

THE PLAYWRIGHT, THE PLAY AND THE REVOLUTIONARY  
AFRICAN AESTHETICS

by

Tar Ahura

The premise for this essay inevitably stems from Bertolt Brecht's poser.

"How can the unfree, ignorant man of our century, with his thirst for freedom and his hunger for knowledge, how can the tortured and the heroic, abused and ingenious, changeable and world-changing man of this great and ghastly century obtain his own theatre which will help him to master the world and himself?"<sup>1</sup>

A useful starting point to tackle this question is to first battle with what constitutes the revolutionary African Aesthetics. And talking of revolutionary aesthetics implicitly reopens the argument on art and commitment.

ART AND COMMITMENT

The argument about art and commitment is already an overflogged one. Yet when reopened, it always excites new interest. In fact, in the twentieth century, the issue seems to have excited more interest than ever. This crisis of technique raging now seems to me a reflection of the crisis of social relations and practice. If this contention holds then the connection between art and human behaviour cannot be denied.

Can art actually be and remain abstract both in dimension and in function? Must it always be divorced from other intentions and responses? Put simply, is it only in language and form that meaning can be found? Can meaning not be potently realised in the human process? Can language really be insolubly extra-social? If this is so then does it not deny that language is a function of human sociality? Art for art's sake has always been and will ever be a false idea. It is like arguing that the beauty of an envelope is more important than the letter it has conveyed or that the shape of the head is more important than the brains inside it.

"When a false idea is made the basis of an artistic work, it imparts to it inherent contradictions that inevitably detract from its aesthetic merit."<sup>2</sup>

A work of art is not meant to advertise the author's efficient use of language. If this is the intention then it will amount to arguing that ego is the only reality which of course is a fallacy. The work of art tries to elicit response or to propose a relationship to the experience under expression. Language is only a medium, not even a pure medium

"through which the reality of a life or the reality of an event or an experience or the reality of a society can flow. It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so."<sup>3</sup>

Looked at from a social perspective, art for art's sake is committed art. It is a product of the extreme individualism of the period of bourgeois decay. It was motivated, in the Western Bourgeois world, by fear of the monopoly of the means of economic production. Rather than write and expose those structures and their social contradictions, the artist sought to protect himself in a cowardly manner by hiding under the yoke of the oppressor where he sought to divert the attention from the main oppressive situation to the beauty of the word.

The bourgeois class is a basically individualistic class. The members of the class strike out on individual pursuits for worldly matters. The more individualistic the bourgeois is, the more likely is he to grab with impunity. His selfish interest becomes the ruling passion. His only interest in the people around him is to force them into his productive processes to enhance his unearned treasures. He becomes dehumanized.

The artist of art for art's sake is undoubtedly in alliance with this class. He is an intellectual bourgeois far removed from the world of reality to sterile preoccupation with private emotional experiences. Having seen that he cannot beat the members of the upper economic class, he decides that it is safer to join them. He, therefore, abandons the real world of men to an imaginary world. Now, as a member of the vulgar class he develops all the haughty qualities of the class. He grows stone hearted and convinces himself that he has no social responsibility to anybody. The end result of his

"preoccupation is something that not only has no relation to beauty of any kind, but which moreover represents an obvious absurdity that can only be defended with the help of sophisticated distortions of the idealist theory of knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

Another way of looking at the idealistic artist is that he is a person who has violently fallen out with his society. His society too having turned its back on this artist, he decides to beat a solitary path. The result is the severing of the spiritual ties between him and his society so that he begins to wander about as a mystic.

Art is always aligned. The artist is either a member of a given class whose values he tries to project in his writings or he is sympathetic or antagonistic to a given class or situation that he writes about. These emotions may either be implicitly or explicitly expressed.

Can the African artist avoid commitment at this present stage of our development and still be valid? It is not possible to see how. The African societies have not yet arrived at the point of the bourgeois decadence of the West at which, there is serious economic contentment and moral bankruptcy to enable the African to indulge in idle preoccupation. John Osborne<sup>5</sup> tells us that in the Western societies there are no more significant causes left to write about. But for the Africans there is too much relevant stuff to write about and the artist cannot be excused for taking a flight of fancy. Secondly, African art is largely functional. A creative artist must show his indebtedness to his culture by integrating literary practice with cultural practice.

#### REVOLUTIONARY AFRICAN AESTHETICS

Since the concern of this paper is with theatre, efforts will be made to discuss the topic in relation to revolutionary theatre. Revolutionary theatre may be construed to mean the transformation of art in a way that it can induce action for social regeneration and struggle. Ross Kidd, Expanding on this contention, advises that theatre must be turned from

"a monologue fostering passivity or pseudo-therapy into dialogue in which the 'audience' is actively engaged in the production of meaning. It converts the 'audience' from passive recipients of received truth to active protagonists in creating a theatrical experience (which reflects their own sense of their situation), criticising it, and using this analysis (and further theatrical experience) in working out political strategies and engaging in struggle."<sup>6</sup>

It is the contention here that a serious writer cannot escape feeling the political heartbeat of his environment. Theatre is more or less creative social criticism. Within this radical perspective its function is basically to raise man's consciousness. Within the revolutionary culture

liberation of man is the focus. Revolution, therefore, aims at increasing man's awareness of his human potentialities. The highest goal of theatre within the radical perspective is to help man to understand his social environment and to rationally and emotionally master it. Thus it is necessary to reclaim theatre from a home of illusion to a home of experiences.

Attainment of freedom marks the beginning of the attainment of human dignity. Good theatre must seek to persuade society to move forward through a process of reflection and mediation so that human beings can achieve dignity. And within the present day socio-economic conditions of Africa, revolutionary action becomes the most viable alternative for change. Revolutionary action must be seen as a compelling drive by the down-trodden members of the society, 'wretched of the earth'.

In most of the African societies the cultures of the rural masses tend to be seriously disdained by members of the 'superior' elite culture. This breeds insecurity and loss of confidence in the members of the 'inferior' culture to the extent that they tend to lose confidence in their social capacities. A situation like this becomes a quick impediment to development. With intensification of denigration of the rural masses' capacities through the reckless display of the features or characteristics of the so-called superior cultures, the alienated rural man becomes ever more insecure to the extent that freedom begins to awe him. He begins to entertain genuine fear of freedom.

For theatre to overcome these obstacles, it must seek to understand the present social structures and direct its attention against those that are oppressive. Theatre must thus take its appeal direct to this depressed rural man. It must be recognised that real revolutionary power lies with the rural masses. What they lack is the organisational capacity coupled with their loss of confidence in their abilities. For theatre to be relevant in circumstances of this nature, it must above all things rely on the revolutionary aesthetics. Revolutionary aesthetics is the aesthetics of the oppressed. Theatre must, therefore, seek to understand the psychology of the oppressed man; to understand his motivation and non-motivation; to appreciate his suffering and his fears. From this understanding theatre can make progress in the process of conscientizing the deprived man so that he can come to see a way out of his frustration and fear and may feel a strong desire to assert his humanity. Theatre workers must always understand that

"until the cultural barriers manifest in stereotypes and cliched characterizations are challenged, there

cannot be real development in countries where there is a clear cultural disequilibrium between a dominant society and culturally or ethnically distinct sub-groups."

Where such stereotyped characterizations exist, as indeed they exist all over Africa, conditions of violence are already created. As Paulo Freire<sup>8</sup> states, any act that denies man his human dignity is oppressive and, therefore, pregnant with violence. Theatre must, therefore, be seen as a cultural action that is determined to bring about change. And for this change to take place, theatre must be brought down to earth. It must be taken to the people instead of bringing the people to the theatre. It must be rural peasant based if change is to come through it.

To come to grips with the aesthetics of the oppressed, theatre must abandon the remote ivory tower, the classroom, and the theatre houses and physically move to the rural environment. This is a return to the roots. There is a growing need for theatre to return to the origins where its relevance becomes more poignant. In this regard the theatre worker must choose his field or target environment and must move into this field not like the christian missionary of long ago but as a pupil teacher who has come to share ideas with the oppressed rural masses. Through cross-fertilization of ideals the theatre worker will come to full understanding of the specific problems of the area.

He will then work these problems into a drama using the villagers and other theatre workers as actors.

This approach has many advantages over the existing approaches:

1. As of now, theatre has tended to be elite based. A number of revolutionary writers like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, to mention a few, have tried writing some revolutionary plays which show their intellectual awareness of the issues involved in the revolutionary aesthetics. But these plays barely touch the masses mostly because they are elitist. There is still a need to move out to the broader masses and using theatre, initiate them into collective action. Revolutionary aesthetics requires that those for whom the play is meant must, through creative handling, be convinced to join and participate in the process that will eventually pull them out of their depressed condition.
2. This approach denies the universality of the human situation. People differ in their predicaments and

in their reactions to, and appreciation of their problems. Making human problems universal only scratches the problems on the surface and leads to no real commitment to change things.

3. Because the drama deals with problems that are local, presenting them in new and fresh ways thereby heightening the rural people's awareness of them, the people more easily identify with them and become mobilised for mass social transformation.
4. Because this approach necessarily takes the theatre worker to the rural people, he comes to a deeper understanding of the people and their art and is more able to appreciate the elements of the African aesthetics. The aesthetics of the people derive from the basic elements of their social relationships and beliefs. This approach, therefore, gives the theatre worker the opportunity to come to the concrete realisation that African aesthetics demands among other things simplicity of expression; humility towards a people's culture; African collective sensibility and the functional nature of the message or lesson expressed. With this realisation, a play that eventually emerges from this approach, with a touch of radicalism, satisfies the condition for revolutionary African aesthetics.
5. The modern playwright, because of his white-collar job is justifiably looked at as a member of the privileged class. The rural masses are therefore, suspicious of his revolutionary concerns. By moving into the rural environment and experiencing the conditions of the deprived rural man he stands a better chance of convincing the rural man of his purpose or intentions which are to help him in his efforts to realise his potentials as a man.

Theatre is deemed to have satisfied the revolutionary drive only if it provokes the desired action which is aimed at the collective social goal.

What constitute the basis of European dramatic aesthetics are conflict and alienation. In African Revolutionary aesthetics, conflict and alienation do not always play the most significant role. Revolutionary African aesthetics is a celebration of the quality of the lives of the generality of the people. It is the nature and quality of these celebrations that sustain the interest of the African audience. A twist in the known events here and there, a heightened or intensified articulation of the known happenings create new ways of looking at life thereby creating sufficient

suspense and instilling the interest of the African audience in the celebrations of their own lives.

#### THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

If as stated earlier, within the revolutionary African aesthetics the aim is to broaden human potentials, what role can be ascribed to the playwright? Obviously, he will not be a solitary person in intellectual exile where he will pass valuable idle hours wondering how the 'twinkle twinkle little stars' are doing. Africa, with its myriads of problems and compelling issues to write about cannot forgive such a mystic. The essential role of the playwright will be to nurse popular attitudes that are favourable to the enlargement of these human potentials. As Tunde Lakoju puts it, the duty of the playwright is

"to re-create in imaginative terms, the history of the struggle and all the contradictions embodied in this."<sup>9</sup>

The inspiration of the playwright comes from what is capable of improving social intercourse among people. As a theatrical technocrat, he has the gift and the knowledge to plan and direct the movement of the play in such a way that it produces the proper climate for action.

It must be noted that within the radical, tradition play writing is not a one-man job. It is a collective creative responsibility. The entire society whose problems are being dramatised contribute to the 'writing' of the play. Play writing is necessarily in the oral medium and is an improvised 'script'. In this regard, play 'writing' and rehearsal are the same and one process. Once the problems of a given village or society have been identified and analysed and once issues to be treated in the drama have been agreed upon, play 'writing' begins. The villagers may be asked to dramatise a given problem as creatively and as naturally as possible. While this is going on the other people standing around act the role of critics so that play writing, play acting and play criticism are joined into one function. This process continues until a play is 'written'.

This approach has many factors that recommend it:

1. For theatre to be effective in social transformation it must learn to act pieces of its own art instead of relying on a written script.
2. This process of of play making invariably involves the rural masses who must be conscientized by the drama process so that they will come to accept the

challenge posed by the drama as a challenge to themselves. This helps to awaken and transform them into contributors to determining their own fates.

3. It invigorates the creative energies of the rural masses so that they begin to look at their problems in new analytical ways. Consequently they feel a desire to do something to improve their situation.
4. Because it involves the rural masses as actors and critics, a medium of expression that can reach the largest number of the members of the society is found. In this regard the language of the people is normally used. This has the advantage of introducing the local structures of expression into the dramatic framework. In this regard the rural masses are able to realise confidence in themselves since they now come to see drama as what each of them is capable of handling effectively.

From the above it can be seen that theatre is a weapon, not just a tool for some selected mystics who equate it with idle pleasures. Theatre must guarantee every individual in the society a chance for creative expression which of course is a basic human characteristic. Creative expression enhances individual and collective identity; increases self-respect and instills into the members of the society a sense of place and purpose. All these increase individual and collective consciousness which are necessary ingredients for change.

What then is the role of the modern conventional playwright within the revolutionary aesthetics? As stated earlier, he is a minor if set outside the collective creative sphere. Within it, he can be an adviser in the creative process. Since revolutionary theatre, like African art, is basically functional his role is to apply his technical skills in the process of playmaking so as to project without mistakes, the particular point of view or ideology the play is out to work with thereby focussing attention on that which is capable of making human beings realise their humanity. In doing this the playwright must realise that theatre is a language that must complement human verbal language in achieving a fuller life. It is a language that seeks to degrade man. As Augusto Boal contends, the role of theatre is not

"to show the correct path, but only to offer a means by which all possible paths may be examined."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the play that unfolds must not be seen as an entity in itself. It is a means, not an end. The play should only provide a dialectical view of the world of man in a given

environment. It is a view that needs to be sharpened and consolidated outside the dramatic framework through dialogue which will consequently lead to action. Dialogue must, thus, be seen as a very crucial element of revolutionary theatre. Through dialogue between the theatre worker and the deprived rural man, possibilities are opened up for action. The hitherto unexplained position gets explained. Problems and prospects of action are examined in all ramifications. In this regard action is a creative expression aimed at reinforcing human dignity through the challenge of stereotypes that are pejorative. The play is, therefore, a catalyst while action is the fulfilment.

Does all this mean the death of text? By no means. But text is of secondary importance in the revolutionary theatre. It belongs to written literature mostly for classroom consumption. A written play obviously has its own limitations because it has no action or rhythm. The play director has to look for these to embellish the play. And depending on his inclinations the action and rhythm he may find may not have the revolutionary force that is required for change. Secondly because of the desire of the written text to reach out to as many people as possible, its relevance which should prompt people to identify with it thus making it possible for them to wish to do something about it may diminish as the particular problems treated may lose their relevance on another society. Theatre should always seek to understand and to see rather than feel and imagine. This is the objective truth of the theatre. The written text in this regard encourages feeling and imagination which may not reflect concrete realities. It may also fail to discover simple emotions that make all men kin. Lastly, the written text, because of its economic tendency to reach out to as many people as possible encourages the competition for greater styles which tend to corrupt us and detract from its social concrete reality. This has been responsible for the crisis of style we are now in.

Yet, we must have a text. The modern playwright who must first and foremost be a field worker rather than a desk revolutionary, must after the field experience recollect the people's play into a written text embellishing it with the greater style, yet taking care not to take it too far from its social significance. In this regard the written text must provide a rehearsal for a revolution.

It must expose in its stark realities the social and economic structures that have tended to dehumanise man. Through such exposures, the dehumanised economic giants of the society may be taught to recognise their essential humanity because their game is now exposed for public scrutiny. As a rehearsal for a revolution, the written play must not only expose the structures of oppression but must also give hints

of various possibilities for action. That is, it must explore one or two possibilities affecting change. These possibilities may be implicitly or explicitly stated. The written text must also endeavour to recapture the simple, humble African emotions. This will ensure its greater appeal. This simplicity and humility must also be extended to the expressive medium. True creativity demands that the playwright shows awareness of his cultural practice which should be blended with artistic practice. Since a true revolutionary play should as much as possible endeavour to capture the lives of the ordinary citizens in their concrete realities and since the basic African life and expression are simple and humble, the play based on them must be expressed with similar simplicity. The playwright's attraction to the greater style must not be allowed to becloud the main issue or his work may be irrelevant to the cause. As Bode Osanyin aptly puts it:

"When a playwright is soaked inside himself and uses personal images and allusions which are totally untranslatable and incomprehensible, and goes round to mystify his own person and his art, he has succeeded as a time-waster. That is simply tragic. The life-style or the personality of the writer is not the issue. Committedness must be found in the art, not artist."<sup>11</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eric Bentley (ed), The Theory of the Modern Stage, Penguin, New York, 1968, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> G.V. Plekhanov, Art and Social Life, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Fourth Impression, 1979, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> G.V. Plekhanov, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> John Osborne, the British Playwright, in his play Look Back in Anger states categorically "There aren't any good, brave causes left." This is the true position of the western world.

<sup>6</sup> Ross Kidd, "People's Theatre, Conscientization and Struggle," published in Media Development, London, 1980 Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> ----- Cultural Expression and Social Change, Inter-American Foundation, April 21, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire in his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed states categorically that "An act is oppressive only when it prevents man from being more fully human."

<sup>9</sup> Tunde Lakoju, "The Place of the Playwright in a Radical Theatre Proposal for Nigeria," an unpublished paper presented at the workshop on the role of theatre in cultural education in Nigeria at ABU Zaria on May 21, 1980, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, New York, Urize Books, 1979, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> Bode Osanyin, "Committed Theatre: A Corner-Stone of Nation-Building," published in Nigerian Theatre Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1983, p. 2.