

**PERFORMING ILLUSION: VISUAL SEMIOTICS AND
TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION IN CONTEMPORARY
NIGERIAN THEATRE**

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Abstract

The technological adoption in theatrical performance has essentially changed the parameters of artistic expression, especially in the stage makeup design. The Igbojaye stage performance at the Wole Soyinka Theatre, University of Ibadan, was a rather strong case study which could be used to consider the way Special Effects (SFX) makeup methods can be used to help the characters become more embodied, the storyline become clearer, and the audience pays more attention to the production. Although the use of SFX in theatre and cinema has spread across the globe, stage productions in Nigeria tend to heavily depend on the traditional methods of makeup, which restrict the visual and emotional representation of the performance. The main issue covered by this research is the question of how technological innovation should be combined with indigenous theatrical art in order to boost the expressiveness of Nigerian stagecraft.

The qualitative case study method was employed in the research investigating the process of makeup design of the Igbojaye performance, particularly, the use of SFX to alter characters and thematically convey them. The method used in the collection of data was the direct observation of rehearsals and performances, photographs, costume records, and extensive interviews with the makeup team and performers. The paper has examined the materials, technological devices, and creative decision-making that informed character transformation, and how the practical and aesthetic aspects of SFX led to the quality of performance.

Among the important results, it was revealed that SFX makeup contributed greatly to the character differentiation, thematic impact, and the spectators' immersion. Characters with supernatural,

grotesque, or very stylised aspects were reproduced with accuracy, showing that the level of modern makeup technology can support the narrative needs without losing any authenticity. Its practical advantages, such as production efficiency, reproducibility of complex character appearances, and responsiveness to dynamic stage lighting conditions, which promoted an easier performance, were also given by the research.

The study's impact is twofold. In practice, it offers a guideline to incorporate SFX makeup in the Nigerian theatre, demonstrating how art and technology can be together. Theoretically, it contributes to performance scholarship because it demonstrates how contemporary technologies in theatrical production can contribute to indigenous storytelling traditions in providing a model that could be followed in future productions. The Igbojaye performance, with its technological innovation combined with cultural authenticity, captures a new frontier in Nigerian stagecraft, with an increase in aesthetic possibilities, but a preservation of narrative richness and performance power of traditional performance.

Introduction

Theatre, being a performative art, flourishes on the interactions between narrative, visual images, and perception of the audience (Pavis, 2003). Makeup design has long since been considered an ornamental but a fundamental part of character development, narrative narration, and audience interaction (Aronson, 2005). Makeup, in the theatrical tradition of Nigeria, has always been based on traditional methods, and most times it has been confined to naturalistic use or to culturally significant motive (Olaniyan, 2010). The staging of the Igbojaye at the Wole Soyinka Theatre, University of Ibadan, provided an excellent chance at examining how Special Effects (SFX) makeup can be utilised with traditional indigenous performance, showing how technology can increase the expressive and transformative possibilities of stagecraft. The significance of makeup in theatre is not only aesthetics but its ability to create a mediating role between performer and audience in the form of translation of narrative and emotive material into visual form, which increases the level of interest and understanding (Innes, 2002).

Special effects makeup is a form of makeup art, which is utilised to produce special effects on a face or body during cinematic

productions, theatrical productions, and other such events. The purpose of its design is to cause representative illusions in an on-stage or on-screen live drama. Special effects makeup artistry includes special wounds, scars, prosthetics, animatronics, and so on. This type of makeup is mostly applied to produce the appearance of old age, monsters, designs of creatures, injuries, and transformation (Badru et al., 2022).

SFX makeup has transformed theatrical and cinematic narration globally, where characters have managed to explore and live in worlds that could not be convincingly portrayed before (Phelan, 2012). Grotesque fantasy creatures can be explored to the realistic aging effects, and SFX technologies introduce the tools that merge the artistry with technical accuracy (Jones, 2015). Nonetheless, such innovations are not used in the Nigerian theatre. Majority of stage productions are still based on conventional methods that, although full of cultural appeal, limit the visual vibrancy and storyline intelligibility that can be accomplished on the stage (Olaniyan, 2010). This study aims to fill this gap by studying the extent to which SFX techniques can be used to make characters more appealing and help the audience see them more effectively, based on the example of Igbojaye.

This study has multi-dimensional objectives. First, it will capture the phenomenon of SFX makeup design in a Nigerian stage show and space the dynamics of innovation, technical dexterity, and cultural concerns (Riggs, 2017). Second, it aims at measuring how SFX makeup affects perception by the audience, character differentiation, and plot comprehension. Third, it discusses the usability and aesthetic advantages of the use of technology in makeup on stage, such as efficiency, repeatability, and responsiveness to lighting and stage conditions (Smith and Taylor, 2019). Lastly, the paper explores the research question of integrating SFX into indigenous theatre in the context of scholarly discussion, culture, and sustainability of the same in future practice.

Existing literature reveals that SFX makeup has been widely studied in film and Western theatre, but little research has been conducted on its use in African stage cultures (Phelan, 2012). The academic discussion outlines the potential SFX transformation in the areas of realism, fantasy, and theatrical illusion, but the amount of empirical evidence in the context of Nigeria is scarce. The current literature is centred on costume and set design, and little is said on the

technological interventions that can be made in makeup to affect performance results (Olaniyan, 2010). The performance of Igbojaye, thus, presents a new point of intersection between cultural tradition and technological practice that can offer practical and theoretical knowledge about the contemporary Nigerian theatre.

The hypothesis guiding this study is that the incorporation of SFX makeup in the Nigerian stage performance improves expressiveness of characters, understanding of the storyline, and interest to the audience without interfering with the cultural identity of the local theatre (Aronson, 2005; Phelan, 2012). The integration of technology with art allows performers to portray more complex, imaginative, and culturally resonant characters through makeup designers to have the ability to better refine and maintain consistency, but also to experiment, which is inherently creative (Riggs, 2017).

Overall, this paper contextualises the Igbojaye performance within larger categories of study in theatre studies, SFX art, and African performance studies. It assumes that the intentional fusion of technological innovation and traditional art can develop the expressive potential of the Nigerian theatre, providing it with new aesthetic opportunities and also enhancing the professionalisation of the stage art. Through this examination of integration, the study provides a framework for future productions seeking to balance innovation with cultural fidelity, while highlighting the strategic role of makeup as a mediating boundary between the actor, the audience, and the narrative world (Innes, 2002; Smith and Taylor, 2019).

Literature Review

Usability of Special Effects (SFX) in designing make-up is an important breakthrough in the performative arts, involving technology and art to provide a better visual narration (Riggs, 2017). In theatricality, makeup has been acknowledged for many years not only as a social art but also as an essential element of characterisation, storytelling, and spectatorship (Aronson, 2005). Researchers point out that theatrical makeup can be seen as a visual code, which translates inner character conditions and dramatic themes into one that can be read by the viewer (Innes, 2002; Pavis, 2003). Although this principle has been well developed in the Western theatre, very little empirical research has been done on it in Africa, especially on technologically developed techniques like SFX (Olaniyan, 2010).

The Igbojaye play in the Wole Soyinka Theatre is a very useful case study since it represents the practical and theoretical implications of the use of technology in makeup in the modern Nigerian theatre.

Traditionally, the makeup in African theatre has been entrenched in interpretive, symbolic, and cultural roles. In Yoruba theatre, however, face painting, scarification patterns, and colour symbolism have been used to indicate status, emotion, or spiritual membership (Olaniyan, 2010). Conventional stage makeup supports the cultural identity and expresses archetypal features, but has limitations in its use methods, present in both manual application and natural pigments that restrict versatility and longevity (Adeoye, 2017). With the development of SFX technology, designers have the means to overcome these restrictions and create characters who need exaggerated or fantastical characteristics (Riggs, 2017). This also improves the visual fidelity and narrative clarity, allowing performers to bring out complex characters more believably (Phelan, 2012).

The usefulness of SFX makeup in strengthening storytelling has been widely reported in the theatre and movie studies globally. Phelan (2012) notes that SFX can facilitate the match between the physical appearance and psychological and emotional character states of actors. Prosthetics, latex applications, and digitally informed designs in the film industry make characters look more real, especially those that are supernatural or exaggerated (Jones, 2015). Nonetheless, live stage performance presents peculiar demands, such as lighting endurance, visual visibility of the audience, and mobility of the actors, requiring modification in the movie-based approaches (Smith and Taylor, 2019). The successful adaptation of Igbojaye production proves that such adaptation is possible, and offers an example of how SFX can be integrated successfully in the live Nigerian theatre context.

The literary approach of this research is influenced by the Brechtian performance theory and symbolic interactionism. Brechtian theory emphasises the tactical application of theatrical features to convey social truths and make the audience think (Brecht, 1964), and makeup is one of the semiotic strategies that can be used to mediate between character, story, and audience. This view is upheld by symbolic interactionism, which states that the meaning-making of audiences is dependent on observable signs, such as visual ones, such as makeup (Blumer, 1969). These visual cues can be reinforced by the use of SFX, and viewers can easily infer the intricate

traits of characters, their social standing, and the plot without paying close attention to the movie (Riggs, 2017).

The comparison of the traditional and SFX-enhanced makeup shows both aesthetic and functional differences. Classical Yoruba stage makeup is more focused on hand-made pigments, cultural representation, and sparse prosthetics, being authentic and close to rituals (Olaniyan, 2010). SFX, on the contrary, uses silicone, latex, and gelatin to create exaggerated and high-contrast visual effects with stage lighting (Smith and Taylor, 2019). Although the critics believe that SFX can be oppressive to performance since it tends to put more emphasis on visual effect (Phelan, 2012), hybrid productions such as *Igbojaye* show that it is balanced in such a way that it does not take away characterisation at the expense of cultural fabrication.

There are still gaps in evidence, especially in the empirical studies that capture the process, challenges, and outcomes of SFX in Nigerian theatre. The literature available is concentrated on costume and stage design, and very little is mentioned about makeup technology (Adeyemi, 2015). There is limited literature on the audience reception of SFX, which is essential to understanding the effectiveness of this tool in improving the level of engagement and understanding. Likewise, additional studies regarding feasible limitations such as material supply, weather impacts on prosthetics, and the makeup artist training program are also limited (Riggs, 2017). This work fills these gaps, providing a detailed description of the SFX usage in a culturally appealing Nigerian staging.

This research has implications for both theory and practice. In practice, it offers a guide to theatre practitioners, writing about techniques of SFX, such as the sculpting of prosthetics, overlaying them, and adapting them to character requirements. Theoretically, it also adds value to African performance scholarship in that it illustrates how technology can be used to complement traditional performance to create culturally authentic and aesthetically appealing performances (Pavis, 2003; Smith and Taylor, 2019). Moreover, it places the Nigerian theatre in the context of global academic discourse, emphasising the innovative solutions to the correspondence of the local traditions of performance to the international standards of stagecraft.

In summary, SFX makeup can offer a revolutionary approach to live theatre, making characters more expressive, increasing clarity

of the storyline, and capturing the audience. The Igbojaye stage performance is the critical case study of how technology and art can co-exist in the Nigerian theatre as a way of maintaining cultural identity and, at the same time, adopting innovation. With the incorporation of theoretical insights, documentation of processes, and filling the gaps in the literature, this literature review creates a basis for further methodological and result-oriented research of SFX application in Nigerian stage performance.

Method

The sample of this study covered everyone who took part in the direct process of makeup design, and also important performers who had their characters changed by SFX technology. Particularly, ten makeup artists, four lead performers, and two stage directors were included in the sample. Purposive and criterion-based sampling was employed to select the participants who had direct experience with SFX application, as well as had an in-depth knowledge of both the technical and creative side of character design (Patton, 2015). Also, archival data like photographs, rehearsal notes, and costume design records were used as an additional source of data to triangulate observations and participant narratives.

For data collection, several approaches were used to make sure that there was an all-around picture of SFX application. The researcher was able to observe rehearsals and the performance directly, which allowed recording the type of makeup application, time control, materials usage, and interaction between artists and performers. The makeup artists and performers were interviewed in semi-structured interviews in order to gain the insights that they had on creative decision-making, challenges, and innovations brought into the production. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy for thematic analysis.

A systematic analysis plan was used in the study, which included a thematic and descriptive approach. The analysis of observational and interview data was done through thematic coding that considered the recurrent patterns, the categorisation of emerging themes, and a description of the implications of SFX techniques in character portrayal and engagement with the audience (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis of archival materials was carried out using content analysis, which concerned character design, material choice, and technical performance. The combination of observation,

interviews, and archival information increased the validity and reliability of results, as the conclusion is anchored in numerous sources of information. In addition, the reflection memos were kept during the course of the research to document the insights of the researcher and reduce the possible bias.

The ethical aspect was strictly followed. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymisation of personal identifiers was used as a guarantee of confidentiality. The subjects were informed of the purpose of the study, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any point were not violated (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, 2001). The use of photographs and visuals was paid special attention to so that the intellectual property rights of the makeup artists and the performers could be considered.

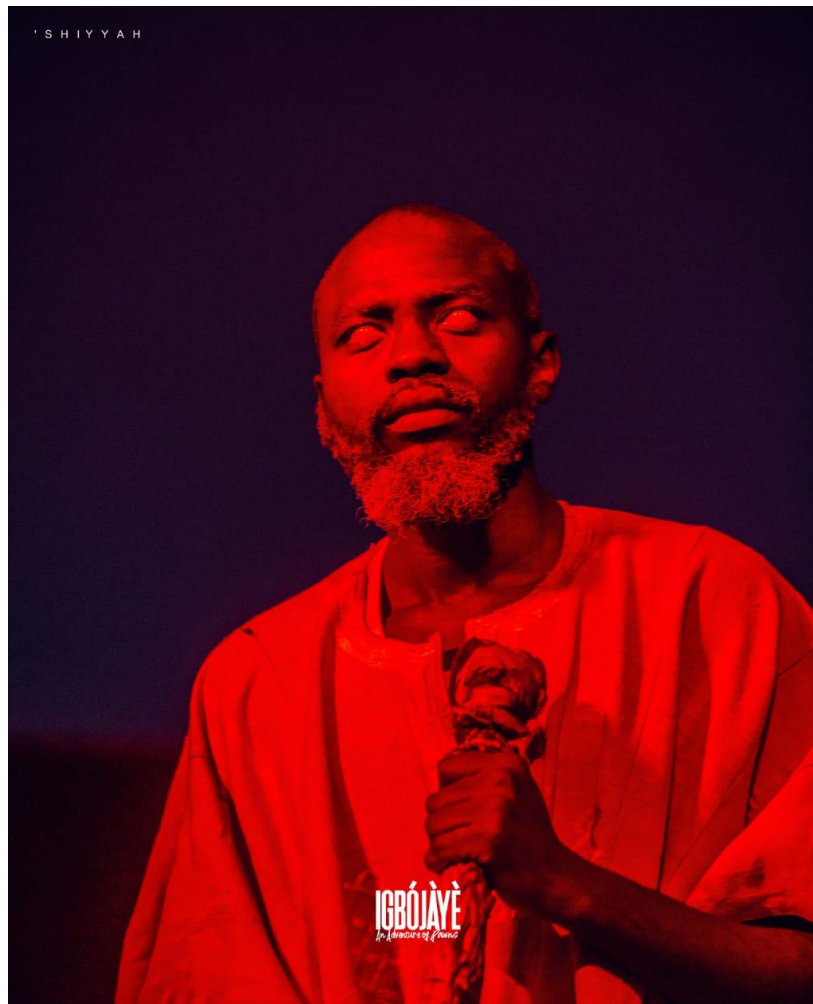
Overall, the qualitative approaches used in the study were a case study with a purposive sample of prominent makeup artists and performers, and triangulated data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and literature review. The data analysis was done through thematic and content analysis methods, which enabled the researcher to derive the use of SFX makeup in the Igbojaye stage performance. Such a solid methodological design ensured that the study combined both technical and aesthetic aspects of SFX integration and has detailed information on how technology could be used to improve the traditional theatrical practices in Nigeria.

Discussion

The use of Special Effects (SFX) makeup in the stage performance of Igbojaye set at Wole Soyinka theatre, illustrates the profound influences on the transformation of characters, narration, and viewer interaction. The triangulation of observational information, interviews with the makeup crew and actors, and archival documents allowed the analysis of both the technical performance and artistic results of the implementation of SFX. In this way, a thorough insight into the potential of modern technological intervention to improve the performance of indigenous Nigerian theatre and remain culturally authentic was made possible (Riggs, 2017; Phelan, 2012).

The initial pronounced discovery is that of the character differentiation by using SFX makeup. The characters that needed supernatural, exaggerated, or symbolic attributes were depicted with the accuracy of the application of the prosthetic attachments, the

application of the latex, and the use of the advanced coloring technique (Jones, 2015). An example is the visual difference between the characters in mythological components or antagonist elements with the human main characters through textured prosthetics, the contrast of colors, and elaborate face sculpture. Performers interviewed stated that these changes helped them better get into the role since physical change in appearance allowed them to psychologically fit the character they were playing (Aronson, 2005). The use of prosthetic enhancements prompted one actor to report that they were able to move and respond as the character rather than as themselves, highlighting the role of SFX in facilitating actor embodiment.



Secondly, the incorporation of SFX was a vital addition to the clarity of the narrative and the emphasis of the themes. Makeup-enhanced visual effects, which supported symbolic messages inscribed in the script, enabled the audience to easily differentiate social ranks, moral inclinations, and cultural patterns (Olaniyan, 2010; Smith and Taylor, 2019). In one instance, the facial design of the antagonist was more exaggerated in wrinkles, dark hues, and lack of symmetry as a symbol of corruption and evil, whereas the design of the lead character was sleeker and highlighted with brighter colors to demonstrate purity and cultural goodness. Audience reaction recorded in post-performance interviews and in the form of observations indicated that there was an increased perception of thematic contrasts, which implies that SFX is not only a means of aesthetics but also an enhancer of narrative (Pavis, 2003).

Thirdly, the practical advantages were gained from the SFX application process. The beauty team claimed that the application of prosthetics, fast-setting substances, and layering could enhance the efficiency and enable the quick changes between the scenes (Riggs, 2017). Another benefit was the repeatability of character appearance between the various performances to be consistent, as well as spending less time on preparation. Also, the property of adapting to stage lighting was remarkable; the materials and pigments used allowed keeping the colour richness and texture quality during the bright spotlights as well as in the dark ambient light, eliminating the difficulties that are typical of staging in live theatre (Jones, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2019).

Although these positive results were obtained, a number of limitations were also found. The availability of resources limited the extent of the SFX applications since some of the prosthetics and high-grade pigments were either not locally available or had to be imported, which made the production more expensive. Another reason was technical proficiency; certain makeup skills required special training, and capacity-building projects of theatre makeup professionals were required (Adeyemi, 2015). Also, the live stage setting has put a time limit on the show, and some makeup had to be applied and changed quickly in a stressful situation, which sometimes caused slight discrepancies in characterisation. These restrictions highlight the expediency of combining the latest SFX with

conventional stagecraft in Nigeria, but also indicate the growth and professionalisation possibilities in the future.

It also exposed the researcher to creative decision-making and teamwork. Makeup artists collaborated with costume designers, directors, and performers to make sure that SFX applications supplemented costume textures, stage lighting, and movement dynamics (Aronson, 2005). This integrative style helped in building a compelling visual story, and SFX supplemented performance or costume design and did not overpower them. It was emphasised that the collaboration in planning the performance before the performance, the opportunities to experiment with the prosthetics, and the testing under the stage lighting, and the repetition of the character design to create more refined and influential images, led to more successful and impactful visual results (Riggs, 2017; Smith & Taylor, 2019).

Symbolic and Technical Role of SFX in Igbojaye



Plate 1: SFX (special effects) symbolic props, including skulls and dismemberment of human parts.

Igbojaye has a stage design that involves the use of symbolic props, including skulls and dismemberment of human parts, which can be regarded as the SFX (special effects) prosthetics to make the play more realistic. They are not just decorative objects; they can be discussed as the visual metaphors of the revenge of ancestors and the spiritual price of human misdeeds. Their position in the middle of the

scene of the ritual turns the stage into a liminal space—the space which unites the physical and the metaphysical, the living and the dead.

The skull and the human remains could have been created technically in terms of using latex or foam or papier-mache, covered with fake blood colours to make it look like it was disintegrating and actually becoming real. This is a conscious combination of art and technology, which proves the way modern SFX techniques are used by theatre designers of Nigeria to transfer the ancient spiritual motifs (Okoye, 2022).

The skull has a symbolic meaning of ancestral power and death, whereas the human parts indicate sacrifice and change, which are reflected symbolically in the Yoruba ritual aesthetics (Ogunde, 1990). The SFX therefore have a visual role, but not exclusive to it, a semiotic role making the connection between the sensory perception of the audience and the metaphysical subtext of the story.

The application of all these effects is consistent with the overall purpose of the performance: to reconstruct the indigenous rites with the help of modern performance technology. Through the combined approach to iconography and cinematic realism, Igbojaye can be regarded as a typical example of the new wave of performative hybridity in postcolonial African theatre.

In summary, the results show that SFX makeup has a very noticeable positive impact on the visual, narrative, and performative aspects of the Nigerian theatre, as it was presented in the case of the Igbojaye performance. It enables distinguishing characters more accurately, amplifying themes, and better interaction with the audience, and it also possesses such practical benefits as efficiency, repeatability, and adaptability. The resource constraints and the lack of technical skills suggest the potential opportunity for further development, such as localised production of prosthetics, the programs of development and improvement of the skills of the makeup artists, and the systematic implementation of SFX into the theatre programs (Phelan, 2012; Olaniyan, 2010).

In general, the analysis supports the idea that the integration of technology and art in stage makeup does not affect the cultural authenticity; instead, it expands the range of the expressive potential of the indigenous theatre. This study allows replication of the patterns of processes, problems, and results to other theatre productions in

Nigerian and African society, which will connect conservative performance cultures with the latest technological advancements. The SFX case of Igbojaye demonstrates that SFX can bring Nigerian theatre to the world level, and the Nigerian productions will be more appreciated by academics and the general audience.

Conclusion

The Igbojaye stage show at the Wole Soyinka Theatre is one of the milestones of how technology and art may be united to strengthen the cultural and emotional power of African theatre. The Special Effects (SFX) makeup design passed the limits of the traditional performance aesthetics and turned the physical bodies of the actors into the canvases of myth, ritual, and memory expressiveness. The production used to create a remarkable combination of the spiritual and the theatrical through the use of prosthetic developments, a textured body painting, and the symbolic arrangement of objects like skulls and dismembered limbs.

Such a combination of visual realism and symbolic representation brings out the possibilities of SFX as a performative language, the one that conveys more than words, involving the audience's senses and emotions, and reasserting the cultural nature of the story. The technical makeup design was not just a shock and visual spectacle; it played a semiotic derivative of the main themes of the play: life, death, power, and redemption. This form of fusion shows us that indigenous African theatre is not fixed; it is quite dynamic in terms of technological and creative experimentation and preserves cultural authenticity, but adjusts to the international trends of performance.

Furthermore, this study supports the fact that makeup in theatre is not cosmetic. It is a narrative, self-identification re-creation, and a commentary on society and culture. The excellence of Igbojaye is that it places the Yoruba ritual aesthetics as a part of the international discourse of digital and technical theatre, and thus, it is a contribution to the decolonisation of performance design. It is eventually determined that SFX in African stagecraft is not merely a technical thing but a philosophy of art— a revolution in the unseen being seen on stage.

Recommendations

In order to continue the creative and academic path introduced by Igbojaye, this paper recommends the following: first, institutional investment in the training of technical theatre in the universities and theatre academies in Nigeria is needed. Prosthetics, SFX makeup, and digital stage design courses need to be incorporated into the current curricula to enable the future generations of theatre artists to be equipped with cultural literacy and technological skills.

In addition, artists, scientists, and cultural scholars should be encouraged to engage in joint research to create environmentally safe and locally sourced materials used in the creation of SFX. This would foster sustainability whilst it would comply with the African principles of resourcefulness and ecological balance.

Also, theatre technology needs to be considered an important constituent of cultural diplomacy by cultural policymakers and funding agencies. By contributing to the growth of technologically progressive yet traditional-based productions such as Igbojaye, Nigerian theatre can be placed on the world map as a frontrunner in terms of hybridised performances. This would not just boost the creative industry, but also help save the philosophical nature of African storytelling in a fast digitised world.

As demonstrated in this study, Igbojaye shows that the integration of artistry and technology, grounded in cultural consciousness and creative innovation, can enable African theatre to sustain its relevance, sophistication, and vitality in the 21st-century theatrical landscape.

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