

SCENIC DESIGN AND COUNTERING TERRORISM IN THE PERFORMANCE OF EMMA DANDAURA'S *VENOM* *FOR VENOM*

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Abstract

The art of the theatre is a collaborative enterprise. It involves the creative efforts of different artists: director, stage manager, set, lighting, properties, costume, make-up and sound designers. These artists work together for the realization of a theatrical production. They work within a production concept which is the guiding principle upon which a production is based. However, as the theatre is audio-visual and immediate, it is the duty of these artists to ensure that every aspect of the production is perfectly deployed for the audience's understanding of the play. Of all the artists of the theatre, the scenic designer's work is the most eloquent visual expressive element in the theatre because he is the artist responsible for interpreting the play/drama in concrete visual terms through the creation of an aesthetically pleasing and functional background. This essay interrogates the use of scenic design in countering terrorism in the Unizik performance of Emma Dandaura's *Venom for Venom*. The study finds that through adequate use of the elements and principles of design that the scenic artist was able to counter the spate of terrorism as depicted in the play through his set design. It submits that terror in a theatrical performance can be ameliorated through subtle use of design for the audience's better understanding of the message of the play.

Key words: Scenic Design, Terrorism, Counter-terrorism, performance.

Introduction

Scene design is the most eloquent of the visual aspect of the theatre as it is the first object the audience sees as he enters the theatre to watch a performance. According to Demas Nwoko, "the visual forms come before the text in importance ... there can validly exist a theatre without text while text without visual expression can only become literature and not theatre" (476). This aptly underscores the importance of scene design in any theatrical production. Scene design

involves all that the scenic artist puts together to create the environment for the action of the play or any other form of performance: set, décor and properties. In other words, the scenic environment represents the world of the play for it is within this created space that the actors live and re-enact their roles. The scene design thus expresses the play in concrete visual terms for the audience's further understanding of the performance. Through his designs, the scenic artist establishes the location of the play, tells the social status of the occupant(s), states the tribe, period and possibly the season the play is set and reaffirms the dominant mood of the play. These functions of scene design are achieved by the design artist through a proper analysis of the given circumstances in the play.

Every design therefore evolves from the dramatic situations in the play. However, it is the duty of the scene designer to move the play's interpretation further through the design by delineating the theme of the play in visual terms for a better comprehension by the audience. In other words, the scenic artist brings his creative ingenuity to bear on the already given situations as may have been provided by the playwright. This he does through deft manipulation of colours, shapes, lines, texture, contrast, balance and other principles of design. The scenic artist however, neither creates in isolation nor abstraction. He must work in collaboration with other design artists: costume, make-up, lighting and property designers and based on the given circumstances of the play. This is why the theatre is called an ensemble art and a collaborative enterprise. Citing Joseph Agofure Idogho, Chukwuma Anyanwu defines the theatre as "a collaborative form of fine art that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place" (4). This collaboration comes to the fore in every theatrical performance where the director, who is at the helm of affairs in the interpretative work, has to work with the other artists in order to present an aesthetically pleasing performance to an audience.

While the scenic artist has the artistic license to reinterpret the play's design to suit the performance space for which a particular performance is slated for and based on the logistics as it concerns the availability of funds and raw materials at his disposal, his interpretations must conform to the theme of the play. In other words, the design(s) must bear the original message of the playwright this is why every performance must be guided by a production concept which is the guiding principle for all the artists of the theatre involved in any particular production. However, as a creative and interpretative artist, the scenic designer can seek answers to certain artistic

questions which will help his interpretation of the play for a better rendition of designs which will help the audience's comprehension of the play's message. Thus the scene designer should seek to find a solution to Diana Taylor's poser that does the theatre

By allowing spectators to sit passively and watch others engage in conflict, by enabling spectators to experience the thrills vicariously and benefit from cathartic release, spectacles might arguably diffuse the rage,... (168).

This discourse makes a critical appraisal of the nature of scene design in Emma Dandaura's *Venom for Venom* to ascertain how the scenic designer deployed his designs as an artistic means of countering terrorism in order to help the audience understand the message of the play which theme calls for the eschew of violence and an embrace of dialogue and peace.

Venom for Venom: A synopsis

It is a story of a people's struggle to liberate themselves from the shackles of greed, avarice and wanton oppression by foreign investors who have connived with the ruling class to exploit their own people. It tells the story of how the foreign investors have come to explore and cart away the rich natural resources of a people without adequate compensation. Rather than giving back to the people what naturally belongs to them which in actual fact is what they (Foreign Oil Companies) got from the land, they resort to bribery and manipulation of the law enforcement agencies to intimidate the owners of the land leaving them in abject poverty since the activities of their respective companies spoil the land as it were. This went on for so long until some youths of the land got together and decided to take their destinies into their hands. They chose to be outlaws in their own land in order to fight the injustices being meted out to their people by the Foreign Investors who are using their own King and some elders as willing tools to marginalize the people.

Countering Terrorism through Scene Design

Scenic design expresses the play's theme in concrete visual terms through the application of the elements and principles of design. These elements and principles of design are the means through which a play is interpreted through design. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert Ball thus observe that, "... how audiences respond depends on how these aspects of design have been shaped. The

various theatre artists primarily use these elements and principles of design to create meanings they hope the audience will perceive” (301). Every scenic artist therefore, strives to portray the playwright’s message to the audience through a rendition of the play’s message in the design for the setting of the play in performance.

The primary function of scene design however, is to create an environment for the action of the play. By creating this environment the scene designer succeeds in defining the performance space which is achieved through a careful and artistic manipulation of some basic scenic units such as flats and platforms in addition to scenic properties which are designed to delineate the acting space.

Venom for Venom as produced by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka at the Arts Theatre, technically achieved the aim of countering terrorism through a creative use of colours, harmony, contrast, shape and variety amongst other principles and elements of design employed in the design for the set of the play.

The performance space for the play is the University’s Theatre located inside the Faculty of Arts complex. It is owned and managed by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies. The stage is a proscenium type with little depth for the manipulation of scenic units and the construction of large set pieces. It has an Apron which availed the artistes more space in the front of the proscenium arch. There are no Act Curtains. Minimal Lighting was used because the performance took place in the afternoon. Large drapes were used to cut off natural light that streams in through the windows such that the effect of stage lighting could be felt by the audience. As the stage has very little depth, only Front-of-house lighting was used to illuminate the stage and create the enabling atmosphere that would delineate the theme.

Venom... is a journey into the physical and psychological trauma meted out to a people by a government that ordinarily should nurture and protect the people’s collective interest. This is exemplified in the dialogue between The King and Mr. Rockbottoms:

King: Do not get hysterical, Mr. Rockbottoms, we are trying to bring the situation under control. How much is Mr. Drybones ready to provide for the assignment?

Rockbottom: How can you ask that, your Majesty? We are in your community to make money for our company. I have to match all expenditure with the income generated. Where do you expect us to get the money from, if your youths will not allow us operate profitably?

King: Enough Mr. Rockbottom, are you here to harass me or seek solution to your problems? Since your company came into this community, it has been from one problem to another. Your activities have devastated our water, our land, crops, our resources, and our everything! ... Look, gentlemen, if you do not have anything serious to say, goodnight!

Drybones: Sorry your Majesty, we do not mean to get you angry... I have with me here, twenty thousand dollars for a start.

King: Now you are talking! But you know I do not collect such monies directly... (33-34)

The play thus is full of tension as there are plans and counter-plans among the opposing factions hence the setting for the play needs to answer some of the thematic questions posed by the play. Such questions may include; which of the different locations in the play will be predominant? In other words, amongst the numerous settings in the play which will be emphasized in order to carry the playwright's message to the audience?

The playwright did provide some insight into the nature of the locations by stating where each action in the play is supposedly taking place. Thus it is understood that there is a *King's Place*, *A Militant Camp* for the rampaging youths, a *Dilapidated School Building* for another group of the Renegade youths amongst others. There is also a need for a simultaneous setting as could be seen in Scene Nine. The designer therefore was faced with the creative task of creating a scenic environment that will capture these various locations within the confines of the UNIZIK Arts theatre stage.

In *Venom* ... there are threats of war and extreme violence and there are bloodsheds and deaths;

Ogenero: No, we shall not bite. When you bite you leave no injury that could fester and further pollute the environment. Rather, like the scorpions, we shall sting and leave no traces. They swamped on us like angry bees for five decades now, our bodies are filled with the venom they have injected into us in the process. Now we have resolved that it is time to sting back (14),

Yet there are calls for peace and harmonious living;

Youth 2: Yes, but have you considered the fact that most of those Policemen are as oppressed as all of us here. The day we succeed in educating them on their real identity as our marginalized brothers, that day the oppressors will have no robots to use against us. Let us concentrate on educating our people to resist exploitation in all its ramifications (39).

The scenic artist is therefore faced with the task of striking a balance between the two opposing concepts: violence and peace. In the production being interrogated here, the designer obviously chose to symbolically represent the locations by presenting only those basic scenic units that will help tell the story without encumbering the movement of the actors because the gospel of symbolism is that, “truth can only be hinted at through a network of symbols that evokes feelings and states of mind corresponding imprecisely to our intuition” (Brockett and Ball 161). Thus, the scenes were predominantly depicted by furniture and scenic properties. The designer’s choice of symbolism is predicated on the fact that the play needs swift scene changes to meet and keep an even tempo that will help sustain the suspense crafted into it and yet, meet the expectations of the audience. John Iwuh thus observes that;

Several approaches have been adopted to make theatre performances as entertaining and exciting as performance could possibly be. One way is to

engage vital scenic objects to move within that performance space in conformity with its functional pattern in a referral world (110).

Consequently, the stage was bare and in semi-darkness at the opening scene because the scene was played on the orchestra pit so that the dialogue between the town drunk, Tamtam and the actors who sat with the audience. As the play progressed, the barest essentials of stage furniture were brought on stage to situate the respective scenes within a particular location. This is because the “aesthetic appreciation of a theatrical production lies in the expressiveness of the designs which in actual fact are the symbols through which the message of the production is made easy for the audience” (Okeke 114).

To counter the terror in the play which was actually too obvious from the dialogues in order to portray the drama as a medium of peace in an otherwise tense environment the scene designer made use of colours. This is because the play, though called for violent approaches to solve radical situations in a town raped by her leaders, the playwright deftly manipulated the violent situations to be resolved in peace such that even the fieriest character, Ogbenero, was humbled when he beheld ‘raw’ violence at the death of his lover, Eliza, through violent acts orchestrated by him, Oghenero.

Ordinarily, the designers could have used colours that are traditionally associated with violence, such as red, instead, he made use of cool colours which are suggestive of peace. Thus, the blue and a mixture of orange and violet adorned the background.

The purple represented royalty as could be seen in the palace scenes while the blue and orange colours were to emphasize the peace and love that was eventually achieved in the community in spite of the violence that had persisted for a while.

Basically, the set had two entrances at Up Stage Right (USR) and Up Stage Left (USL) respectively. These were to serve as entrances and exits. The location onstage is accessed by non-residents of the places from the aisles left and right of the auditorium. On the flat Centre Stage is a motif, an abstract painting, depicting the people’s struggle and the eventual peace that the play preaches. This painting, which was rendered in beautiful colours dominated the stage. The location SR represented the Militant’s Camp while that SL represented the Dilapidated School building. Actions in these scenes were played with symbolic properties in order to avoid assaulting

the audience's senses by violent images. Thus the audience's attention was "diverted so that it can dismiss that knowledge and claim innocence" (Taylor 168). The "knowledge" referred to here is the knowledge of violence and tension in the community presented to us in the play. By playing down on scenic materials and colours that can elicit violent images, the scene designer has subtly began his art of countering terrorism through careful and deft application of the elements and principles of design.

The Palace was placed CS. It is only in the Palace scenes that the two doors US(R/L) were used. During these palace scenes, the door USL leads to the King's Wives quarters while the door USR leads to the King's inner chambers. The deft manipulation of colours by the scenic artist was to ensure that the design achieved the purpose of focusing the attention of the audience to the eventual outcome of the play's message which is a call to dialogue as a means to achieving peace in a crisis situation.

Conclusion

Playwrights craft their works out of their perceived vision of the society and the situations prevalent at the time of the creation of the dramatic piece. Emmanuel Dandaura, in *Venom for Venom* has created a community where mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence reigns out of an existing anarchy thus reaffirming the fact that the playwright recreates history in order to chart a better course for the future. The scene designer, on the hand, has demonstrated the fact that he is a co-creator in his interpretation of the playwright's work by creating an environment for the performance of the play: an environment that is devoid of rancour which is easily understood by the audience who is the consumer of the artistic work.

In designing the set for *Venom*...as performed at the UNIZIK Arts Theatre stage, the scene designer has advanced the playwright's message further through his careful rendition of his design that is aesthetically pleasing yet highly functional because it helped the audience assimilate the message of peace and unity as preached by the playwright without being distracted by the seeming violence that dominated the community before a solution was found.

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