A SCENOGRAPHIC MANUAL FOR ALEX ASIGBO’S
WAR OF THE TIN GODS

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Introduction

From the early beginnings of recorded history, playwrights have written plays to achieve certain ends. An underlying reason for crafting a play, undoubtedly, is to pass across certain information to whoever comes in contact with the play either by reading it or by watching a performance of it. To pass across the message in a play, a playwright may adopt any of several styles of playwriting that are available to him or her. In the same way, the playwright may locate the actions of the play in any number of environments, ranging from the natural world that humanity is more accustomed to, to the supernatural and the fantastic (pre-life, after-life or simply another realm of existence) which tend to be more of creations of the imagination.

The locale(s) of a play may not necessarily determine how successful a play is as a text. Such parameters of the success of a play as literature surely lie more in the realm of the appropriation and deployment of language; the believability or otherwise of the characters; the plot of the play, its arrangement and plausibility; the issues treated in the play and how they are treated; indeed, the general craftsmanship of the play and how it is able to appeal to the sensibilities of the audience.

When a play transits, however, from literature to theatre by way of performance, the locale(s) of action and how they are achieved on stage become huge determinants of the success or otherwise of the play as theatre. Thus a playwright may locate the actions of a play in environments and worlds out of the ordinary without necessarily bothering about how they may be realized on stage. Such headache, as it were, lies with the person charged with the task of translating the text of the play into a living organism on stage before an audience.

Of all the persons saddled with the responsibility of translating a play text into a performance, the scene designer is squarely responsible for the delineation of the physical space and the actualisation of the setting to be used for the enactment of
the actions of the play. The scene designer conceptualises and designs the setting(s) for the performance based on the demands of the script and some other parameters that are external to the script. Molinta Enendu in “Theatrical Design in Stage Production” gives a brief of the stages that theatrical design should go through. Enendu says design starts as a thought process that relies on imagination which is then transferred onto paper in the form of sketches, detailed drawings and model. In doing this, the designer gathers information from other members of the production team and the script (27).

In the course of making the scenic design for a performance, the designer must be conscious of how effective the setting would be to the actors in the execution of their roles and how clearly or otherwise the message of the setting, and in consequence the message of the play and the performance, would be conveyed to the audience. This is why the design so created must be reflective of what is desired to bring the play alive in performance and to convey the message to the audience.

**Scenography and Performance**

Every theatrical performance invariably takes place within a given scenic environment. This is because, as Edwin Wilson puts it, “The theatre experience does not occur in a visual vacuum … always present are the visual images of scenery” (333). Thus we notice that from pre-historic times, the scenic environment has always featured whenever the art of theatre was engaged in. Talking from an Occidental point of view, Edward Wright traces the purposes that the scenic background has served in the various eras that theatre has gone through. He traces the scenic background to a hut at the end of the Greek acting area which was known as *skene*. According to Wright, this hut served the purpose of concealment for the actors to change their costumes and masks. He then goes on to say that for the Roman era, it served basically a decorative function, for the Medieval era that of conveying mood, for the Renaissance era it was suggestion of locale while for the modern era it served the purpose of portraying place (5). Of course scenery served more than the purposes ascribed to them by Edward Wright in the various eras. The import of the above narrative, however, is the indispensability of the scenic background in theatrical performances.

Even within our own indigenous theatrical performance practices, scenery, in one form or the other, has always been present. Different shrines and groves were and are decorated for the purpose of the performances enacted therein. Village squares are also prepared to create some kind of background against
which the performances are given. Without such a background, the performance would not acquire the kind of evocative spirit expected of it. It would not convey the desired message and may not elicit the kind of response expected from the participating audience. Charles Nwadigwe concurs with the above view in his essay “Art and Attitude: Imperative for design in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre”. Nwadigwe makes reference to N. Ugonna who argues that in Igbo masquerade performances, the *Ulo* and *Ekwuru*, amongst others, serve as the scenic backgrounds in the village square. Drawing from this, Nwadigwe contends that the forest often serves as the scenic background for traditional African theatre performances, and that “ritual drama often makes use of elaborate setting and decoration to depict the sacredness and aura of the shrine” (423). These submissions help to amplify the point that the scenic background cannot be done away with in theatre performances, and this is irrespective of the historical period of the performance or the culture in which it is situated.

As noted earlier, the scenic environment for a performance may acquire any number of characteristics, and it may range from the natural and realistic to the unnatural and fantastic. Whatever the colouration of the scenic background, it serves basically the same function, which is to provide an architectural environment against or in which a performance is enacted. Of course, the functions of the scenic background go beyond merely providing an architectural environment. This is why, while discussing the objectives of scene design, Edwin Wilson avers that a scene designer has a number of objectives to fulfil, among which are

1. Creating an environment for the performers and for the performance.
2. Helping to set the mood and style of the production.
3. Helping to distinguish the realistic from non-realistic theatre.
4. Establishing the locale and period in which the play takes place. ..... 

(337)

Numbers 3 and 4 above are quite germane to our discourse. That is scenery that depicts realistic and non-realistic environments clearly, in addition to also portraying an unambiguous representation of the locale of action within its historical period. When these are properly done, the scenery not only aids the actors in the enactment of their roles but also helps in the effective staging of the story. In this way, the audience is better placed to follow the actions, understand what is presented and receive the message passed across.

The scenic environment created for a production ought, therefore, to function like a raconteur who captivates the audience and narrates the story of the
performance. This is because the scenic environment is the springboard that launches the performance, it is the vehicle that conveys the actors from one locale to another on their journey through the performance, and ultimately delivers the performance to the audience for understanding and appreciation. Ayodele Adesina in his essay “Scenographer as a Storyteller in Nigerian Theatre” argues that the scenic background so created for a production must avail such “… a theatrical experience vivid picturization …” (156), that the scenographer must be able to capture the particular environment suggested by the play (especially given that some playwrights hardly suggest the locale of their plays) and present same to the audience like a storyteller would. Such a picturization created by scenography enhances the quality of the performance, the believability of it and a clearer transmission of the message to the audience.

The Play
The play War of the Tin Gods traces the journey of two earthlings, Aba and Aki, who are sent on a mission to the nether world to fetch two ancestors that would help them re-invigorate the dying art of playwriting bedevilling them. Aba and Aki begin their quest at the bar of Pa Tuola, the famous palm wine drinkard. They approach Pa Tuola’s bar dressed in ridiculous costumes full of gourds and charms ostensibly to ward off evil. They are barely saved from being beaten up by Agbako, the strong arm of the gods and messenger of Olodumare, when he sees them. And following pleas by Pa Tuola, Agbako agrees to take them to Olodumare’s court.

At the court, which has ancestors in attendance, including Chebe and Zuluike, Aba and Aki passionately make their case to be allowed to go back to earth with two ancestors, Woye and Emi, so they could put more life to the art of playwriting on earth. Olodumare says only one ancestor may be allowed to return to earth at a time and asks the duo of Aba and Aki to make a choice, a decision they are unable to arrive at as each prefers one writer to the other. At this point, Chebe proposes a contest between Woye and Emi to determine who would go back to earth, a proposition rejected by Zuluike as she considers Emi not worthy a writer to engage in a contest with Woye. She then suggests that Woye should be sent, saying, however, that should Olodumare allow two ancestors to be released, then she should accompany Woye on the trip to earth. Olodumare, however, opts to hold the contest. He, therefore, summons Woye and Emi to his court.

After much heated debate between Woye and Emi, a debate in which each strives to show why the other is not a worthy writer, strives to show that the work of the
other does not represent the best interest of humanity, indeed a debate in which each tries to
deconstruct the other, Olodumare attempts to weigh the weight of their words but Emi protests
that such a process is disadvantageous to him. Olodumare then calls on the ancestors for their
judgement. At this, Zuluike pitches her tent with Woye while Chebe sides with Emi, just as Aba
decides on Woye while Aki opts for Emi. Since it appears the ancestors and the sojourners are
unable to decide on a winner, Olodumare elects to make a choice of one of them, at which point
Eshu and Ogun burst onto the court to fight the courses of their respective wards. A stalemate
thus ensues with Orunmila stepping in to propose a middle course of a fusion of the essences of
Ogun, Eshu and Orunmila. Olodumare then decrees and sends the emissaries back home to await
the birth of a redeemer for their dying art of playwriting, a redeemer that would embody the
essences of Ogun, Eshu and Orunmila.

War of the Tin Gods is modelled after The Frogs by Aristophanes. The Frogs also tells of a
journey to the underworld (Hades) to bring a dead playwright back to life to restore the dignity
of Greek tragedies. The journey is embarked upon by Dionysus, accompanied by his slave
Xanthias. After a lot of hiccups along the way, they eventually arrive in hades and fortuitously
meet a contest between Euripides and Aeschylus for the title of Best Tragic Poet in Pluto’s court.
At the heat of the contest, a scale is brought to weigh their words and Aeschylus wins. But
Dionysus, who was appointed the judge, does not quite make up his mind just yet. He then asks
the playwrights to give advice on how to save Athens. Aeschylus gives the better advice and
wins again. Pluto, the ruler of the underworld, then releases Aeschylus back to life to help
Athens regain her pride of place.

There are lots of similarities between Aristophanes’ The Frogs and Alex Asigbo’s War of the Tin
Gods: from the journey to the nether world with the accompanying hazards, the contest
organised for the two writers in contention respectively, to the use of scale to weigh the words of
the writers amongst others. One major difference between both plays, however, is that in War of
the Tin Gods, Olodumare sends the emissaries back to earth to await the birth of the one to
redeem their art of playwriting because there is no clear cut winner while in The Frogs, Aeschylus is released back to earth by Pluto. Both plays also deal with known and identifiable
characters. However, while The Frogs presents the characters plainly with their original names in
a clear and identifiable manner, War of the Tin Gods coats the characters in veneer of other
names. But the attributes given the characters easily give them away. This is in spite of the
spirited efforts of the playwright to the effect that
The characters and events described in this play are entirely the author’s imagination and bear no semblance whatsoever to persons dead or living. Any resemblance is therefore unequivocally fortuitous. (v)

This assertion by the playwright is far from the reality inherent in the play. This style of writing with identifiable characters but with different names from the original is also adopted by Esiaba Irobi in the play *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* that deals with the activities of a group of African writers and critics at a writers’ convention. Indeed, *War of the Tin Gods* has good company in this regard.

**Scenographic Demands**

Every play is located within a given scenographic landscape. This is a landscape that the playwright would have visualized as being best for the dialogue and actions of the play. Such a landscape manifests in the physical and other realms such as sociological, political, religious, economic, and so on. The landscape also manifests in external and internal dimensions. Of course these different landscape levels have influence on one another, thus the characteristics of one may affect how another turns out. Our focus in this essay, however, is the physical landscape of action which, going by our earlier thesis, does not necessarily stand alone. It is influenced by other landscape dimensions just as it also influences them. A reading through of *War of the Tin Gods* reveals certain characteristics about the physical landscape of the play.

The play is divided into two broad parts: Sequence One and Sequence Two. Within each sequence, however, are other divisions that are marked, essentially by smooth transitions from one locale to another and from one set of actions to another. These inner divisions in each of the sequences occur within one broad physical landscape.

A tabular representation of the scenographic demands of *War of the Tin Gods* would take the following form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene/Division</th>
<th>Scenographic Demand</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sequence One (1st Part)</td>
<td>Bare stage</td>
<td>Road to Pa Tuola’s bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence One (2nd Part)</td>
<td>Table with gourds of palm wine and cups, sign post, bench.</td>
<td>Pa Tuola’s bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sequene Two (1\textsuperscript{st} Part) & Palace setting. “Only symbolic sets indicative of a court are needed”. (P. 11) & Olodumare’s court  
Sequene Two (2\textsuperscript{nd} Part) & Same palace setting but with mats and stools for the crowd brought by Emi Eshu & Olodumare’s court  

Scenographic Considerations

The scenographic demands of \textit{War of the Tin Gods} are clear, straightforward and austere. In Sequence One, the playwright gives the following description:

\begin{quote}
Lights. Bare stage except for a table with gourds of palm wine and cups. Emulewu the bar boy comes out with a sign post on which is written this legend “Pa Tuola’s Palmwine Bar” Next he brings out a bench and positions it up stage left Enter Aba and Aki They are ridiculously att[\i]red with big gourds hanging from their necks and danshikis ringed with amulets. (1)
\end{quote}

The stage directions above seem to suggest an environment that is rather austere. However, if we consider the stature of the owner of the bar, Pa Tuola, and his antecedents, we cannot concede such an austere disposition to his bar. After all, this is a bar that supposedly hosts visits from eminent ancestors. Such a bar would need to be well appointed, within the aesthetic dictates of the traditional setting in the netherworld. It would need a shelf for the gourds of palm wine, a holding area for the cups, miniature tables and chairs in addition to the big table and the bench. There would also be the need for some artistic pieces and decorations that would help to imbue in the setting the ambience of a traditional bar.

Given that Aba and Aki actually try to hide from Agbako while wearing their voluminous costumes on which are attached big gourd, it would be near impossible to do that under the bench. This is where the shelf would come in handy, as it can provide the necessary shield to execute that action.

In Sequence Two, the playwright gives a terse scenic description to the effect that what is required is the “Court of Olodumare” and then adds the qualifier: “Only symbolic sets indicative of a cour[t] are needed” (11). However, given the personality of Olodumare as the father of the world, a father who every other god is beneath and pays obeisance, the scenographic environment created must attempt to project that personality. A glimpse of Olodumare’s personality is shown at the opening of Sequence Two:
AGBAKO: Silence distinguished ancestors! For the world father himself approaches. ANCESTORS STAND AS AGBAKO PROSTRATES Olodumare o! You who even the bravest of the gods disdain to look straight in the eye! You whose footsteps tremble the earth! Salutations Mighty Iroko that provides shelter and nourishments to creatures beneath its unending stream. Calm, but deep. You whose anger swallows villages and towns whole and entire! Father of multitude in whose house diverse creatures are found. Salutation PROSTRATES AGAIN OLODUMARE SITS AND THE ANCESTORS SIT ALSO. (11)

The above quote profiles a royal personage, the father of the world, as it were. He is the head of the pantheon before whom every other being, ancestor or god is subject. Olodumare’s personality equates that of the Greek Zeus. It is fitting, therefore, that his court be appropriately appointed.

Given the above, it is the contention of this writer that it would be doing harm to the personality of Olodumare to adopt the use of “symbolic sets” for the court as recommended by the playwright. We need to go beyond the prescriptions of the playwright. And we find impetus for this in the words of David Welker who admonishes designers thus:

The designer should at this point be given a warning … Although he should study the scenic description given in the script, he should feel free to develop his own design independently: the author’s suggestions may be helpful, but they are suggestions, not restrictions, and may, if it seems wise, be completely rejected. (112)

We thus recommend the designing and creation of a well appointed Yoruba palace. A palace befitting the status of the alpha god, a court in which the nobility of the netherworld are entertained, a palace in which Olodumare himself holds court. The palace setting should at once convey a sense of religiosity as the ultimate spiritual haven, and also a feeling of military might as the supreme protector of the netherworld and the human race. This would tie in with the quality of the characters that the play parades, and the import of the issues that it addresses.

Conclusion
The script or the scenario of a play usually forms the base for a dramatic performance. Every other thing in the performance is done in relation to the dictates of the script or the scenario. For a written text, the primary information contained therein that would be useful to the scenographer are the stage
directions or scenic descriptions put down by the playwright. These stage directions delineate the characteristics and the boundaries of the scenographic environment of action. They present to us the world of the play as visualized by the playwright. Beyond the stage directions, we also would have the dialogue of the characters which may make allusions to certain features of the physical environment of action. In addition to these would also be props or some special effects that are deployed as part of the action in the play. All of these suggest to the designer how to craft the scenic environment for the production. But these are suggestions, not necessarily prescriptions. It is on this score that Molinta Enendu argues that

... the description of the setting supplied by the author, may or, may not profit the designer. A designer is free to develop his ideas independently no matter how helpful the author’s suggestions may appear. (160)

It is on the strength of the above submission by Enendu that these considerations have been put forth towards the creation of the scenographic environment for a production of War of the Tin Gods.

The scenographic considerations enunciated in this essay have gone beyond the scanty descriptions supplied by the playwright because in making designs for a performance, the designer would normally also consider other factors like the historical period of the play, the social, political, economic, religious and cultural dimensions of the play, amongst others. Having considered all of these, it is our contention that the play deserves a more robust scenographic background that would not only stimulate the actors into giving their best, but that would also assist the audience to derive the utmost meaning and message from the play.

Works Cited


