

From Page to Stage: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Language of African Theatre Revisited

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A play's production team has the task of interpreting the dramatic text into a theatrical production. The director and his cast have to create semiotic codes by which to present to the audience their understanding of the playwright's message to the audience. The director, having an upper hand, in such cases, tends to spend time to keenly pre-empt the audience's theatre literacy levels to be able to communicate to them in a sign system or language that they can understand. It is within this shared language that the contribution of the production team - a director, designer, and thespians, among others to the interpretation of a text can be understood (Balme, 2010). The transformation of a text from the script to a stage performance becomes a process akin to translation from one language to another; from verbal language adorned with implied supra-segmental features to a performative language whose basis is not idioms –as is with literary language- but voice, movement fabric, paint and so on.

In this endeavor, the director, in collaboration with the rest of the crew and cast has to make sense of the written. Primarily, a director's energy is directed towards the dialogue - and its punctuation and articulation- and stage directions to guide him on the characters' appearance, movement and the set - and its location and appearance - as some of the crucial elements that characterize a theatrical text (*Ibid*, 2010: 119-121). A director's interpretation of these is what uniquely differentiates one performance from another.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is well known for his novels and critical writings. His enormous contribution to theatre studies and practice cannot be ignored either. His flair in fiction writing and critical deliberations on the postcolonial cultural artifacts has largely propelled him as one of the most celebrated icons of African Literature. Yet specifically, he has had immense influence our understanding of African theatre. First, Ngugi has made a multi-faceted contribution to African Theatre as a playwright, scholar, critic, performer and a champion of indigenization of African theatre. As a playwright, Ngugi's first play, *The Black Hermit*, question imperial cultural vestiges that propagated imperial dominance in a neocolonial Africa. His other plays such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *This Time Tomorrow*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and the unpublished, "Mother Sing for me" have remained renowned in theatre spaces not only in Kenya but across the continent with their strong socio-political messages.

To the point when he got involved in what would later be called Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre, Ngugi's interest in flaunting indigenous African theatrical structure within Modern African drama could not be underestimated. One of the major reminders of Kamiriithu today remains the play; *I will Marry when I want* (1982).

Even though Ngugi's plays are sometimes co-authored, his influence and ideologies in these plays may be viewed against a backdrop of his input in Theatre through his commentaries on African theatre outside the plays. One such influential context in which his opinions on African theatre is expressed is his 1986 work, *Decolonizing the Mind*, in which he grapples with the slippery topic of the language of African theatre. My interest here is to create a basic yet significant nexus between Ngugi's theatrical prescriptions, stated or implied and his play writing practice. Ngugi comes out as a scholar, whose theoretical presuppositions are not mere rhetoric but could be exemplified in his earlier works. I thus base my argument on two elements of great significance to a director of the selected plays, namely, *The Black Hermit* (1962) and *I will Marry when I Want* (1982).

Wa Thiong'o (1986:41) asserts that "imperialism stopped the free development of the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual and ceremonial practices of the peasantry. The real language of African theatre could only be found ... in their life, history and struggles. In his practice, wa Thiong'o attempts to recapture the lost form of theatre found freely in life, history, ritual and struggles. He applauds the Kamiriithu stage which he calls an "actual empty space" (*Ibid*: 42) of which he is proud for it connected itself to the community to an extent that the performance was not just limited to the present audience but it was extended to anyone could see the performers, including the birds in the tall eucalyptus trees behind the auditorium. The free flow of performers and viewers is lauded. This description implies that the "free flow" cannot be the same every time the same theatre piece was performed. The flow anticipates minimal fixed stage directions, a feature that is common in *The Black Hermit*.

In the *Black Hermit*, Ngugi rekindles as an aspect in traditional African theatre; the play largely minimizes its use of stage directions. Wa Thiong'o vaguely presents this element to the director making it open to various interpretations depending on a director's taste, background and production budget. Stage directions in the 76-page play, the longest and most detailed stage directions usher in Act two and occupy five and a half lines. Stage directions are very important in modern theatre as they give the director and thespians indication of movement and scene arrangement. Given the structure of traditional African theatre, stage directions were minimal and not fixed since "it could take place anywhere - wherever there was an empty space." (wa Thiong'o, 1986:37). The performance was oral and existed among other communal activities, which took place in various cultural and spatial locations. Ngugi's experience with Western drama- which are conventionally replete with detailed stage descriptions and directions- notwithstanding, *The Black Hermit* leaves out stage directions even when it is almost obvious that such directions are necessary for a director's interpretation of the text.

The playwright thus gives the director a freehand in deciding how to package and present the performance. Pre-colonial theatre had scripts, which existed in the mind of the performers. The performer was entrusted with the rendition of the story. Detailed stage directions pre-empt a one-sided interpretation of the script into a performance. A unilateral interpretation of the script into a performative language was not pre-empted as would be in the case of a written script. So, even though Ngugi had not come out fully

championing for a better language of African theatre, my understanding is that he was already practicing it, within his modern African theatre practice as exemplified in the *Black Hermit*.

In comparison, *I Will Marry When I Want* exhibits a detailed use of stage directions that easily paints a picture of a play much easier to block when directing. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miiri get into details of even expressing what appears to be the obvious. Even mere indications such as "another day" in *I will marry when I want* (p. 55) are not reflected in *The Black Hermit*. In Act 1 (pp. 19-20), Kiguunda has been reminiscing about how expensive cost of living has become. From the beginning of the play to this point, he blames the rise on the poor performance by the state. His wife and daughter - Wangeci and Gathoni's - conversation intercepts his nostalgic outpouring. Going back to Kiguunda, an obvious stage direction precedes his dialogue: [*As if his thoughts are still on wages and price increases*]. This is unnecessary to a director who has comprehended the character's role very well. An actor who is fully into character after proper rehearsal also finds this redundant. Since the very dialogue brings back his emotions in the previous dialogue before Wangeci and Gathoni's interruption of Kiguunda's thoughts on how much life has changed. In fact, his thoughts should not even be moved from the main issues in his mind throughout this scene.

In *I will Marry when I Want* at the end of the dance and song flashback in which Wangeci and Kiguunda's courtship is re-enacted, the stage directions are so elaborate that the director easily visualizes the scenes on stage as he reads through the script. It reduces strain on directing. Yet, some of the stage directions, instead of fully elaborating -for the director - production requirements such as props, they explain the obvious to near mockery of the function of stage directions. In act 1 (p. 42), "*A knock at the door: all eyes turn to the door.*" This is expected. When a knock at the door interrupts an ecstatic moment of song and dance, the occupants of the room are expected to turn their eyes to the door. However, their reaction can only be emphasized in stage directions if they respond to the apparently audible knock in an unexpected manner.

Similarly, two very distinct couples walk into Kiguunda's house: Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his wife Jezebel's wealth is displayed in their dressing and general demeanor. They are clearly contrasted with Samuel Ndugire and his wife Hellen. The latter couple has recently just recently started gaining some wealth. Through the description of their costume, the director and the thespians are able to understand better the contrast in the two pairs of characters. To the audience, the two couples' level of richness is distinguished through costume and prop as described in the stage directions, "*Kioi for instance, is dressed in an expensive suit with a hat and a folded umbrella for a walking stick.*" These directions call for a director's proper understanding of the historical period in which the play is set. Thus, withdrawing this play from its historical setting renders some of the very significant costume and props described meaningless. Less detailed stage directions could probably enhance the script's timelessness. For instance, currently, in the 21st century, walking with an umbrella for a walking stick is more humorous than fashionable.

I Will Marry When I Want invokes another very pertinent component of the language of African theatre as not only described by Ngugi himself in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) but also strongly and continually reiterated by African theatre experts and practitioners: The inseparability of song and dance from theatre in Africa's oral tradition. *I will Marry When I Want* incorporates song and dance into the narrative fabric of the play. Compared to *The Black Hermit*, the play permits extremely detailed stage directions to the production crew and cast. However, the song and dance motif may pose a great challenge to directing the play. Singing, dance choreography and directing have to be synchronized in order to communicate seamlessly to

the audience. A director's challenge comes in making all these varied art forms to appear natural in a spur-of-the-moment as most song and dance in the traditional national forms of theatre were. The songs and particular dance moves were well known since they had been passed down through the generations albeit with spontaneous modifications during performances. So the only thing needed for the rhythm to flow was the audience who doubled up as performers and space or occasion.

Songs carry class opinions. The wealthy such as Kioi wa Kanoru's class who are content with the neocolonial status quo yet hiding in Christianity sing (p.46) as they extort the poor. They sing Christian songs of contentment. Kiois and the Ndugiris' songs applaud the status quo. They express the two couples' contentment with life. Their songs allude their present socio-economic positions to their acceptance of Christianity. This song, therefore, tries to persuade the Kiguundas to see the beauty in the singers' lives:

*Wild animals and diseases
And even poverty can't get at me
For they are frightened by the bright flames around me
For I am completely dressed up in the splendor of God.*

(p.47)

The song drives the point home for Kiguunda. Fed up with the singers' theatrics, he loses his temper. To a director, this means that the songs need to be strongly considered in the process of play production. This should start all the way from casting, directing and ensuring that through proper rehearsals, the actors master their role and deliver appropriately, since songs carry most of the pertinent messages in this play.

I will Marry when I Want employs song and dance to show off and create admiration in the national cultural practices that easily culminated into theatre. The traditional African beauty of the community including *gitiiro* (p. 67), courtship songs, tribulations that Africans underwent during independence struggles after the warriors took an oath (p. 70). Ngugi reiterates that pre-colonial theatre communities living in the space currently called Kenya was not isolated with a clear-cut borderline between the performers and the audience or better still, consumers of the performance. The consumption and performance involved enjoyment, moral instruction and played a major role in communal survival (wa Thiong'o, 1986). Since these spectacular performances had been interfered with, their presence in the play carries with it nostalgic memory of the past while at the same time carries questions serious thematic issues in the narrative. What begins as a mere memory of a song and dance when Wangeci and Kiguunda were courting takes us through a detailed flashback of necessity, exposing various grievances faced by the workers (p. 23). The songs detail the people's urge and consequent regrets in fighting for and achieving political independence. Therefore, song and dance cannot easily be removed from the story as they strongly contribute to theme, plot and character development.

Song and dance other than their aesthetic value in the dramatic narrative, they break monotony of dialogue, spicing up the rendition of the narrative. Gicamba's use of expressive body language "to convey his message, which so far, his wife challenges." Through dialogue, Gacamba tries to explain the conditions of factory workers vis a vis their meager wages. Yet, Njooki his wife, had rather he kept mum over it and comply for his safety. Gicamba resorts to song and dance through which he and Kiguunda infuse the same message into song and dance and repeats the same point without Njooki's criticism.

Works Cited

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