestions. Moreover, a good number of his plays are adaptations from different sources. On this, Omolara Owoeye avers that "Osofisan does not produce any gently or slightly modified version of a play rather he disrupts the whole order of the earlier play and puts together something fresh and inspiring, with his own dramatic trademarks loudly imprinted on it" (187).

Within Osofisan's dramaturgy, one finds plays like *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*, *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynnying Tayle*, *Tegonni*, *Women of Owu* and *Midnight Hotel* which could deter low-budget would-be producers from taking them up. Also, plays like J. P. Clark's *Ozidi* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* could equally not fit into meagre resources available to contemporary producers and directors in Nigeria today. Hence, for a resurgence of theatrical activities, there is need for the creation of more plays that are pocket-friendly. The importance of such plays to the sustenance of theatre in a much traumatised economy like Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised. One concedes the fact that, unlike in the West where dramatists are paid steep fees to write plays, there is hardly any incentive for creative artists in Africa. In spite of this, one has seen from the successes of some performance genres that starting small, especially with minimal cost, can help in resuscitating art forms that were hitherto hardly recognised. This is what ordinary film retailers and MCs have done with Nollywood and stand-up comedy respectively, taking them from nothing to being among

the most preferred entertainment genres in Nigeria today. Plays can be made a lot cheaper to stage while still retaining high standard of the genre. The manner in which Osofisan successfully re-crafts Shakespeare's plays into simpler stageable versions is an indication that there is hope for the resurgence of Nigeria's live theatre.

The Adaptations

Wesoo, Hamlet! Or The Resurrection of Hamlet is a re-writing of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, craftily transposed into contemporary social realities of Nigeria, specifically the Yoruba-speaking parts. In the play, Leko returns from overseas to discover that his widowed mother has been made the Olori (Queen) after hastily marrying his uncle, Oba Ayibi, the new regent, long before the mourning period of his deceased father was over. Disappointed, Leko disowns his mother and leaves the palace. His ire against his mother is further inflamed when his late father's spirit confirms to him that he was murdered by his successor, Oba Ayibi. From that moment, he makes up his mind to avenge his father and in the process forgets his heartthrob, Tùndùn, who has been eagerly awaiting his return. Furthermore, in a bid to convince his mother of her new husband's complicity in the murder of his late father, Leko puts up a stage play for the royal household; a performance from which Oba Ayibi walks out in annoyance. The new king then successfully executes a plot through which Leko is incarcerated for treason. Tùndùn eventually loses her life in her quest to help her lover regain his freedom and achieve his goal; she dies from the machinations of the evil king. The play is complicated further by the presence of three of Shakespeare's characters: Hamlet, Ophelia and Claudius each of whom becomes special adviser to Leko, Tùndùn and Oba Ayibi respectively. Claudius gets Oba Ayibi to appoint Leko as his aremo (heir apparent) in order to get him out of the way since traditionally an aremo does not see the regent till the latter dies and part of the process of installation is a mock fight between the aremo and the king. Both Claudius and Hamlet try to outdo each other in getting their wards to come out victorious in the duel. In the end it is Leko that wins. But he too dies from a poisoned drink given to him by Tùndùn's bosom friend, Àdùkẹ, to avenge her dead friend.

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The other play, *Love's Unlike Lading* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Here, Osofisan attempts the use of non-Yoruba characters, something he has not done so often². Set in Lagos, the play makes use of situations and characters from the Ijaw-speaking Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The play opens with Boma's arrival to Lagos to stay with her friend, Tosan, in order to get respite from her home, which has become very inconducive as a result of her husband's political activities. Tosan, herself, is in the process of selecting a husband through a contest designed by her late father when Uncle Bash arrives with unsavoury news that Boma's husband, Tariboh, has been kidnapped for a ransom of fifty million naira. After several unsuccessful attempts to raise the money, Bashiru takes them to meet his brother, Alhaji Fowoshanu. It so happens that the multi-billionaire is also broke and he suggests they go to a loan shark. Lassy, Fowosanu's son, takes his uncle, Bashiru, to Mr. Bassey whose daughter, Tumini, he is secretly dating even though there is a long-standing enmity between Mr. Bassey and his father, Alhaji Fowosanu. Mr. Bassey generously offers them the twenty million they needed. He wants to make some concessions for Alhaji Fowosanu in order to show him that his famous loathing of their business is misguided. But the latter wants no concessions whatsoever and opts for the stringent lending rules that Mr. Bassey's business requires hoping that as soon as his shipload of sugar arrives, he will immediately offset the loan. Unfortunately for him, it does not turn out so and he finds himself at the mercy of a man he loathes. Mr. Bassey insists on taking Ahaji's ancestral home used as collateral for the loan. Every complication of the play is settled in the court of law presided over by Apena. Mr Bassey is made to lose face as the lawyers were able to prove that he can only take the house and not the land on which it is built. Lassy's relationship with Tumini is thrown open, Uncle Bash wins the contest to marry Tosan, Uncle Fowoshanu's shipload of sugar is released by the pirates and Tariboh is also freed.

² Of his over fifty plays, it is in *Album of the Midnight Blackout* and *Altine's Wrath* that he extensively used non-Yoruba characters.

Both plays have all the characteristics of Osofisan drama: assertive females, (Túndún and Boma), elements of alienation like the use of songs, intermissions, narratives and play-within-a-play, as well as ingenious technical twists and turns that make the stories exciting. At the thematic level, corruption and its atrocious effect on the people is captured succinctly. Oba Ayibi, for instance, is an epitome of the greed of not only politicians but capitalists who masquerade as agents of development and then bulldoze their ways through sundry oppositions in order to attain their mercantilist and profiteering objectives. The manner in which he murders his brother, becomes king and then facilitates the establishment of the same tobacco company his brother fought tooth and nail to keep away, alludes to the “do-or-die” attitude of Nigerian politicians, the defective electoral process that puts them up as well as the greed and selfishness that is the bedrock of their anti-people ambitions. In the second play, the perennial incidence of kidnapping and ransom demand in the Niger-Delta is highlighted. Osofisan does not present the militants themselves, but views their devilish enterprise from the perspective of their victims. Tariboh, who is aspiring to be governor, is kidnapped for ransom, and Alhaji Fowoshanu’s shipload of sugar is also hijacked by the militants. These two works are true to their Renaissance England origin but more in tune with the realities of the society to which they have been transposed. Specifically, while the stories of the plays may be said to be Shakespearean, their Africanness is not in question since thematically and socio-culturally, they reflect what happens in contemporary Nigeria.

Dramatic Innovations in the Plays

Osofisan does not strictly follow Shakespeare’s storyline, but rather makes insertions and alterations that at once give him ownership of his versions and positing them as genuinely African. A few examples will suffice here. In *Wesoo, Hamlet!*, for instance, Oba Ayibi, unlike Claudius, murders his brother, not merely to become king and marry his widow, but to fulfil a selfish ambitious quest – erecting a tobacco company in their community. His greed puts him at odds with his brother and continues to be the cause of myriad crises throughout the play. Secondly, the introduction of the bàrà (a place of rest for dead kings) and

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a custodian for it, Iyamode, enables Osofisan to avoid the use of ghost like in Shakespeare. Leko is by this means provided with a believable situation, especially within the African traditional belief system, through which he can see his late father. Another innovation in the play is the opening scene which is aptly labelled "The Dance of Ancestral Masks", where Orunmila mandates the trio of Claudius, Hamlet and Ophelia to return to earth and help people who are about undergoing the same conditions that they experienced. These characters are brought in to show the universality of deprivations and oppression of the poor by the privileged. Hence, Osofisan shows through the insertion of these archetypal characters that within every epoch there are people who would stand either for or against justice. He exploits the existence of ancestral masks and the accompanying understanding that they are manifestations of dead ancestors to create a justification for the inclusion of some of Shakespeare's characters. Even Shakespeare himself is identified among the ancestral spirits. Fourthly, Osofisan uses 'aroko' (ancient Yoruba medium of communication); first by Oba Ayibi on his brother, Oba Sayadero (*Wesoo...* p. 26); then it is used in asking Oba Ayibi to pardon Leko (*Wesoo...* p. 62). 'Aroko' is an advanced indigenous medium of communication in which riddles and parables are employed to talk in circles, while the underlying message is clear to more experienced minds.

In *Love's Unlike Lading*, instead of demanding for a pound of flesh as in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Mr. Bassey asks for Alhaji Fowoshanu's ancestral home. In Yorubaland, once an individual loses his ancestral home for whatever reason, he has lost his pride and must therefore commit suicide. So in the manner of requesting that no blood should be lost in the process of taking a pound of flesh in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the traditional judge asks Mr. Bassey to take the house and leave the land on which it rests since their contract makes no mention of his inheriting the land as well (*Love's...* p. 88). Next, the introduction of kidnapping and ransom demand as well as the seizure of Alhaji Fowoshanu's shipload of sugar further tie the play to contemporary Nigerian socio-political realities. Thirdly, he employs

songs for different purposes, ranging from scene changes to mood setting (*Love's...* pp. 6, 20, and 43). Finally, the entire court scene presided over by Apena is the most comic part of the play and the manner in which all the knots are untangled and every complication settled at this scene makes the drama to end happily. In this adaptation, none of Shakespeare's characters is brought in even though the play is made up of personalities that bear the traits of those of *The Merchant of Venice*. In his own version, Osofisan is able to duplicate the intricate mix of multiple plots as Shakespeare did in his work – Basiru and Tosan, Boma and Tariboh, Tumini and Lassy as well as the loan business that links these characters, Alhaji Fowoshanu and Mr. Bassey. He also successfully finds solution to every complexity in the last scene. The major innovation of this play, however, is the manner in which Osofisan strips his adaptation of the expensive technical demands of Shakespeare's version without reducing the artistic quality of his own work.

Formalistic Devices that Make the Plays "Cheap"

One element that can make a play production expensive is the number of characters in the cast. For a professional theatre, performers have to be paid for their involvement in a theatrical enactment; hence, the more the actors and actresses are, the higher the amount of money to be expended. Osofisan's *Wesoo, Hamlet!* has twelve identifiable characters apart from Masks, Citizens/Townspeople and Drummers while *Love's Unlike Lading* has fifteen characters in all, with only about ten of them having sizeable speaking roles apart from Drummers, Market Traders, Court Attendants and others. Here, we find two plays that have small cast especially when compared to plays like J. P. Clark's *Ozidi*. Apart from the number, another important aspect of character is type. In the first of the two adaptations, Osofisan gives directions for casting thus:

The play has been conceived for a mixed cast of black and white actors. However, given our situation in Africa, it is quite possible there are no white actors readily available for performance. In such circumstances, the practice so far has been to make up black actors, either by painting their faces or noses white, and/or giving them wigs, etc. This never quite works as far as I am concerned, except for comic characters. I

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will therefore prefer that even the white characters be played by black actors, and so have included in the text appropriate dialogue to explain this to the audience. However, these areas of the text can be easily identified, and expunged or modified where the appropriate mixed cast is available. (*Wesoo...* p. 7)

From the preceding one observes that Osofisan is less rigid about how his script will be played. One sees here that even within the dialogue, this dramatist makes room for situations where a mixed cast is not readily available. By extension, he is concerned about the cost of hiring a white-skinned person to play a role in a community that has little or no white people. By advising the producer and/or director to make final decisions about how to play their actors, Osofisan liberalises the art of playwriting thereby giving the director more room to exercise his or her own creativity.

This liberalisation is not only in the choice of characters but also in stage transitions – scene changes, entry of a new character, striking the set, etc. Both plays under study have multiple sets but the playwright does not make the scenic movements to be too rigid that they will require specific set items which could have extravagant cost implications. The initial stage direction of *Love's Unlike Lading* goes thus:

The set is ready. It is a mostly symbolic set, indicating a fairly large, well-furnished room. There are two doors, one leading inside the house, including the backyard, and the other outside. As Tosan enters into the set, the Stage Manager carries in a large board on which is written: "Lagos. In the house of Tosan. Early afternoon." The play begins. (*Love's...* p. 6)

Even in Scene Eight, during the court scene where there ordinarily should have been a significant scene change, Osofisan still makes it easier for the director by suggesting that the actors should strike and set the scene:

LIGHTS change and, as before, the actors and crew change the set. The SM carries in a banner with the announcement, "Lagos. Magistrate Court." (*Love's...* p. 72).

Furthermore, Tariboh's appearance is mostly on the television – a cardboard frame which the Stage Manager conveniently brings in each time, superimposing it on the existing scene (*Love's...* pp. 8, 22-26, 48-49). In this manner Osofisan saves the director the hassle and cost of producing an entirely new set. Also, cardboards are used to announce locations (*Love's...* pp. 31, 40). In the other play, Osofisan also creates room for easy transitions by suggesting that the stage should "depict a general playing area, with minimal set, allowing for a swift and fluid movement between the various scenes [...]. Thus only two areas need to be specifically mapped out – the palace courtyard, and the bàrà..." (*Wesoo* p. vi). Much of the action takes place in front of the palace rather than inside it. It is worthy of note that the choice of this locale of action is an economic one. Creating a palace scene would create additional cost for the director and yet there are certain actions that cannot play inside the palace. By this economy of scene Osofisan merges the meetings between Leto, the villagers led by Baba Asipa and Iyamode, his mother and then Oba Ayibi (*Wesoo...* pp. 9-16). Also, Tundun seeks Leto out finally at the bàrà, after his father's spirit has conveniently withdrawn from the scene (*Wesoo...* p. 33). This should not be misconstrued as being defective because as Iyamode chides Tùndùn for defiling the sacred resting place for dead rulers, one can see the desperation in Tùndùn to ensure that she sees her lover as soon as possible.

One may erroneously attribute the liberalisation of scenic movements to his privileging of what Bertolt Brecht refers to as "Alienation Effect." However, although one may assert that the techniques Osofisan prefers in his works are akin to what Brecht propounded in his theory of Epic Theatre, a closer look will show that what Osofisan does is a fine blend of what one hereby dubs Western and African Realism. To put it more succinctly, Osofisan does not encourage directors to have actors narrate his lines in the name of distancing effect, an indication that he prefers realistic acting. However, he plays with the techniques of theatre in the same way that African festivals are presented, without recourse to enforced believability. In other words,

there is a playfulness which Osofisan prefers in the presentation of his scripts which demystifies the art of theatre in the process of staging. Examples of this playfulness include the manner in which the performers are encouraged to dress up in front of the audience. Suffice it to say that, apart from enforcing the alienation of the performer from the action as Brecht posits, we also need to consider that in a place like Nigeria where performance venues are bereft of conventional changing rooms and basic backstage space, dressing in the full glare of the audience could be a way of cutting down cost.

The technical requirement of a play can make it expensive in production. This includes props, costume/make-up, lighting and set designs. When a script demands certain action(s) to be dependent on specific lighting and costumes, such scenes become difficult to achieve in the absence of such technical aids. In Osofisan's adaptations, this is curtailed to the barest minimum that even in *Love's Unlike Lading* where the script requests that Tariboh's appearance be captured in spotlight, it is evident that the cardboard frame is also an emphatic tool for the character in the absence of theatre lighting.

Apart from lighting, the two adaptations do not make specific costume and make-up demands on the director. This is because the characters are everyday personas except for the spirit of Leko's father which is shown in the bàrà in *Wesoo, Hamlet!*. That the author is silent on its appearance and those of the masked spirits is an indication that he leaves the nature of their costumes and make-up to the discretion of the director and the designers responsible. This means that whoever takes up any of the plays for performance would likely design these characters within the bonds of what is available. In the second play, there are no characters whose stage appearance could present difficulties for the designers and director. In terms of set design, I have already mentioned above that the palace is not shown in *Wesoo, Hamlet!* because it could be expensive to achieve and also may not have necessarily played all the scenes better played in the front of the palace. *Love's Unlike Lading* shows a deliberate attempt to reduce the number of locations for action; hence the use of the cardboard frame to show Tariboh. In this manner,

his scene is mostly superimposed on existing ones. The use of these forms of presentation means a reduction in the set design demands of the play.

The next element that could make a play script expensive is dramatic/theatrical devices. Some plays are played on specific stages while a majority of others can go on any form of acting space. Osofisan's plays do not contain theatrical demands like trapdoors, deus ex machina and other forms of technical aids which are not readily available in most theatre spaces in Nigeria. His preferred dramatic devices include flashbacks. This is employed extensively in the two adaptations. In *Wesoo, Hamlet!*, it is used to show how Oba Ayibi and Leko's father argue before the latter is killed (p. 26) and how Tùndùn gets engaged to Leko (p. 54). In *Love's Unlike Lading*, all the appearances of Tariboh are presented in flashbacks (pp. 8; 22-26, 48-49). Another tool is the play-within-a-play which Leko performs to convince his mother of her new husband's complicity in the murder of his father (*Wesoo*, p. 45). Other devices include the usual setting of the stage and dressing the characters up in the full glare of the audience, the use of music and masks as well as Osofisan's characteristic play division. The two adaptations do not follow Shakespeare's preferred five-act format. Here, Osofisan sticks to the more obligatory actions of the stories thereby making his versions tighter and their progression more fluid. He divided the plays in his usual pattern where the entry or exit of one character signifies the beginning of a new scene. The plays, however, are not divided into acts but into numbered scenes. In *Love's Unlike Lading* which has several locales, each transfer of action bears a new scene number, whereas in *Wesoo, Hamlet!*, there is a deliberate effort by the playwright to minimise the number of scene changes, with each entry and exit bearing numbers too.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that none of the afore-mentioned dramatic devices requires outlandish theatre technique to actualise. The implication is that the two adaptations are stageable on any available performance space and as such is adequate for the kind of "poor theatre" that now exists in Nigeria. Little wonder Osofisan's plays are acted more often than those of his contemporaries. In spite of the challenges of today, there is still

hope for the profession if theatre practitioners can borrow a leaf from Nollywood, stand-up comedy and popular music by evolving plays that demand little capital rather than sitting tight and waiting for the government to change its philistine tendencies. In each of the plays, one observes Osofisan's concentration on brevity and cost-effectiveness for the benefit of would-be directors. His desire is obviously not to merely adapt Shakespeare, but to communicate with his own society and environment. He wrote these plays with an eye on their stageability in Nigeria rather than with an eye on Shakespeare. One of the hallmarks of Osofisan in adapting plays is that he imbues his adaptations with his personality and the socio-cultural ambience of his society rather than exerting efforts to compete with the original texts.

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