

Mapping the Sp(ace)ecifics of *The Gods are not to Blame*

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The Gods are not to Blame by Ola Rotimi happens to be one of the classic plays in Nigeria that has attracted the attention of both scholars and theatre practitioners in its interpretation and reinterpretation. In a reinterpretation mode, this study intends to turn its focus into negotiating the spaces and mapping out the selected locales indicated in the play, in a bid to give it a fresh dynamics, and one which immerses the audience into a better understanding of the sights and sounds of the text. Examining spatial dynamics, the study observes that the locales peculiar to the play are palace, sitting room, bedroom, bathroom, and the stairs. Physicalizing all these into Foucault's sixth principle of Heterotopia, the study intends to turn the focus of theatre makers into the discourse created by the possibilities of staging this play in a hotel. This also partly answers the scenographic complexities posed in this play where different scenes happen in different places making it hard for the Nigerian theatre practitioners to physicalize all settings as indicated in the play onto a Nigerian stage. In order to make a significant headway that intimately engages the actor-audience and audience-space relationship, the site-specific approach as expounded in this study provides a good way to answering many spatial issues in *The Gods are not to Blame*.

Keywords: Spatial dynamics, scenographic, actor-audience, audience-space, site-specific

I

Negotiating the Other

Sadly, folk opera groups in Nigeria, in spite of their close link with the traditions of precolonial theater, have found it somehow difficult to free themselves from the shackles of the proscenium anomaly. I've tried to persuade some of these groups to make use of the arena setting, but they just won't touch it. (Gilbert and Tompkins 157)

Nigerian theatre, right from the introduction of the proscenium theatre, have been facing some major challenges especially in the area of producer's ability to free themselves from the boundaries of the proscenium theatre, which limits creative abilities. Despite the complaints above by Ola Rotimi, there seem to be a withdrawal from the arena setting which is partly due to the fear of making profit. This fears have not been allayed, thanks to the

economic situation of Nigeria that happens to be dwindling as time goes by. Soyinka joins in this complaint by advocating for a true African theatre mode which favours the audience and actor relationship. However, rather for the artiste to abandon, this theatre which ‘manipulates the artiste’ (22), much more building keeps being erected, thereby resulting to the continuation of the ‘calcifying influence’ (22) of the theatre in Ibadan, Kampala and Nsukka. Theatres like National Theatre Lagos, Main Auditorium Unilag, and the recent Terra Kulture Arena have been erected after this, leading to the thought of when ‘shackles of the proscenium’ will be really broken.

With structures like the Terra Kulture Arena, ability for the creative ingenuity becomes more and more stifled and crippled. Surprising to note here that actors have not been excluded from this crippling effect. At the moment, this theatre seem to be enjoying the patronage of many theatre producers in Lagos, Nigeria. While many producers are very happy to stage productions in this venue due to the stress it eradicates especially in the area of technical theatre, most producers have been unwillingly and excruciatingly made to adhere to the structural and ethical standard of this theatre.

Closely examining the structural defect of this building, the theatre has a small backstage, which has only one small entry to the stage. With this small entry, actors exiting and entering the stage struggle to enter through this 2ft and a little inch wide door. Having stage managed couple of shows in this building, change of set pieces is excruciatingly stressfull, as some set pieces have been destroyed in the process of moving on and off stage. The makeshift place for keeping large set pieces at the left hand side of the stage, shared by the actors getting ready for their cues makes the theatre a misfit for theatrical productions. Due to this structural defect, everybody coming on stage needs to share a small entry at upstage right which narrowly links to upstage left exit and then ultimately links to the small 2inch backstage exit mentioned above. Though scholars like Ejeke, Uwadinma-Idemudia, Ebo, Agoba, and Fanyam, have

suggested several structural and technical solutions to problems facing Nigerian theatre, Ejeke's solution of "casting our imagination back and forth in the development of the theatre production style in order to break away from the restrictions of the contemporary production methodology" (151-2) happens to be practicable here.

Casting our imaginations back leads to examining the audience-participatory form of Nigerian Theatre. Audience has been known to play a significant role in the travelling theatres of the Alarinjo travelling theatre troupe to the Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Moses Olaiya and many others. Infact their theatre is known to have survived solely because of them as they travelled from cities to cities performing their work. This is essence also help the theatre grow immensely as the audience, even while theatre moved to the proscenium stage from the arena stage, still contributed to the actions on stage. As theatre practices continued the influence of the audience started becoming reduced as it became rowdy and affected the actions on stage, not forgetting the impact of the fourth wall on the audience which is a major restricting factor. As mentioned above, theatre practitioners like Ola Rotimi refused to be caged by this fourth wall , thereby embracing the arena form of setting which proved very good and is known to be one of the best directors Nigeria has ever produced. Most of his plays like *The Gods are Not to Blame*, *Ovoranwen Nogbaisi*, and many others were staged at the Ori Olokun theatre which is in form of an arena setting that helped to explore the potentials of his plays better.

However despite the fact that this theatre practitioner embraced the arena setting, there were still some disconnect as the scene physicalized still needed some scenic representation to 'represent' some scenes on stage. For example, in an arena setting, a bedroom as indicated in a play will still need to be represented with the use of a bed. The absence of other scenic elements in this representation distort, and does not help the audience to a great deal to be able to properly imagine and immerse themselves in the locale of the play. This is not a denial of

the fact that the audience still enjoyed themselves, and the arena setting proved successful, but the physicalizing this scene in a real bedroom would have proved much more immersive.

Apart from the immersiveness of the audience, comes the area of concentration. From experiences at most proscenium shows, most audience tend not to pay too much attention in the performance being staged. In this theatre, they feel a sort of protection and ability to do whatever they want, based on the blackness of the auditorium, which makes them to keep to themselves, and in turn further restricts participation. As a result of this, with the Nigerian theatre in focus, most theatre audiences from my experience result to their phones especially for performances that are either lively or boring. As a matter of fact, some audience only get to leave their phones when they hear others laughing which is an indication of something interesting happening on stage or when something that interest them happens. This I have ascribed to the fact that mobility is not involved in these performances becomes of the long nature of sitting down. Hence, mobility of the audience is advised because it helps perform the same function that the Bertolt Brecht achieved with his *Epic Theatre*. However, this is not to say that some audience do not go to their phones in site-specific performances, but the possibility and the frequent nature is reduced based on its promenade form, and the three dimensional effect movement of the actors have on the audience.

III

Remembering *The Gods are not to Blame* (Overview of the locales)

Though *The Gods are not to Blame* (TGANTB) is very popular among Nigerian readers, it is very important here to give a brief summary of the acts, for people who have no foreknowledge of the play. This provides an easy read for the next session which deconstructs the scenes into different sites not meant for them. *TGANTB* is divided into a prologue and three acts (two scenes in act one, four scenes in act two, and four scenes in act four). The prologue provides a

background to the play, which is the birth of Odewale which serves as a catalyst to future events in the play. The locale as provided by the playwright is the “shrine of ogun”, where the Narrator reveals a prophesy that the baby; Odewale, will kill his father and then marry his daughter. This leads to thirty two years later, after the death of King Adetusa, which makes a part of the prophesy fulfilled, thereby bringing in the mature Odewale into the scene, then the tune of the play changes to that of wailings.

Act one is situated outside the palace where Odewale attends to the townspeople who had come to the palace to complain of their ill fates. This scene ends with the town crier striking a gong which signifies a wakeup to go to the bush to look for potent cure. This act later proceeds to scene 2, where Odewale is in a meeting with his chiefs, and Aderopo conveys the message of *Ifa* on the real death of King Adetusa, and ends on Odewale swearing to make whoever is responsible for the death suffer.

Act two starts in the same setting as Act two scene one. This is where Odewale is revealed as the real murderer of King Adetusa, by Baba Fakunle. Odewale storms into the inner room angrily after this revelation. Act two scene two starts with Aderopo coming out of the bedroom to have a meeting with the chiefs, then Aderopo; whom after having a heated conversation with him on the death of King Adetusa, swears not to set his eyes on Aderopo. Next scene starts in the same place, but with Ojuola and her children singing. Odewale enters as Ojuola calms him.

Act three starts in the palace of Odewale, with Alaka making his way in through the bodyguards to meet Odewale; who was his friend. A major flashback happens in this scene where the death of King Adetusa, at the farm where three footpath meets was played out. This scene later dovetails to act three scene two where Ojuola reveals to Odewale how Baba Fakunle made her kill his first son (Odewale), and then to scene three where the truth gets unravelled gradually. The final scene happens in the palace where Odewale gets to know that he was

responsible for the death of his father and makes himself blind and finally exiles himself from the land. Ojuola also killed herself after knowing Odewale is her son.

IV

Mapping the Spaces and Sites in *The Gods are not to Blame*

Deconstructing the inherent meanings of *The Gods are not to Blame* can be found in the spaces where the scenes are located in order to appropriately situate the play's rightful meanings in social and political context, which the latter is not quite the focus of this study. Closer examination of the spaces in this play include the living room, the bedroom, staircase. It is however to be noted that this play deviated from the interior palace setting which is a norm in most Nigerian epic plays, though the exterior of the palace is located which can be physicalized in different places.

From earlier discussions, it is made clear that the mobility ability of Nigerian audience is quite constrained due to factors such as security, less risk taking, and VIP factors amongst many others. Due to this, site-specific performances that happen in busses, trains, and other mobile mediums are less often to survive in Nigeria. Owing to the primacy of these factors, the hotel which provides a sort of security and encompasses the locales in *The Gods are not to Blame* becomes a plausible venue here. Observing the structure of any hotel in Nigeria involves the following spaces: a gate (which provides 'security'), a parking lot, entrance, reception area (the size of this reception area depends on the star rating of the hotel), a bar or waiting area, rooms, and stairs (motels are exceptions in this case, of which they are not that common in Nigeria). The analysis of the play will be divided into various scenes as it is in the play.

Prologue

Physicalizing this play, the director needs headphones, and mp3 for the audience, because of the narrator's lines. It is suggested that the lines of the Narrator be pre-recorded on mp3's. This recording should start with the way Ola Rotimi has written in the play thus "Background choral singing, drumming, and symbolic sound-effects come up now and again to stress climatic moments". This helps to build the mood of the narration, and then proceeds to the Narrator's lines. The feel of the shrine of Ogun at the prologue, though important to this play, as it is a traditional one, can be simulated using audio recording of Ogun chants. Also in the representation of this play, the entry of Queen Ojuola King Adetusa and his chief, Ogun Priest, Baba Fakunle is not really necessary.

Examining the prologue further, Odewale's lines as seen below needs to be restructured.

ODEWALE. I heard their wailings,

First as rumour;...

... and scattered.

Peace, too is no more (5-8)

These lines happen to break the flow of narration, because Odewale gets to reveal later in the play all that was said in the prologue. Hence, I am of the opinion that the line should be made to read the following, linked from the last lines of the Narrator.

NARRATOR. They killed hundreds,

they seized hundred,

they enslaved hundreds more,

and left behind in the land of Kutuje

hunger, and thirst, and fear.

[lines from here to the end of the quotation are my reconstruction]

*Odewale; son of the tribe of Ijekun Yemoja
found his way to the strange land of Kutuje,
He gathered the people of Kutuje,
and attacked the people of Ikolu.
the people broke the tradition and made him King of Kutuje unasked.
He married Ojuola.
But joy has a slender body
that breaks too soon.
There is trouble
now in the land.
Joy had broken and scattered.
Peace, too, is no more.*

Act One Scene One

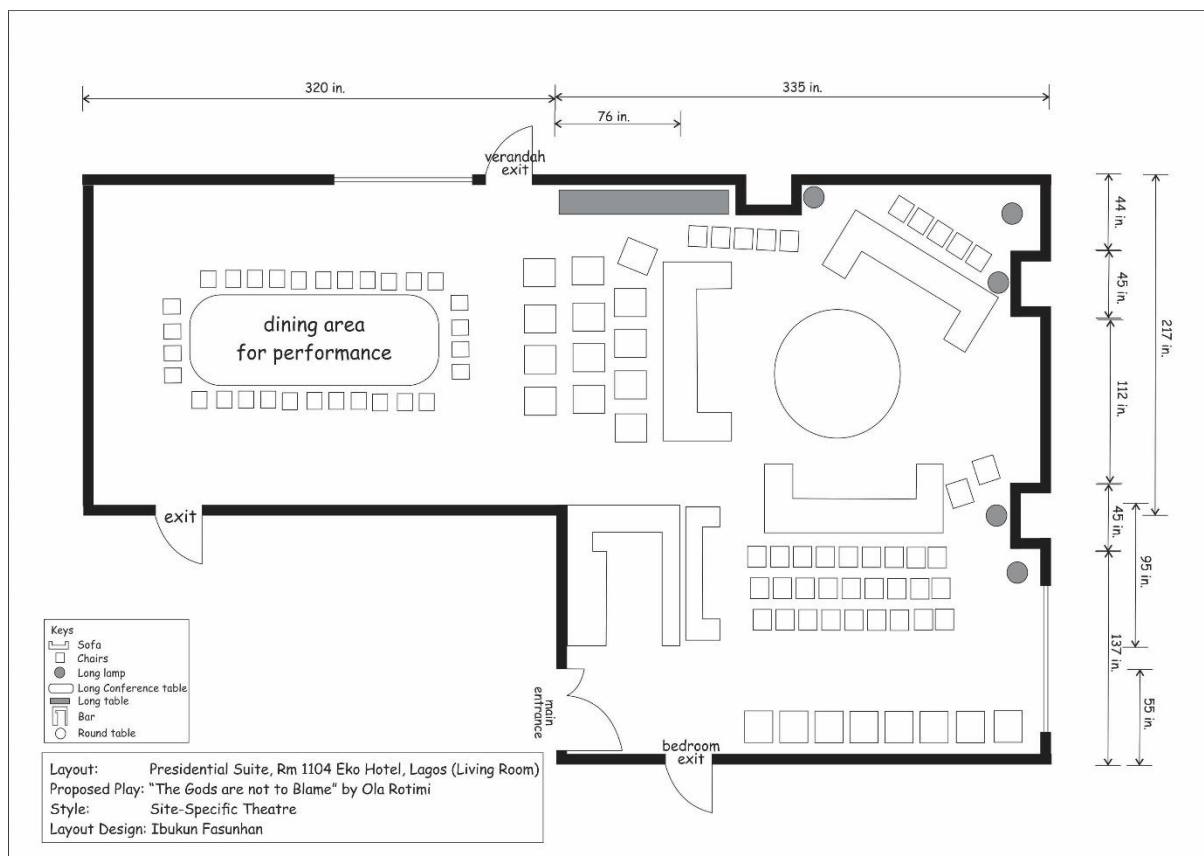
The introduction of Odewale should herald people into the lobby of the hotel. To make this happen, the *Townspeople* should be positioned as part of the audience who enter into the hotel with the audience, thereby making the distinctions between the audience and the actors invisible. At the point where Odewale starts, the townspeople suddenly start their wailings in succession from the audience area. Ojuola also enters with her children from the same entrance as did Odewale. At the line of Odewale below, he makes a sign to the audience and actors planted amongst the audience to enter the hotel reception.

ODEWALE. That's the spirit, my people, go about it with
gladness! Life is a struggle.

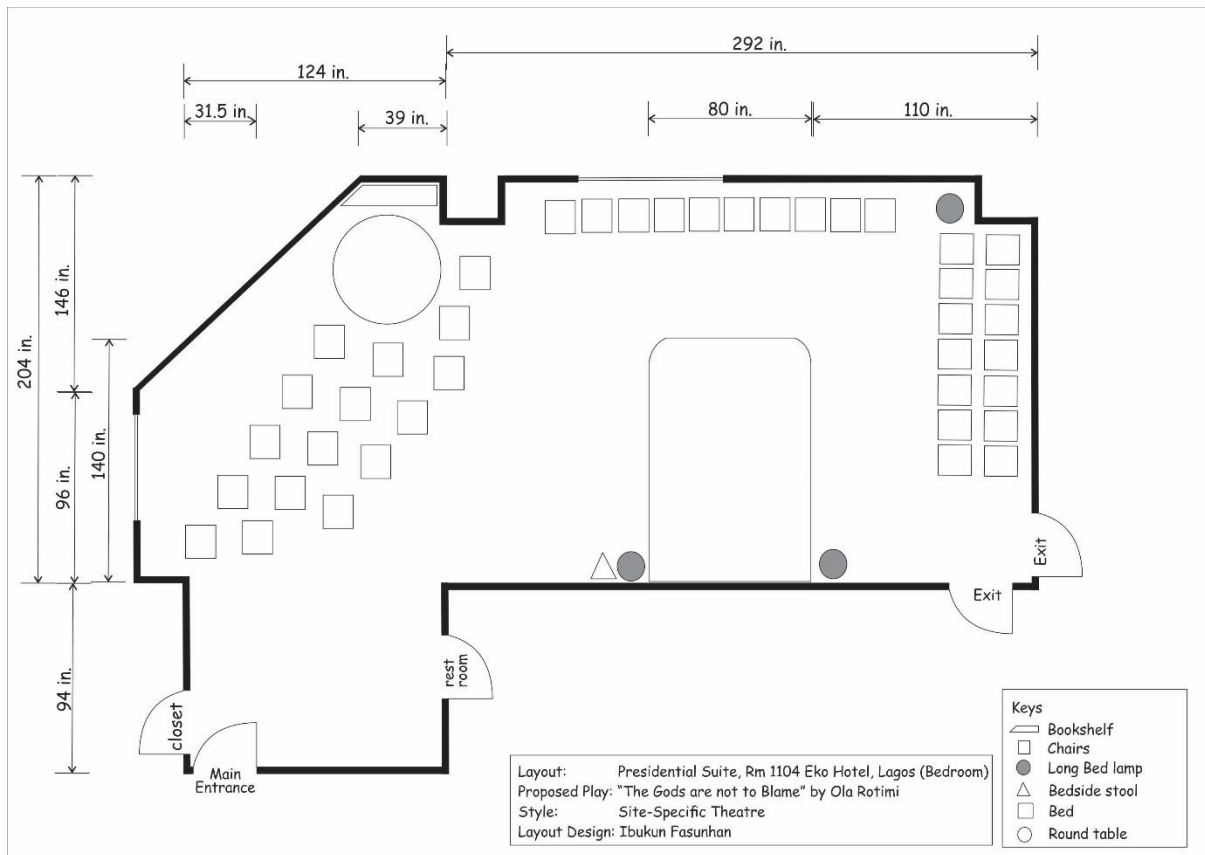
[To CHIEFS and OJUOLA] Come, people, let us- (15).

It is expected that at this point, Iya Aburo breaks this movement by opening the hotel gates forcefully and moving towards Odewale which jolts the audience. The towncrier after

Odewale's line which says "Come brother, let us hear the word that my wife's sons had brought from the oracle"(16), comes from any angle of the hotel's compound as he leads the people towards the reception area. As noted earlier, the choice of the hotel is important here especially an hotel room which has a living room and a bedroom like the Presidential suite at Eko Hotel. While Odewale (using the presidential suite), has gone ahead of other cast to the living room of this suite, other cast are led by the towncrier using the elevators. To make this movement through elevator dramatic, the audience can be told to press the next track on their mp3's. An African music that sets the tone for the next scene that the audience are about to witness at the suite should be pre-recorded on this device. The length of this recording should be dependent on the minute it takes all of the audience to get to the suite.



Pic 1. The Living Room at Presidential Suite Eko Hotel



Pic 2. The Bedroom at Presidential Suite Eko Hotel

Act One Scene Two

When the audience gets to the suite, they should be made to seat anywhere they find, especially the chiefs. Reservation of seats for the chiefs might distort the audience immersive experience, or can bring back the atmosphere gotten from the proscenium stage. Aderopo and Ojuola can also come from the entrance to the living room. This scene ends with Odewale going to the bedroom, to bring a matchet to swear.

Act Two Scene One

This act continues in the same place due to the stage direction that reads "The chiefs are sitting commenting on the allegation made by the king the day before" (25). This can be done with the chiefs talking to the audience. It aids their participation and also helps to know that the

scene about to be splayed out happens the next day after the previous scene. Aderopo then enters from the main entrance to the hotel living room. In cases where the chiefs push Odewale into the inner room, the movement should be directed towards the bedroom, which Ojuola comes out from.

Act Two Scene Two

This scene happens in the same place, but with Odewale coming out from the bedroom. This scene should be made usuch that Odewale and the first chief does not sit, but roams round the audience delivering lines. At the end of this scene, Odewale and Ojuola enters the inner room

Act Two Scene Three

Though this scene is set in the palace, I am of the opinion that this scene can happen in the bedroom since it is a scene where Ojuola is playing with her children. Hence, in the re-representation of this play in site-specific form, the issue of the state and the banter between the chiefs, Odewale and Aderopo happens in the living room, while intimate scenes happen in the bedroom. As this scene happens, one of the children can run in from the audience area to the bedroom. This would help in the audience reaction if the child had been in the audience area from the start of the play without being noticed that he/she is an actor. He can however, as the case may be, prompt other audience member to move to the bedroom. The song in the scene should be repeated until all the audience enter the room.

For this scene, the praise singing of Odewale should start from outside the hotel room to the living room. After the praise singing, Odewale enters the bedroom. Ojuola at this point can go to the entrance of the bedroom as the Royal Bard is about to deliver this line:

ROYAL BARD. ... Make way, I pray, let my greeting also
touch your wife. (37).

After this, the Royal Bard leaves, including the children, leaving Ojuola and Odewale in the bedroom.

Act Two Scene Four

This scene should continue in the bedroom instead of the stage direction which reads “ODEWALE, now in casual wear, emerges from the bedroom and is met by OJUOLA in the sitting room” (38). Due to the privacy of the bedroom, the entry of Akilapa should be restricted to the entry of the bedroom door. Odewale then goes to meet Akilapa at the entrance where the remainder of the scene happens.

Act Three Scene One

This scene happens at the entrance to the hotel room, the bedroom and the living room. The lines of Alaka at the beginning of the scene which reads “I must see him. I must – let go of me! I say I will see the King!” (41), should happen at the entrance to the hotel room. Ojuola who is evidently tired of the troubles in the land, moves out of the bedroom, to meet the first and second bodyguard. The entry of Abero in this scene is really not necessary, and his lines about the king asking for the name of Alaka can be delivered by Ojuola. At the lines delivered by Alaka, and Odewale below, Odewale should be the one that leads the audience out of the bedroom to the living room

ALAKA. Scorpion! My child, Scorpion!

ODEWALE. *[recognizing him]*. A-ah! Alaka, son of Odediran!

ALAKA. Scorpion! One that must not... (43).

Some lines should be said by Odewale, to know that this scene is actually shifting to the living room.

Flashback in Act Three Scene One

Though the flashback is a good tool of Narration, the suspense is better kept, because all that was revealed at the flashback was later made clear in the play. If at all the flashback is necessary to the director, then it is of the opinion that it should be done before the narration at the beginning of the play. Odeiwale's lines in this scene can then read

ODEWALE. I... I... a man died there. In my hands ...

ODEWALE. He provoked me. I went to my farm one morning. And what did I find? ... first this man... short, and old man. In his company, all over the farm, people-all sorts of people, armed with hoes. On my own farm. And what were they doing? Digging up my sweat! [I got into a fight with his retainers and with my own hands. I killed the man (*lines are that of the researcher's*)].

The woods heard my cry. The ground heard my running. There was nothing to stay for on my farm. (45-9).

This flashback can also be pre-recorded on a TV depending on the approach by the director. If there is a place where three footpaths meet close to the hotel, it is highly suggested that this play starts from there. The play then takes another direction, in the sense that after the audience meets at this point, they all move using directions on their mp3 to find their way to the hotel which should not be far. The road directions as recorded on the mp3, then gives them an instruction to play the next track, which has the narrator line pre-recorded. On getting to the hotel, act one scene one starts. As noted in the previous explanations of act one scene one, the actors should be positioned with the audience right from the beginning and the actors planted amongst the audience can help them find their way in case of they miss it.

Act Three Scene Two

This scene happens in the same place as the previous scene and ends with Odewale entering into the bedroom, and Akilapa, Labata and Agidi leaving to look for Gbonka.

Act Three Scene Three

Since there is a bathroom in the hotel, Alaka enters from the bathroom and starts her discussion with Ojuola which leads them to the dining area of the presidential suite. This also leads the audience to move to the dining area where they get to seat or stand for a while. Odewale also enters from the bedroom to meet hi there. THis scene has a great potential of incorporating the audience, hence, it should be greatly explored.

Act Three Scene Four

Due to the heavy commotion in the previous scene, Gbonka's entrance should make everybody move back to the living room. The line below should aid the movement of the audience.

ODEWALE. Come this way! [*GBONKA hesitates*]]

I said come! Are you deaf? (65).

The play then ends with Odewale, Adebisi exiting the hotel to signal the end, with choral dirge sung by the chiefs.

V

Potential Artistic Challenges for the Director

Challenges of getting an appropriate hotel can pose a great challenge towards the physicalization of this work.. A three to four star hotel should be looked for due to space. An hotel with a spacious lobby and parking space is required.

The health and safety of the audience should also be taken into full consideration. The width of the door space, and the room itself should be wide enough to accommodate the number of audience that can fit into it. With the diagram of the Presidential Suite, Eko Hotel in focus, the main entry is at the living room while the emergency exit is at the bedroom. This should always be taken into consideration, as audience could get trapped in the hotel, in case of an emergency. Due to the width of the entrance door which is 1397mm wide, and the way the room is constructed, for this type of performance, not more than 50 people should be admitted into the Presidential suite to see this performance¹. The Technical Standards for Places of Entertainment should however be adhered to in staging plays like this in the site specific form;

- Doors on escape routes should have a minimum height of 2060mm in new buildings, or at least 1960mm in existing building.
- Doors on escape routes should have a minimum width of 1050mm in a new building, or at least 850mm in an existing building...

Internal single doors in single building should be at least 800mm wide, or at least 775mm in an existing building. Where there are double doors, at least one of the doors should be this wide. (“RU Safe?” 7)

Due to the promenade nature of the performance, there is a high possibility of the performance to be stressful for the Nigerian audience especially, who are not used to the site-specific form. The narration with the mp3 at the beginning of the play can be enhanced if need be with visual introduction or spectacles as deemed fit by the director or the introduction of the characters² coming out of the entry into the hotel’s ³ reception area, which is not advised.

¹ More health and safety guidelines can be gotten from the yellow book “RU Safe?” by the Members from Technical Standards for Places of Entertainment.

² Care should be made that these characters come out, without the audience knowing that they are actors in the performance.

³ This should not be confused with the main gate of the hotel. Most hotels in Nigeria have two entries. The first entry is a gate with fenced wall that leads to the second entry which is usually a glass entry. This is different

VI

Conclusion

It should be noted that this article is not aimed at providing a detailed directorial note to the director, but how to physicalize the locales in the play in different sites. This is an attempt to refocus the minds of Nigerian theatre makers into decolonizing performance aesthetics, and embracing theatre spaces and the narrative it offers. Not only will this improve the theatre practice in Nigeria, but it will invariably provide more opportunities for theatre artiste, directors, and improve spectatorship in Nigerian theatre, thereby breaking the perceived notion of the superiority/authenticity of proscenium theatre. In conclusion, refocussing the minds of artiste into unconventional spaces will help to reduce the rate of poverty and joblessness prevalent in the Nigerian theatre industry.

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from five star hotels like Eko Hotel in Lagos, where the first gate leads to a big parking space and series of entries into different buildings. In this hotel, there is not second glass entry (except for Eko Signature) but an open space that leads to elevators where the rooms can be accessed. In summary, the director can adapt the play to suit different hotels

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