TOTAL THEATRE AESTHETICS
ON STAGE WITH TEMIENOR TUEDOR’S

*TO CAST A FIRST STONE*

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Abstract
As universal as the theatrical art is, it is usually performed according to certain parameters. And the parameters that shape how a theatrical performance is packaged and presented to the public are in turn determined by a number of factors. Such factors could be economic, infrastructural, cultural, political, social or simply style. Given the above, this essay investigates the Total Theatre style of theatrical production and looks at it vis-à-vis its historical antecedents and its defining characteristics. The essay also attempts to distinguish between the African and Occidental concepts of Total Theatre. Using Temienor Tuedor’s “To Cast a First Stone”, within the descriptive research method, the essay discusses how the Total Theatre style may be applied in performance context. The essay posits that, indeed, Total Theatre is a style of production that resonates with African theatre performance aesthetics, and this is clearly shown in the production under reference.

Keywords: Total Theatre, Aesthetics, To Cast a First Stone, performance

Introduction
The idea of a theatrical production presupposes the mingling of several
elements/arts to achieve a unified whole. Such elements include the script (as a raw material), artistic directing, theatre and stage management, costume, make-up, scenographic designing, lighting designing, sound designing, song/music, movement, acting, etc. It is the quality/quantity, and the manner in which these elements are “mixed” that determine the particular aesthetic flavour of the individual production. This is what constitutes style in play production. Temienor Tuedor’s *To Cast a First Stone* is one play that was produced within the framework of a particular style – what has been termed African Total Theatre.

What follows is an analysis of the production of this play in 1996 and 1997, when it was an unpublished script, at the Theatre Arts Studio of Delta State University, Abraka. The particular productions were under the artistic direction of Eni-Afolabi Jologho Umuko, popularly known as Eni-Jones, while this writer was the Scenographer/Technical Director.

Temienor Tuedor is a graduate of English – Literature stress – from the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife). This was after his secondary education at Government College, Ughelli. For some years, he was a member of staff of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) during which period the play was written before the playwright went into full-time business.

**THE PLAY TO CAST A FIRST STONE**

Before the analysis of the production, it is fit to know the play in question. The actions in *To Cast a First Stone* take place primarily in a drink shack in a university campus. The play shows us a group of students who congregate at the drink shack of Madam Palms to unwind from the stress of academic life and to engage themselves in intellectual discourse while reflecting their own idiosyncrasies, petty jealousies and love lives.

The play opens with Alagoa making amorous advances at the coquettish
Madam Palms. Their play is interrupted, first by Funke – niece to Madam Palms – who comes to collect money to make her hair, and later, by Tietie and Tinuke. Subsequently, Obasa comes in, followed by Sule, and then Funke comes back from the salon. Together, they decide to act out portions from “the good old story of Jabua” (19) in which we are first presented the bit between Acting Charman and Contractor x-raying the high level of corruption (especially in government offices) and the moral depravity to which persons of supposed importance/integrity in the society have fallen.

The next bit we see is a caricature of our so-called political and military rulers. Obasa plays the roles of these rulers (two sides of the same coin) who pretend that they do not want the position of leadership “thrust” on them but once they get it, they proceed to engage in all kinds of subterfuges to line their pockets with ill-gotten money. The bit that follows is that about the embezzlement of public funds and the habit of setting public buildings on fire to cover up such misdeeds. To make matters worse, innocent people are held responsible for the embezzlement and arson while the culprits go scot-free. Rich Man, in the said bit, lays off two workers because his concubines were insulted. This is after setting the Audit Department on fire to cover the tracks of his embezzlement. The students themselves are not spared, as they unleash attacks on one another, exposing their false attitudes and the veneer in their existence. This goes on as they x-ray the pretence exhibited by women in the guise of living the life of a “liberated woman”. Tinuke bears the brunt of attack, particularly from Sule, and this dovetails into a revelation of Sule and Tinuke’s childhood romantic escapades – which resulted in pregnancy and consequently the birth of a son. Consequent upon this discovery, Tinuke leaves Tietie for Sule and they both depart to see their son. Madam Palms’ infidelity is also exposed in this bit just before Inspector Aboyowa rolls in, only to be beaten by Funke and Tietie. The play ends with Tietie and Funke leaving Madam Palms in a confused state, with Aboyowa unconscious on the floor.
It needs to be added here that the various bits in the play are bridged by the students arguing over and discussing the bits they present and their lives on campus generally. The play exposes a lot of the ills that plague our nation today: corruption, greed, insincerity, clinging on to power, insensitivity to the welfare and well-being of others, the hollowness of the women’s liberation ideology, ethnicity, social stratification, and the shackles of feudalism. People do not want anything to do with other persons outside their religious circle, ethnic base or social class. Even political affiliation is a yardstick for measuring the level of acceptability a person should enjoy or how much truth one should say about that person. And yet the Nigerian state, which the play mirrors, keeps preaching about national integration and tolerance, keeps “fighting” corruption, keeps looking for ways to grow the economy, to promote social justice and inclusiveness. These being done by leaders whose sole aim is to steal as much as their manipulation of the system can allow. These are what constitute what the playwright terms our “national characteristic confusion” (32).

*To Cast a First Stone* is veritably a treatise on our rottenness and the double standards that rule our very existence. Thus Sule says:

> I am flabbergasted by the hypocrisy of our breed. We lead our lives like specks of dust, galvanised and wafted along by libidinal impulses, yet feel all too holy. All too readily we condemn, criticise and damn others without ever even a cursory glance at ourselves. Was it not said somewhere in the Bible, “let him who has no sin cast the first stone.”? (49)

Indeed, for anyone to claim the right or privilege of casting the first stone they must first purge themselves of all iniquities and do away with all the vices that characterise us as a nation. The play presents a mirror image of the Nigeria of today and is in consonance with the views of Bakary Traore that a good work of the theatre must

> … identify with the struggle … It must present to the public themes which correspond to their own pre-occupations …
to express social reality in an objective way. (105)

This is because the problems that confront us, issues that militate against the attainment of our goals are created by persons who are in positions to determine how things should run. In effect, “the problem is a human one” (Traore, 105). Therefore, it is only the human beings who live in an environment that can effect the required change. It cannot be divinely done, no matter how pious one may claim to be. The play, therefore, asks us to take an introspective look at our sepulchral existence and make a change for the better. In terms of style, it is a total theatre kind of script. But before we go on to analyse how it bears the total theatre stamp, it is necessary we have an operational understanding of the term, “total theatre”.

**Total Theatre Aesthetics**

The concept called total theatre is one that is now also being used to describe a kind of staging that finds deep roots in the fertile African theatrical soil. The term is not necessarily restricted to the African continent as it has also been used to good effect in the United States of America and Europe. As a style of playwriting and play production, it has its own characteristics and qualities that are peculiar to it. The thrust of this discourse is on the production but it is necessary to also relate it to the script, which is more or less the primary raw material for the production. In discussing total theatre, therefore, it is instructive to have at the back of our minds what Oscar Brockett says in *The Theatre: An Introduction*, to the effect that

> Style results from the manner in which the play is presented in the theatre. The directing, acting, scenery, costumes, lighting, music and dance used to translate the play from the written script to the stage may each be manipulated to effect stylistic qualities. (58)

We shall thus be looking at the interplay of these various elements in terms of the number of times and manner of the interaction to situate
the production within the ambience of total theatre aesthetics.

The total theatre concept of production is used by scholars/theatre practitioners in Africa and across the seas in the United States of America and Europe. The concept, however, has some slight variation in these various cultures. Total theatre, in the Western viewpoint, is integrative as is held by Africans but their understanding of the term is much wider than the view held by African scholars. Indeed, Erwin Piscator extends the frontiers of the concept by distinguishing between what he called “theatre of totality” and “total theatre”. In Piscator’s view, “theatre of totality” refers to a physical architectural structure inside of which the spectator is stormed from all angles with projectors, moving footways, rising and descending stages, etc. “Total theatre”, he says, is different because it is a heterogeneous intermingling of text, song and pantomime (8-9). Derek Bowskill would, however, rather look at just one term “total theatre” but with about the same views expressed by Piscator about “theatre of totality” and “total theatre”. According to Bowskill, total theatre exists where the auditorium is laid out and furnished in much the same way as the actual environment where the events being enacted are believed to have taken place; thus the audience are more or less normal clients visiting the venue and the production is done naturally (285). Bowskill further argues that total theatre also refers to an assault on the audience from all around. He says it is a

… constant bombardment from actors, sound sources, lights, films, slides, television and moving scenery … Presentations involve techniques drawn from the music-hall, ballet, the circus, strip clubs, encounter groups and political rallies. (285)

And this concept of total theatre in the West is obviously different from the African concept, as we shall soon find out.

In the West as well, playwrights and directors are not exactly in one accord as to the meaning of the total theatre concept. Western
playwrights see total theatre as a direct confrontation between the actor and the spectator, that it is made manifest, as Billetdoux puts it, when a play “engages the whole of man in the secular activities of life and provokes the universe by the word” (30). Directors on their part tend to see total theatre as a form of theatre that brings together a wide variety of artistic forms in a homogenised wholesomeness as exemplified by the words of Erwin Piscator earlier referred to.

It is imperative at this point to draw a distinguishing line between what Occidental scholars mean by the term total theatre and the concept of African total theatre. According to Bode Osanyin,

The African Total Theatre explores the eclectic quality of the African indigenous theatrical forms in which music, dance, poetry, masking and topicality are, not only well blended, but also constitute important integral components. All these must belong structurally. (154)

In the same light, Meki Nzewi observes that doing away with such things as music and dance in any dramatic performance renders the product un-Nigerian and consequently un-African. In his own words,

… Stage productions not structured to, sequenced by, vected through, or tipped with music and dance or stylized movement is alien to the inherent Nigerian theatre sensibilities. (433)

Thus we note that theatre, according to the African, should be a blend of the elements outlined above. This point is strengthened by Ziky Kofoworola, a scholar who carried out extensive research on Hausa performing arts. He says art forms such as dialogue, dance, music, songs among others are the constituents of any dramatic endeavour (172). Kofoworola adds that these art forms must so integrate in performance that advantage is not given to any of the constituents. Although it should be stated that such blending as not to concede advantage to any of the constituting art forms is not always possible. Further, Abdoulaye Maiga
in his discussion of the “Social Role of Theatre” avers that these elements are
germane to the expression of the true spirit of African theatre (94). The same view
is held by Bode Osanyin who posits that the presence of these elements all point to
the fact that

The African total theatre is, by implication, an assemblage of all
African art forms in a highly concentrated, heightened and
dynamic theatrical event. (154)

In consequence of the existence and mixture of these elements in a theatrical
performance, it can be argued that an organic and unified theatrical event that bears
the African spirit is created.

It might be instructive to note at this juncture that total theatre has much in
common with another concept of playwriting and production: story-telling theatre.
Again, story-telling theatre has a predominantly African strain and in most cases
we find it overlapping with total theatre. In his discussion of how related or not the
Brechtian epic theatre is to the African story-telling theatre, ‘Diran Ademiju-Bepo
looks at the characteristics that define the two theatre forms and posits that

It is impossible to excise or disregard music and dance, song
and choreography in the study of the features of African theatre.
They are intrinsic to the theatrical expression as they are
intermingled in the arts of the theatre. (118)

These are characteristics that also shape total theatre practice. Story-telling theatre,
basically, is the narration of a story and the acting out of relevant portions either by
the narrator or by a group of actors. Story-telling theatre is not the main thrust of
this discourse but suffice it to say that it bears some basic connection with total
theatre as well as the production of To Cast a First Stone which is under
consideration in this essay. For the purpose of this paper, we shall subsume story-
telling theatre under total theatre aesthetics.
The question that may be asked at this point is: what are the staging techniques applicable to total theatre? It needs to be stated from the onset that, in terms of the scenic environment, total theatre does not demand any rigid form. The latitude may spread from the completely illusionistic to the merely symbolic. As Tugbokorowei puts it, what needs to be considered when staging a total theatre production are such things as “the nature of the play, the venue in which the production will take place, the resources available to the group, and of course the impact to be achieved by the particular production” (58).

These are very germane points because if a production is designed in a particular style without considering the requirements, challenges and drawbacks for staging the particular play, the production would not be harmonious and would not make meaning. In the same way, there should be a consideration of the venue and the equipment available. The same consideration is to be applied to the resources at the disposal of the group because if the production is designed lavishly with expensive accouterments whereas the group has meagre resources, then the group and the production would likely run into problems.

Indeed, as a way of overcoming this last problem, Jerzy Grotowski advocates reliance on the actor to create all that is needed. Grotowski advocates for, and places premium on the actor “… who changes his appearance before the spectator’s eyes, who forges himself a mask, suggests, transforms himself from thin to fat, from young to old, from character to character …” 18), and in that way advances the course of the production. In terms of music, Grotowski also advocates its creation on stage by the actors and says that set and costume must be consigned to the background. We must hasten to point out here that Grotowski is in no way advocating the non-importance of the technical aspects of production. It is not a situation where, as David Welker puts it, “the technical aspects of the production are simply there, taken for granted, seldom noticed focally or consciously” (2). Rather, it is about the fact that the scenic environment should not be designed in such a way as to
constitute a hindrance or a drawback to the effective realisation of the production. Other scholars such as Oscar Brockett (The Theatre: An Introduction 552) and Val May (43-44) have also advocated the simplification of the scenic environment in total theatre productions. Val May particularly expresses the view that the audience in total theatre productions are “not seeing an illusion of reality” (44), as the performance is non-illusionistic. Thus scenic units should sometimes be hollow and made as low as possible, particularly in arena productions.

Some other scholars, however, would rather veer away from the symbolic in executing the scenic environment for total theatre productions. Ziky Kofoworola advocates a movement towards the realistic in total theatre staging. In the book Hausa Performing Arts and Music, which he co-wrote with Yusef Lateef, Kofoworola discusses his production of Queen Amina of Zazzau by U. B. Ahmed. He avers that he employed realistic techniques in the staging, and goes on to list the visual features that helped in making the production a success:

(a) The dramatization of various components of the abstract ideas, thought, diction etc., in a logical sequence of folk-epic as an imitation of action and mirror of truth …
(b) The reproduction of mood, feeling, emotions and sentiments through the use of extrinsic means such as music, dance, mime, etc. …
(c) The reproduction of scenic situation through the use of scenic background which provides the illusion of the natural scenic setting. This is pursued in the use of different scenic design for court scenes, as against street and forest scenes.
(d) The use of costumes, props, etc. to authenticate the dramatic situation, characterisation etc.
(e) The use of make-up to create the right illusion especially in the characterisation of men to play the
role of women. (179)

Given the diversity of views expressed by different scholars and practitioners, we would thus notice that staging techniques in total theatre productions embrace virtually all production styles. What we need to consider is whether the style used brings out the essence of the play. If it does, then it is valid.

The foregoing has been concerned principally with the scenic environment of productions. But it needs to be pointed out here that what has been discussed above is applicable to every other thing that goes into the successful realisation of a production. The entire production process in a total theatre setting can be achieved within the wide spectrum of the symbolic and naturalistic styles.

**Total Theatre Reflected in the Play/Performance**

The play *To Cast a First Stone* is described in the blurb to the collection as being “more or less in the Brechtian tradition”. But is this really true? Admittedly, it bears a lot of the signposts of the Brechtian epic theatre style, but, given the nature of its presentation as a text and as a production, we cannot but ascribe to it a total theatre identification.

The Brechtian epic, essentially, has to do with productions that are episodic in nature, having songs that separate the different segments, coupled with large signs or posters that announce the various scenes in the production. The epic theatre, as enunciated by Bertolt Brecht, and captured by Sarah Stanton and Martin Banham in *Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre*, makes use of half curtain, half masks, summary projections, few props, visible stage machinery, songs that punctuate the action, and ‘cool’ or estranged acting. Brecht demanded that the spectator use reason to reflect upon the performance. (110)

The question to ask is: how are these characteristics outlined above reflected in the play and the production? As a text, *To Cast a First Stone*
cannot be said to be episodic in nature. The mere fact of such situations as Acting Chairman’s sequence, civil and military politicians’ sequence, workers’ sequence and classroom sequence are acted out in the same play does not make it episodic. In an episodic play, the scenes may not necessarily have a cause-and-effect relationship but they are organically linked to each other in terms of general direction of thought and situation, just as we find in Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage where the scenes are all linked to the war and its effects. In the case of To Cast a First Stone, we only have snatches taken from diverse sources and acted out as “plays” within the play. They are not scenes, in the conventional sense of the word, as the play is one long stretch of happenings in a drinking shack. The songs that are rendered in the course of the play are not meant to separate the different segments in the play but act as lubricants that propel the play forward and bring out the desired emotions/meaning.

As a production, the half curtain was not used. Neither were half masks nor summary projections or posters. Full complements of props necessary for the realisation of the play were used as well as a complete scenic background. The cool or estranged acting demanded by Brecht was not used in the production. Indeed, the play itself advocates full emotional involvement of the actors in whatever role they play. Obasa describes Alagua’s acting in the workers’ bit:

I know what it is: empathy. He so empathised with his role, he became the revolutionary worker striking down the oppressor.

(36)

What the play calls for is not estranged acting but the ability to transform oneself from one role to another in the course of the play. This is not epic acting but African total theatre.

The affinity of To Cast a First Stone to the total theatre concept is further brought to the fore in the sense that, in a total theatre setting, all elements of production integrate into an artistic and homogenous
whole, as was done with the production under discussion. This oneness and wholesomeness is not to be found in epic productions because, as Oscar Brockett in *History of the Theatre* notes, “Brecht did not believe that all the theatrical elements should be synthesised into a master work with a completely unified effect” (602). Rather, these elements are supposed to be deliberately disjointed in order to induce the alienation effect desired in such productions.

The setting for the production under discussion here was a mixture of the realistic and the symbolic. This particular approach does not detract from the philosophy of the production because there are no hard and fast rules regarding the design and construction of scenic environments for total theatre productions, as has been stated before. The realistic aspect of the setting was the main shack itself – the walls, roof, counter, chairs, tables, signboard, etc., while the symbolic came to the fore in the mini-settings for the “plays”-within-the-play. This deft mixture of the realistic and the symbolic was crucial to the successful realisation of the production. Our position is strengthened by the views of Edward Wright who posits that such a mixture of styles is

\[\ldots\text{ practical and effective when a drama calls for a great many short scenes or when it is necessary for the action to move from one locale to another very rapidly.}\]

(158)

Such rapid movement from one locale to another is a feature found in a great many total theatre plays. And in terms of production, the settings for such plays are designed in a way that would best bring out the essence of the performance. Again, Edward Wright admonishes that “as much or as little as the designer may wish in the way of props and scenery may be used to indicate locale” (158). And the style in which total theatre settings are designed span the whole latitude of the realistic to the symbolic. The settings for this particular *To Cast a First Stone* production was not different.

We may now wish to look at the settings for the different bits in the production.
Plate 1: Setting for opening; civil and military rulers; and Rich Man and Workers sequences.

Plate 2: Setting for Acting Chairman and Contractor sequence.
The lighting style adopted for the production was purely functional. This is particularly so because of the nature of the stage used for the production, which is the stage of the Theatre Arts Studio, Delta State University, Abraka. This Theatre Arts Studio is not a purpose built theatre but a multi-purpose university hall that has metamorphosed into a performance venue used by the Department of Theatre Arts of the university for teaching and performance purposes. Another determining characteristic is the kind and number of lighting equipment available at the Theatre Studio. Most importantly, the nature of the play itself shaped the lighting model adopted. The play has a number of sequences within it that should be acted within the confines of the shack. With the arrangement of the “acting areas” for the mini-plays, the light was dim on other areas of the stage while the “acting area” for any sequence was given bright light. By this, light was used to perform the function of staging the story by picking out the actions as the play unfolded. Some form of realism was also aimed at when Rich man burns down the Audit Department. This was done by having a Parabolic Sealed Beam Reflector instrument with red gel placed facing
up at the left back of the shack. The manipulation of this light had some convincing effect, although we must admit that if the theatre was better equipped, an effects projector would have given a better picture. Again, the style of lighting adopted is in consonance with the total theatre spirit of production. Lighting does not tie down itself to any particular style in total theatre productions. Rather, it is the nature of the play and the effect to be achieved that counts.

The songs used in the production were those written by the playwright as part of the play, except for the palm wine song raised by Sule and used to induce Madam Palms into allowing them “do concert” (20) in her drinking shack which was taken from the repertoire of the Palm Wine Drinkards (*Kegites*) Club. The way the songs are written and the way they were used are in conformity with total theatre aesthetics. They were not used to bridge gaps in the play but were rather intrinsic parts of the entire production, which conforms with the total theatre tradition. One should add, however, that using songs to bridge gaps in a production does not necessarily run against the grain of total theatre aesthetics. Dances were also choreographed to accompany the songs. Each of the songs has its own contextual and social meaning, and different dance steps appropriate to them were used in the production. The songs and dances, of course, blended with other production elements to achieve a unified and artistically dazzling wholeness.

Costumes appropriate to the characters were used. The primary characters came in their normal clothes – the students in shirts and trousers, blouses and skirts, gowns, etc. Madam Palms was decked in a typically “madamish” *buba* and wrapper while Inspector Aboyowa came in the black-on-black police uniform. The secondary characters like Acting Chairman, Contractor, Rich Man, Workers, President, etc., that were played by the primary characters – wore costumes that were appropriate to them, and the costumes were changed right on stage before the audience. This bears some semblance to theatrical engagements in villages (especially on moonlight nights) where the
actors change from character to character, and change their voices, movements/gestures, costumes to suit the different characters. And this is mostly done with the audience watching. It is instructive to note that total theatre aesthetics, which is the focus of this discourse, grew out of such environments. Ziky Kofoworola must have had this at the back of his mind while making the following submission: “That ‘total theatre’ style of production is relevant to the African performance is in compliance with the African tradition” (175). This point is particularly important because African playwrights necessarily draw from their archetypal imagination in creating their works. And this is despite whatever training the playwright may have gotten from wherever in the world. Thus we notice that the African spirit always runs through African creative works, consciously or unconsciously.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have tried to show that To Cast a First Stone is an African play written in the Total Theatre tradition and not in the Brechtian Epic tradition. So much has been postulated about Bertolt Brecht and his epic theatre. The epic theatre is a valid style of presentation and the aim here is not to discredit Brecht or deny him his place in world theatre practice and scholarship. It is simply to state that plays containing songs, dances, music, written in episodic manner, etc., are not necessarily epic in outlook. Depending on what informed the writing of the play, such plays by African authors more properly belong to the total theatre mould. It is a thing of the spirit, archetypal and inborn.

This is not to say that Brecht is without relevance in the world theatre. It is one’s humble opinion that Brecht should be studied more in historical perspective than in contemporary theatrical thinking, particularly where African performance aesthetic is concerned. This is more so when we realise that Brecht himself was rather confused about his epic theatre prescriptions. Frank Whiting says that

In fact, it may well be that Brecht’s worst enemy was Brecht himself … for whereas Brecht in theory seemed to say that
ideas and intellect should replace excitement and emotion, his productions tended to indicate that, far from banishing emotion and excitement, he was a master at exploiting them. (126)

But the confusion Brecht tended to exhibit regarding his theory and his practice of epic theatre is not the focus of this discourse. If we are to consign all plays that have the elements of total theatre that we had earlier enunciated to the epic mould, it would mean such plays as Farewell to a Cannibal Rage by Femi Osofisan, The Marriage of Anansewa by Efua Sutherland, The Slave Wife by Sam Ukala, Princess Esilokun by Eni Jologho Umuko, Ozidi by J. P. Clark, The Lion and the Jewel by Wole Soyinka and so many other plays by African authors all fall within the ambience of the Brechtian epic. This is not exactly true. They may have elements of Brechtian epic but they all belong more properly to the broad spectrum of African Total Theatre, and there, also, does To Cast a First Stone belong, for it is their cousin in spirit.

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**Dedication:**
This essay is dedicated to the memory of Eni-Afolabi Jologho Umuko (popularly called Eni-Jones), the director of the productions under study who departed this world in February, 2011.