

DIVERSITY INFLECTION IN ORAL INTERPRETATION OF ROLES IN ACADEMIC THEATRE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Emile Zola's assertion several decades ago foretold that in the distant future, oral performance would have attained near naturalisation. Oral interpretation till date is, however, yet to reach the desired level of naturalism as postulated by Zola. Actors rely on their convenient vocal registers for their oral delivery rather than strive to attain the necessary voicing requirements that befit the character being played. Arguably, the standard of stage theatre performances needs to be justifiably upheld in academic theatre productions as it remains the major harbour of live theatre. However, focus is gradually drifting from the aspect of speech in students' stage productions to largely visual aesthetics, thereby devaluing the oral aspect of stage theatre performances. Contextual interpretation of dramatic text is de-emphasised in theatre speech, which is now regarded as all-encompassing in correct pronunciation of words.

Juxtaposing students' stage theatre performances of the University of Ghana, Legon and University of Ibadan in Nigeria, the paper takes a dialectical exposition into diversity in oral interpretation of texts, adopting the speech act theory formulated by J.L. Austin. The attention of academic stage theatre practitioners is hereby drawn to the emphasis of the process of voice and speech in stage theatre performances. The comparative analysis between the two major tertiary institutions has yielded significantly different results.

Keywords: Inflection, Voice and Speech, Oral Interpretation, Academic Theatre.

Introduction

The effective use of voice and speech by an actor is primary to the success of his acting career. One of the greatest expectations of the theatre audience is to hear a good and exciting story. This is because the theatre is not just a visual medium. Berry (2001:81) describes actors as story tellers thus:

We have to keep reminding ourselves that we, as actors, are continually in the process of telling a story, and the audience wants to hear that story. We still want to be told stories even in this age of Internet technology; it is surely something primitive within us which will never be blotted out, and the voice has the power to capture the interest of the audience. It is the voice that can draw us into the story, however offbeat or minimal the language being used.

Going by the meanings of some basic terms of the theatre such as audience, audition and auditorium, some scholars have argued that theatre depends more on its audio features than its visual elements. However, emphasis has largely been placed on the visual aspects of performance in contemporary theatre performance thereby devaluing the tenets of applied speech practice in the theatre. Most theatre directors are so much given to visual aesthetics while the manner of line delivery is ignored. The actor then takes the liberty to deliver the text as it best suits him rather than doing proper justice to the lines. Mills, making a citation from Noble (1995) describes this action as "domesticating texts" (Mills, 1999:8). The phrase refers to the extent to which actors approach performance through their domestic vocal register. Actors now subject texts to their own vocal abilities rather than increase their skills to serve the possibilities of the text. In the same vein, Berry (1987:19 & 25) comments that "we make the language behave", "and we put a strait-jacket on the language".

There are several ways in which a single line can be said, but there is only one correct way that a line can be said for it to retain its intended meaning. For instance, a slight shift in stress of a sentence is

capable of altering the intended meaning. Also, an improper articulation of a sound can cause a total distortion in meaning. No matter how distinct the movement of an actor or how fantastic the visual aspect of a production, lack of clarity or proper speech communication by the actor is capable of thwarting the entire process of the production.

Beyond oral interpretation and articulation of words, however, the actor also has the responsibility of convincingly depicting the character he is portraying. Theatre thrives on make-believe, and even though the audience is conscious that actions on stage are a display of well-rehearsed scenes, the audience still expect a level of conviction that the actor truly depicts the character being played. An actor who is from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria may take up a role as a Hausa, Igbo, Ijaw or even a European. Such an actor is then expected to study the speech pattern of the character. This is the essence of naturalism. The crux of this paper, therefore, is an investigation into how student actors employ cultural inflection in their oral interpretation of character. The University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria and the University of Ghana, Legon, have been used as case studies.

Rena Cook (2012:5) describes inflection as “the movement of the pitch through a phrase, sentence or groups of sentences.” The inflection pattern of a monotone speaker is flat. It lacks rhythm and pitch variation – every note is the same. Inflection pattern varies from one speech culture to the other. For instance, a native Yoruba speaker will have a different inflection pattern from a British speaker. The actor who can use various inflection patterns will be a better storyteller and a more successful actor, with the ability to clearly deliver the dense lines of a text to an audience in a clear and compelling way.

A proper interpretation of lines of a dramatic text is not only relevant to the auditory aspect of the theatre, but also to the visual aspect. If an actor is genuinely given to the rigours of interpreting the lines of a script, it will enhance his characterisation, which does not only reflect in his voice but also in his physical features such as body

movement and facial expression. When an actor uses his voice communicatively, it becomes an extension of gesture and a process of movement itself. McCallion (1989:182) affirms this when he states that

In communicative speech the speaker is always trying to reach someone else. A journey is implied. At its most urgent it's as if we want to jump inside the skin of the person we are talking to, to say 'This is me, this is what my meaning feels like'. Or sometimes it's as if we are inviting the listener to make the journey to inhabit us. When there is something really important to be said, it always has a gestural root and shares the communicative and emotional impulse with the whole of our person.

The actor is a middle man between the playwright and the audience. He has the enormous task to convey the playwright's message across to the audience. The actor must first of all understand the central message of the play before he can faithfully deliver it to the audience. An actor is not a robot who is controlled by the lines of the text or tossed about by the director. He is an artiste in his own right and, like every other artiste, he is both creative and imaginative. Working with the text of a playwright, an actor groups his ideas and determines what degree of emphasis to be placed on each phrase; this is referred to as 'phrasing'. Barton and Dal Vera (2011:83) assert that "phrasing is idea grouping, while stressing is idea emphasis. Both areas require rhythmic choices. Both are a product of good text analysis. Phrasing amounts to breaking a line up into its component ideas, then deciding which ideas are primary and which are subordinate." They identify three types of stressing as:

- Sentence or phrase stress: Prominence given to important, or operative, words to bring out the meaning.
- Syllable Stress: The emphasis placed on certain sounds in a multisyllable word. This is more related to pronunciation than interpretation.
- Poetic Stress: The metrical emphasis given in poetic scansion

Factors that constitute proper delivery

An actor must have a good mastery of the structure of language of the text he is dealing with. Communication is basically a process of encoding and decoding. The playwright has his message coded in print – letters of the alphabet, words, phrases, and sentences and, most importantly, the punctuations. A shift in stress or misplacement of punctuation is capable of changing the entire meaning of a sentence. For example:

- A woman. Without her, man is nothing.
- A woman without her man is nothing.
- A woman without. Her man is nothing.

The above example shows the importance of punctuation. The three sentences are constructed with the same words, but the placing of punctuation marks totally changes the meaning of each sentence. The first sentence: *A woman. Without her, man is nothing.* This statement praises the woman. It speaks volumes of the woman's importance in man's life. The second statement however is the opposite of what the first implies: *A woman without her man is nothing.* This statement suggests that the woman is vulnerable. It implies that she is totally dependent on her man. The third statement: *A woman without. Her man is nothing* may imply that the chastity of the woman is questioned. The actor's duty is to give life to the text. This cannot be achieved if the actor lacks a good understanding of the language. The playwright expresses himself through language, while the actor gives life to the language through several components as: the quality of his voice; volume (the loudness or softness of his voice), the pitch and tempo. All these, components combine to give meaningful inflection to delivery.

It is generally accepted that a playwright must have a good mastery of language, but it is equally important for the actor to be as vast in understanding of language as the playwright because being an intermediary between the playwright and the audience, he is involved in

the process of decoding the message of the playwright (in print), and encoding it in his voice for the audience to decode. An actor who has a good mastery of language of the text will easily decipher the phrases that carry the important information. He will also know when to slow down his tempo, when to increase the volume of his voice, when to tone down his pitch, when to make silence speak and, if necessary, what phrase can be chucked off without altering the meaning. The ultimate intention of a playwright is that someday, the play will be performed. The performance of a dramatic text suggests that life will be added to it and presented before an audience. The actor gives life to the printed words and the audience hears the playwright through him. However, there is great variation between the printed words and the spoken lines because there is a vast difference between the written and the verbal. With the various elements of voice and sound, the actor has the ability to present the lines vividly. Emphasising this, Barton and Dal Vera (2011:181) say that:

Writers trying to portray conversation will always be hampered by the limitations of an alphabet that can't represent all the sounds of our language. Transforming what the author has written into what the character says requires sensitivity to all the small elements of sound present within words. Each sound has a sensory component that conveys both meaning and feeling.

Stanislavski asserts that tempo and rhythm are the most crucial aspects of acting. Once an actor gets a character's timing, his task is almost done. However, most actors get trapped. It is particularly difficult when a slow, heavy predictable actor plays the role of a mercurial, lightning-swift magician of a speaker. A large amount of rehearsal problems are solved once the actor finds the tempo-rhythm of the character. Nevertheless, actors have a strong tendency to impose their individual pace on the character. But after struggling with serious frustration over certain speeches it becomes clear that all that the actor need do is to go faster or have stronger stresses and everything often falls into place. Once an actor can successfully avoid getting trapped in his habitual timing, he can

successfully control time. Annette Benning, an actor, says "One of the most useful effects I ever learned was holding spaces within words. When you... create that... empty space... in a... room, you create something... that needs to be filled. You have control. Everyone sits on the edge of their seats, trying to fill it in, but you are the only one who can fill it. It's dynamic. It's physical not magic, but it appears to be magic!" (Quoted in Barton and Dal Vera, 2011:19). Every word has an in-built rhythm, and the rhythm of each word can be found out by noting the following features:

- The number of syllables in the word.
- The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.
- The length of individual sounds.

Intrusion of Cultural Inflection in the Delivery of Student Actors in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and the University of Ghana

The language of performance in academic theatre of most African Anglophone countries is English. However, an overwhelming majority of the student actors in these countries fall in the category of second language users of the English language. Most students only understand the language well enough to communicate with people or manage to pass examinations. The level of understanding of the English language by the student actors is most times not adequate for analysis of texts. When an actor interprets a language he is very familiar with, it is easier for him to modulate his voice and deliver his lines interestingly. This is usually the case when student actors play roles that are close to their personality. A good actor is that who is flexible enough to convincingly play different characters that are in total contrast to his real character. The implication of this, therefore, is that with every role played, the actor is expected to investigate and create a speech pattern that suits the character.

There are different stages involved in the process of voice and speech in the theatre which range from the psychological stage through

the physiological stage to the physical stage. The psychological stage entails the intellectual engagement of the actor in understanding and internalising the text. An actor is not just a pipe through which words in a text just gush out. He is expected to understand the text and interpret each word in accordance with the intention of the playwright. At the physiological stage, the actor employs his various speech organs. It is important that an actor makes proper use of his speech organs to ensure appropriate articulation and clarity. The physical stage involves the environment where the performance takes place. Immediately most student actors receive a script, the next thing that comes to mind is how to memorise the lines. This kind of attitude prevents an actor from fully blending into the character he is playing and instead of the lines of the text to naturally become a part of him, he learns them by rote. Many lines lose their intended significance because the actors delivering them do not even understand the meaning of the lines not to talk of interpreting them. Even in productions where speech directors are contracted, oral interpretation seems to be the last concern of such directors. All they emphasise is articulation and perhaps clarity of voice. Meanwhile a misinterpreted line which is carefully delivered will have no effect or, quite possibly, a negative effect on the audience.

During a research on voice and speech performance in University of Ibadan and University of Ghana students' theatre productions, it was observed that most student actors lacked inflection in their delivery of lines. Acting a role is taken for granted and reduced to cramming and regurgitating lines. Many student actors in these institutions fail to understand that lines are to be digested and broken down into phrases or beats so as to determine the phrases to be emphasised and those not to. In the performance process of *Nneora – An African Doll's House*, a student production monitored by the author in the University of Ghana, it was observed that one of the lead actors put emphasis on virtually all his syllables, words and phrases. Although this may be the particular speech mannerism he has adopted for the character, it sacrificed the rhythm of his lines. It has been observed that the basic characteristic feature in the speech pattern of most African languages as

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opposed to European languages is that Africans speak with so much energy and force unlike their European counterparts. In English speech, only the content words bear stress while the grammatical words and articles are glossed over. Content words include: Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs.

Most student actors in the institutions within the scope of this research assume that once they can articulate words properly they are skilled enough to render lines successfully, and in an attempt to impress the audience with their articulation, they resort to affectation. Interestingly, there are notable cases of actors who had good inflection in their delivery but they fall in the category of those interpreting characters they are familiar with. For example, in most plays where the lines of some characters are in Pidgin English, the beat of such actors usually enjoy good inflection in the delivery. Such is the case in the production process of *Nneora – An African Doll's House* referenced earlier. The play began with a market scene whereby the market women communicated in Pidgin English, and the actors interpreted the lines quite interestingly and delivered them with good rhythm.

It is important for an actor to understand the nature of the genre of text he is working with. For instance, unlike low comedy, which drives on visual elements, the major comic technique of high comedy is language. While interpreting lines in high comedy, an actor needs to be extra sensitive to each beat, if important comic lines will not elude the audience. This was a major defect observed in the production process of *The Engagement*, one of the productions observed in the University of Ibadan. The actor, who played the role of 'Elemude', in an attempt to keep up with the pace of the play, did not properly identify the high points in his lines. Some of the lines were mumbled up; hence, depriving the audience of their expected effect. The actor paid much attention on the visual elements of comedy, making his oral delivery to suffer neglect. It was obvious that the actor did not 'phrase' his ideas or he was unable to identify the 'lead' phrases. Another production studied in the

University of Ibadan was *Tartuffe*. The greatest speech flaw noticed in this production was that most of the actors did not internalise their lines. They were far drawn from the lines and they delivered them without meaning. It is generally held that 'you cannot give what you don't have'; therefore, it is impossible for an actor to convince an audience when he is yet to convince himself.

The stringent nature of the academic syllabus in these institutions is also a contributing factor to students' inability to adequately interpret lines. Most students are involved in too many productions at a time and there is hardly time to reflect on each character being played. In the University of Ibadan, it was observed that each student actor may take acting roles in three different productions at the same period, playing different characters in each. The result, as expected, is that the actor voices these differing characters in the same manner. Considering the other required academic involvements of student actors in these institutions, they only have the rehearsal time of each production to reflect on their roles. Apart from the fact that character analysis cannot be properly done during rehearsal time, the rehearsal time is usually considerably too short because different rehearsals have to run at the same venue; hence, each production is left with only the limited time allocated to it.

In most of the productions observed, there were speech directors, but it appears that these speech directors hardly understood their importance in the production since they were usually absent from rehearsals, and whenever they were present, all that seemed to concern them was the audibility of the actors, forgetting that "a speech could be audible without being clear" (Umukoro, 2002:69). As the artistic director is saddled with the responsibility of overseeing the entire production, so is the speech director meant to coordinate the entire speech pattern and vocal requirements of the production. These include: actors' breath management; articulation; interpretation; and line delivery. These cannot be achieved just a few days to the production; rather, it is a process which should begin from the inception of the production plan. Berry (2001:4) posits that "voice work should not be something that is done at

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the last minute to make the play 'clear' and the actor communicate 'better': it should be integral to the creative exploration of the play itself and of the character. The true exploration of the language should inform how we think, and how the character thinks".

Beyond what any speech director can achieve with the voice of the actor, an actor needs to aspire to work on his voice. Voice is the major instrument by which human beings express their feelings. Further than what gesticulation can achieve, the actor's voice gives life to the written words of the text. It is inevitable for an actor to be emotionally attached to the character he is playing so as to voice his feelings empathically. However, being emotionally attached to the character is not a psychological state. It is largely physiological. For instance, we have some kind of feeling because we find ourselves doing a particular set of behaviours we call mad, sad or glad. This state may be aroused by thoughts, or even brain chemistry, but the emotion itself is a result of some actions of the body. The implication of this is that student actors

can access powerful emotional states by doing the physical behaviours that are that emotion. And you can do it without the mental chaos engaged by trying to stimulate that state from a psychological source. With a clear mind, you can have more control over your voice, you'll be able to make better expressive choices, and you run less risk of vocal, physical, and psychological injury (Barton and Dal Vera, 2011:217).

Character transfer is also observed in academic productions in the institutions within the scope of this research. A mammoth number of the student actors impose their personality on the character being played. These actors refuse to dissolve their cultural backgrounds and fully absorb into the role. For instance, in the indigenous Ghanaian accent, the schwa, an unstressed vowel which is represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet by the symbol /ə/, is usually substituted for a long vowel /a:/. For example:

Remarkable /rɪ'mɑ:kə.bəl/ becomes /rɪ'mɑ:kɑ:bəl/
Palatable /'pæl.ə.tə.bəl/ becomes /'pæl.ə.tɑ:bəl/
Presentable /pri'zen.tə.bəl/ becomes /pri'zen.tɑ:bəl/
Predictable /pri'dɪk.tə.bəl/ becomes /pri'dɪk.tɑ:bəl/

During a Focus Group Discussion with select student actors in the University of Ghana, the author gathered that some of the student actors were unaware of their responsibilities as actors and made excuse that even though they were playing roles as characters of other cultural backgrounds, they could not speak otherwise. This position is untenable. This does not imply that actors must speak perfectly like indigenous speakers of the character being played, but an actor should be cognisant of the fact that accent is one of the distinct features with which an audience can identify the cultural background of the character the actor represents. A good actor should endeavour not to be trapped in speaking a particular accent, but be willing to learn, unlearn and relearn various accents as the character demands. Likewise, during an interview session with a student actor playing the role of 'Herod' in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, one of the student productions studied in the University of Ibadan, the author interrogated the actor to know what informed his vocal interpretation of the character and his simple response was simply that he just felt good hearing himself sound that way. The vocal demand of the character is therefore jeopardised.

Some of the factors responsible for poor line delivery as discovered in this research in the selected academic theatres can be summarised as:

- Directors only pay attention to voice and speech after the play is almost ready and the actors are already used to a manner of saying the lines.
- Actors refuse to let go of their personality, thus imposing it on that of the character they are playing.
- Actors are not emotionally attached to the character being played.
- Actors' inability to modulate their voices when necessary.

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- Affectation rather than faithfully delivering the message.
- Lack of proper breath management.
- Lack of good mastery of the English language.
- Articulation and intonation problems.
- Failure to do proper character analysis.

During an interview with Ms. Gardner, the speech teacher of the Department of Theatre Arts in the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, the author gathered that there is currently no provision for speech as an area of specialty in the department. Though it appears as a compulsory course in the curriculum at the 100 and 200 levels, most students just tolerate it and manage to pass it, after which they do not dream to encounter it again, and ironically, these set of students take keen interest in acting. One of the greatest assets of an actor is his voice, and for an actor to become successful in his career, he must be very interested not just in his physical appearance, but very importantly, in how he sounds.

Conclusion

The work of an actor begins with understanding the text. It has been observed, however, that the major reason for inadequate delivery of lines is lack of proper analysis of text which is sequel to poor mastery of the language of the text. For second language users of the English language, it is recommended that they first of all translate the lines of the text into their indigenous language or any other language that will enable them have better conception of the ideas embedded in the text. An actor seeks to tell the audience a story, and as a good story teller, he is expected to make the audience enjoy the story by giving it the desired rhythm and intonation. It is also important for student actors to be aware that an actor is a man of many parts. By this, I mean the acting profession requires that the practitioner should know a lot about every profession and the peculiarities of all manner of human kind. An actor may act as a judge in

one performance, and take up the role of a criminal in the very next performance. Likewise, an actor may be a typical Yoruba man today and a British in another play. This requires that the actor transforms totally from a tonal language (Yoruba) into the English language with its unique structure and intonation. Acting goes beyond just approaching roles with the general ideas one has about things. It requires specific research about details in the language structure of the character being played. Speech and music are closely related, and as music needs rhythm to retain its musicality, so does an actor's speech have need of rhythm so as not to bore the audience, whose primary purpose for coming to the theatre is to hear a good and exciting story.

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