

## A COMPARISON OF GROTOWSKI, BRECHT AND CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN THEATRE PRACTICE

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### Abstract

Since we see things differently, so also the way plays, are written, directed and designed can also differ. There is always one style or the other to follow depending on the way one wants to convey message to an audience. The most important thing is for the target audience to get the intended message either at the beginning, middle or end of the play. This paper seeks to examine the views and styles of two playwrights, designers and directors (Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht) and compare their styles with what is obtainable in contemporary Nigerian Theatre. This is directed at finding the best means to inform, communicate and educate the audience. The use of texts from the library, seminar papers, internet facilities, journals and other literary materials such as unpublished thesis and personal experiences garnered from the theatre as a director and designer will be relied upon for this work. In doing this, the author will basically attempt to establish some elements or branches of design being used in achieving set objectives. The article aims to investigate further the possible existence of styles or theories within contemporary educational theatres in Nigeria. For this work, representational style is relied upon as my theoretical framework. Over the years' experience has shown that the use of props, lights, scenery and other design elements has assisted greatly to communicate, educate and inform the audience in most performances. From the findings, it is observed that the styles of the two playwrights under study are still relevant in the styles of contemporary Nigerian Theatre practitioners. On the whole, it is clear that emphases on all aspects of Theatre branches are important to effective communication between the audience in plays whether of African or European origin. It is recommended that trainees be exposed to a variety of styles and theories so that they can be adequately equipped in their quest to communicate, educate and entertain their audience.

**Key Words:** Design, Director, Playwrights, Contemporary, Theatre Practices

### Introduction

The origin of Theatre is traced to from the performances that took place during ritual celebrations and is believed to be as old as man because it has been in existence throughout human history. People were already performing ritual, which involved all the elements required for a fully developed theatre. These elements are a performance space, performers, action, masks or make-up, costumes, music, dance and an audience. It is considered through speculative exercises that it was in the performance of such ritual rites that theatre had its beginnings. The performance of rituals which involved movements, dances, make-up, costumes music and an audience was later encouraged and graduated to plays, shows and acting by individuals who became renowned for their parts as artists, dramatists, and directors such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menanda who are regarded as theatre practitioners of Greek classical era that distinguished themselves as the leading artists of the time and became the bridge between the classical Greek era and the modern theatre (Brockett, 1941: 291).

Among these actors, and directors mentioned, Thespis was the foremost who introduced one actor, by breaking away from the chorus to render dialogue and followed by Aeschylus who later introduced two actors and Sophocles who introduced the third actor on stage and thereby brought about complex dialogue as part of their technical contributions on stage and that the three actors each played more than one role, a practice which the use of the mask was permitted (Cole 1970).

### Grotowski's Theatre

Theatre to people means different things depending on the individual's level of understanding and the way he or she sees it. Among the most regarded as thorough in terms of exploration of methods by which the actor can become a vital creative artist is that of Jerzy Grotowski with the research of Stanislavsky carried out at Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory in Wroclaw, Poland. Since 1959, Grotowski and his group had worked with religious fervor to find out how actors can strip away all barriers or obstacles in order to make "a total gift of himself" in his communion with his audience.

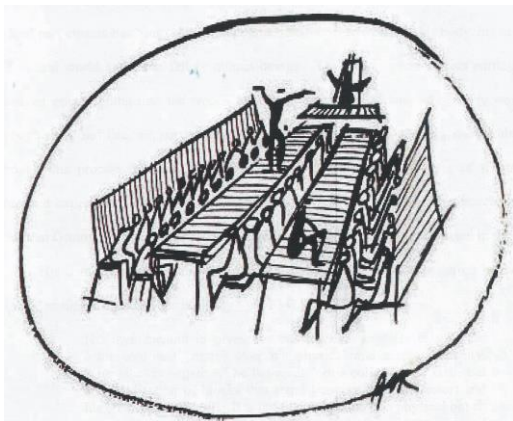
Grotowski was born in 1933 in Rzeszow in the Eastern part of Poland. Grotowski studied acting and directing at the Ludwik Solski Academy of Dramatic Arts in Krakow and Russian Academy of Theater Arts

in Moscow. He became a director at the Theatre Stavy in Cracow and at Theatre Polski in Poznan. Among the plays he prepared and produced at these theatres were *Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco, *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, and *Faust I and II* by Goethe. In 1959 he headed the Theatre 13 Rzedow in Opole, the youngest director to have such a position. This later became his Theatre Laboratory.

Later in 1965 the Theatre Laboratory moved to Wroclaw, where he was officially recognized at The Institute for Research into Action. Grotowski's theatre laboratory does not function ordinarily; it was supported by the state. It is a genuine laboratory in which the productions are, as Grotowski says, detailed investigation of the actor-audience relationship". He turned from the notion of theatre as a synthesis of all the arts, which he calls "Rich Theatre", toward a conception of a "Poor Theatre", in which everything that "proved superfluous" like construction of sets, provisions of costume, make-up and theatres for play production was eliminated. What was left is his idea for all productions was the direct – live actor – audience relationship," which to him is indispensable. For his plays he used a space that could be rearranged to meet the specific needs of each production he used no elaborate lighting effect; he forbids make-up and reduced costumes to the purely functional; i.e., permitted no actor to change costume to indicate a change in role, status, or psychological condition; his stage properties were minimal and were chosen for their adaptability for many purpose. He used no scenery in the traditional scene; his actors produced all music themselves; either by beating out rhythms, by vocal sound or by playing musical instruments (Brockett, 1941: 231).

For all the above listed or enumerated reasons, Grotowski was mostly involved in training of his actors through which he sought to eliminate all blocks or obstacles that tended to prevent performance from giving themselves fully for productions. Intensive physical training coupled with other exercises was designed for his actors to remove all psychological barriers. Their voices were developed as an instrument capable of exceeding the demands of speech.

Another important ingredient in Grotowski's view of the theatre is the audience. At the onset, he tried all he could to involve his audience directly in performances, but he later came to realize that this only made spectators self-conscious of what is expected. He later concentrated on creating an atmosphere of proper spatial relationship between spectators and actors so that they would be able to interact appropriately and unself-consciously. An example of this can be noticed in his adaptation of Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* in which the action occurs on the night the devil is to claim Faustus' soul then Faustus calls together his friends which was represented by the audience for a banquet at which he explains all that has happened. By this, the theatre became a banqueting hall and the audience, seated at long tables on which most of the action occurs. Another similar way in which Grotowski got the audience involved in one of his productions in his adaptation of *Kordian*, in which the action was set in an in-sane asylum and the audience, as though visitors, but was scattered all over among hospital beds that served as the main scenic elements of the play.



**Plate 1, Grotowski's arrangement of the space for Doctor Faustus. The dark figures are performers, the lighter figure spectators. Faustus is seated at the smaller table at top. Picture by H. Martin Berg in Brockett (1941: 291).**

With all the said samples it is assumed that Grotowski viewed the theatre as the modern equivalent of a tribal ceremony capable of uniting a society. Therefore, in preparing any script for a production, he searched in it universally accepted patterns, actions and images and things that are deeply embedded in the human Psyche quite independent of religion, faith, time and place. All these were then given more importance and attention and developed in ways calculated to make both actors and audience confront themselves.

By 1970, Grotowski noticed that his group had reached its peak of his search for more technical mastery, he now decided to create no new production. He then set out to eliminate all the “idea of theatre” in which an actor will be playing before an audience and again to find a way of incorporating spectators into the process. It was noticed then that his main concern was how to lead participants back into elemental connections between man and his body, his imagination, his natural world and other fellow human beings. The major works of this particular period involved groups going into the woods for twenty-four hours during which they would be led through ritualized fire, air, earth, water, eating, dancing, playing, planting and bathing. Going through this process, participants were expected to rediscover the roots of theatre in pure ritualized experience, as well as to discover themselves. With this new approach, it is rightly clear that Grotowski’s current approach differs remarkably from the one he used in the 60s.

His own views of the theatre in all its ramifications can be supported in the sentence credited to him in an interview in Cole (1995):

His own method involves arduous physical exercise to give the actor complete control over his physical and mental capacity. “Our is a via negative,” he has said, “not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks that stand between him (the actor) and his creative confession. It is not the instruction of a physical but an utter opening to another person, in which the phenomenon of ‘shared or double birth’ becomes possible. The actor is reborn not only as an actor, but as a man and with him I am reborn. What is achieved is total acceptance of one man by another. (P. 534)

In another interview of his views in Cole (1995) he says:

You know that in each of our productions we set up a different relationship between actors and audience. In *Dr. Faustus*, the spectators are the quests; in *The Constant Prince*, they are the on lookers. But I think the essential thing is that the actor must not act for the audience, he must not act for the audience, he must act vis-à-vis with the spectators, in the presence of the spectators he must do and even more authentic act in place of the spectators, do an act of extreme yet disciplined sincerity and authenticity. He must give himself and not hold himself back, open up and not close in on himself in a narcissistic way (P. 534).

This may be Grotowski’s way of saying that the actors must be in character and not just interpreting a role for better understanding. Thus, adequately informing and educating his or her audience in an educational theatre for social change in our environment or society we belong. A similar style and idea of Grotowski’s poor theatre is the environmental theatre where there is no use of much stage properties in all their performances because they have to move from one place to the other like the *Alarinjo* theatre in Nigeria. These are group of people that take theatre from place to place with simple painted background on clothing materials. Among the renowned theatre practitioners in this group are Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, just to mention a few.

The Alarinjos painted scenic background was not to have anything to do with the play but only to have a background in front of which performances were held. They were just to complement music, language and dance in conveying a sense of scenery and even mood.

#### **Brecht’s Theatre:**

Bertolt Brecht, a German dramatist, director and a poet born on 10 February, 1898 whose work dominated German Theatre in the 20th Century and is perhaps the most influential force in Western Theatre since the end of the Second World War. He was also called by contemporary critics “one of the most significant writer of this century as well as the most ambiguous and perpetually fascinating figure of the twentieth century European theatre”. He mingled expressionism with satire on the new political tendencies as in his 1922 prize-winning *Trommeln in der Nacht* an indictment of war profiteers. His later plays which gave evidence of his adherence to communism, are in the nature of social documents the most striking is *Die Massnahme* in 1938 with its large Chorus and Cinema technique. In all his plays Brecht sought to educate and enlighten his audience rather than touch its emotions, but in doing these, he was unable to suppress his lyrical and sensuous gifts, which break out in the poetry underlying the grim realities of his theme. In his Munich, staging of *Edward II* which was adapted from Marlowe in 1924, and his anti-militaristic *Man is Man* in 1925, he began to develop the anti-illusionistic staging methods and parable structures that later became the basis for his theory of **Epic Theatre** because he felt they resembled epic poems than the traditional drama. This epic poem composed of alternating sections of dialogue and narrations which literarily means giving

a poetic account of the deeds of one or more great heroes, or of a nation's past history on stage. (Brockett, 1941: 186)

He was forced to exile by Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and later attempted to recoup his finances with the team responsible for his operatic successes. Weill, Lotte Lenya and the scene designer, Casper Nether, in a "Ballet-cantata *The Seven Deadly Sins* staged in Paris in 1933. While in exile, Brecht began writing his major plays, the first version which in *The life of Galileo* in 1938, *Mother courage* and her children in 1939, the *Good person of Setzuan* in 1940 to mention but a few. The work of the ensemble established his influential position in contemporary theatre, and his continuing domination of the German stage can be indicated by figures gathered, in 1963 and 64 season in which there were about 1, 393 performances in about 74 productions of his plays (John 1959).

In describing his new and ideal theatre, Brecht used three key terms. These are **Historification, Alienation and Epic**. In essence, the technique has the intention of encouraging the audience to criticize, study and ultimately correct the circumstances outside the plays artistic world and to participate not only mentally as the case with the audience of all drama but also physically in real – life struggles. This is in line with his radical departure from the Aristotelian and Stanislavsky's canons which he condemns as reducing the audience to the status of passive observers at the risk of consuming and receiving and or worse still intoxicating and indoctrinating them with bourgeois ideas, thereby coercing them to tolerate the status quo.

In the period between 1918 and 1932, Brecht was at his most revolutionary stage, a stage at which his youthful rigor, enthusiasm and dancing innovations and questioning of the status quo are most manifested. Brecht's insistence that the aim and objectives of the theatre are purely the science of teaching and his downzoning of its aesthetic or entertainment aspect are typical of this stage. In those early days, Brecht dissociates himself entirely from Aristotle and Stanislavsky and is an admirer of the Piscatorian, Chinese and sport-like drama. As opposed to Aristotle, the early Brecht introduces the Epic or story telling episodic dramatic style, condemns empathy and advocates the style that with the use of an Alienation effect to make strange ties to alienate the actor from his role and distancing the play from the audience as they are only observers (Brockett, 1941).

With the alienation effect, Brecht is of the opinion that there should be no empathy between the audience and the actor. That the audience should not attach themselves to any of the actors that portray their ways of life but to only observe and make necessary correction to better the society. In this type of acting where the transformation of the actor is incomplete, three ways can contribute to the alienation of the words and action of the person presenting them. These are the adoption of the third person, the use of the past tense and the speaking of stage direction and comments. Through this threefold process the text is alienated in rehearsal and will remain so in performance. All presented on stage are an actors account, opinion of events in the society and since he does not identify himself with the man he presents, he can see him from a particular chosen standpoint and can reveal his opinion of him and bring the spectator who also is not to be identified with the character to criticize him (Brecht, 1965).

To achieve alienation, Brecht adopted many conventions not previously used but, through Brecht's influence, have since become common. First, he reminded the audience that it was in a theatre by calling attention to the theatre's means (which had been concealed in the belief that to allow the audience to see them would destroy theatrical illusion). He insisted that lighting instruments be left unmasked, that scenery be fragmentary (merely sufficient to indicate place), that musicians be visible (sometimes on stage), that captions, maps or other images be projected onto screens, that when objects were suspended the ropes supporting them be clearly visible. Actors often sang directly to the audience or commented on the action.

Gesture in alienation effects is feeling or movements and when it is called for should be brought out. The actor must find a sensuous outward expression for the emotions of his role and this is an action which reveals what is going on inside because less attention was paid to the use of scenery in all his plays.

In recounting events for the society, a useful method is a written title for each scene and such titles must have a historical character. Now, the actor has to assume that distance from occurrences and modes of behavior in the present which the historian assumes from occurrences and modes of behavior in the past. To alienate the audience and the actors is to make them stand out. For emotion, experiment with the Alienation effect in the German theatre has demonstrated that this kind of acting arouses emotions. This Alienation effect is also natural as the acting has nothing to do with stylization. He adopted the story telling technique to detach the audience's emotions from the actions for independent actions.

In his later years, he once more came to think of theatre as theatre and wrote "Let us think of theatre" as a place of amusement... and let us find out what sort of amusement we want". His influence increased again after 1948 when he returned from exile, especially after the founding of the Berliner Ensemble in 1949 and

settled in East Berlin in 1954. In West and East Germany, Brecht became the most popular contemporary playwright edged only by such classics as Shakespeare.

From the fore-going therefore, a comparative analysis of Jerzy Grotowski's views of the theatre and that of Brecht will shoulder round their beliefs/opinions, methods, philosophical ideas and methods employed in their productions in relation to the audience and actors.

Grotowski believe that the theatre does not require the use of anything like construction of self-costume, and make-up to get out the best from an actor for production which Brecht was not in total support. He believed that his own method which involved physical exercise gave the actor complete control over his physical and mental capacity for all productions. He has said, not a collection of skills but an eradiation of that stand between him (the actor) and his creative confession. Meyerhold a director and one of the foremost designers in the theatre in his own respect, also shared same view with Grotowski with his style of using artists as stage properties for all his productions by relying on their physical exercises to keep them fit all the time.

Brecht only believed in the training of an actor's voice for clarity while rendering their narrations to the audience. And also advocated the use of projections, fragmentary set pieces, and similar devices for indicating the location of the action, but in each case the elements should comment on the action.

Aristotle and Hegel have the same concept of the theatre and almost all Grotowski's arguments took its root from it. The concept propounded by these great philosophers is called **Empathy**: which is the audience identifying with any of the actors as heroes. This, Brecht was not in support and tried to break away from it. He believed that, the audience and actors are two different people and so introduced his alienation effect to distance away the audience from the actors that they should be observers only. By involving the audience in the action, he is already aware of what is coming up next. He uses all his energy where as in Brecht's Epic theatre it only awakes his energy and curiosity to know what is coming up next since he does not take part but only observe them doing it. Brecht further believes that theatre should be episodic. It should lead from one thing to the other to form a story (Brecht, 1965). And so, he used captions (projected on screens), songs or other devices to emphasize breaks in the action. Captions also were used at the beginning of scenes to summarize the contents of the scene to follow in order to direct attention from story or suspense and direct it to the social implications of the events.

It was the belief of Brecht also that theatre was not only meant for the rich but can also be used to change the life style of the poor. He insisted that theatre should bring pleasures, he then argues that the greatest pleasure comes from "productive participation" where by spectators and judges apply what they see on stage to conditions outside the stage.

Brecht as a social critique did not stop only as an actor, director, poet and playwright but went deep into his writing, theories and productions, with a focus pointed at shaping them down to the smallest detail in the bid to explain his political points of view in society. Outwardly, he was for about thirty years an orthodox communicator. But he was never a party member, or even a party journalist or speaker, for principle (so he told the Un-American Activities Committee in 1947)

It was the best for me not to join any party whatever ... I think they (i.e. presumably the German communists) considered me just as a writer who wanted to write the truth as he saw it, but not as a political figure... I found out that it was not my business.

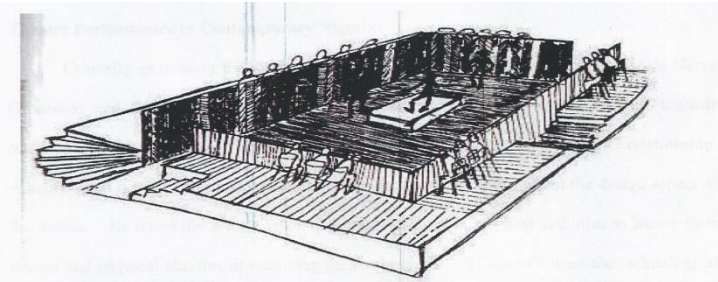


Plate 3, Arrangement of the performance space for Grotowski's  
The Constant Prince.  
Picture by H. Martin Berg in (Brockett, 231).

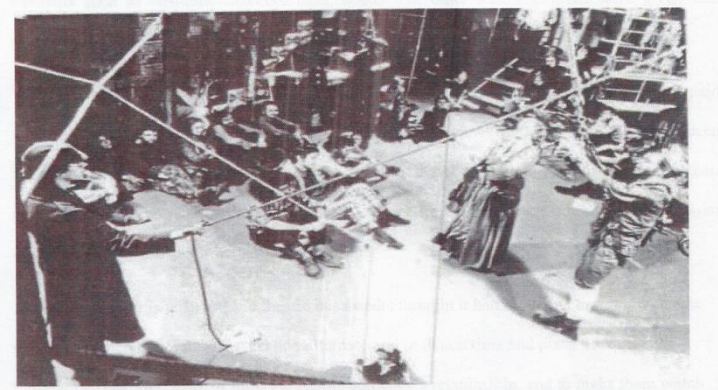


Plate 2 and 3, The performance Groups production of Brecht's Mother Courage. Notice actor-audience relationship in the flexible theatre space. Picture by Richard Schechner in (Brockett 232)

#### Theatre Performance in Contemporary Nigeria:

Critically examining the styles, theories and contributions of the two Dramatists (Jerzy Grotowski and Bertolt Brecht), it will be observed that Grotowski's main interest towards realizing any play on stage for an audience was mainly on actors and audience relationship. He believed that actors should not perform in isolation and therefore did not care much with the design aspect of the theatre. He trained the actor's voice and involved them in physical activities to arouse their mental and physical abilities in rendering their roles well. He didn't want the technological devices used in other media to take over the theatre and so relied solely on dialogue and gesture, for his performances. As a result of this, he called his theatre the **Poor Theatre** where other elements such as costume, makeup, light, sound and other technical areas were given less attention.

Today, because of the economic situation of most academic theatres, less attention is paid to all elements of design in theatre productions and the views of Jerzy Grotowski are being adopted. In my own view, this does not in any way give the students under training a good foundation in their professional field because physical activities and voice training alone are not enough to assist interpret roles by artists for better understanding.

Brecht in his wish as Epic theatre because he thought it had move in common with epic poetry (in which dialogue and narration alternate and in which time and place are quickly transformed) to alter, stop, or limit the actor's audience's relationship, and to make them watch critically, were arrived at the concept of "alienation" by distancing the audience from the stage action. Confirming these Brockett (1941) asserts:

He insisted that lighting instruments be left on marked, that scenery be fragmentary (merely sufficient to indicate place), musicians be visible (sometimes on stage), that captions, maps, or other images be projected into screen, that when objects were suspended the ropes supporting them be clearly visible (p. 186).

In his style as a playwright, director, designer and his desire to provoke social change, Brecht saw the need to minimally introduce other design elements like scenery, costume and make-up as asserted by (Brockett, 1941):

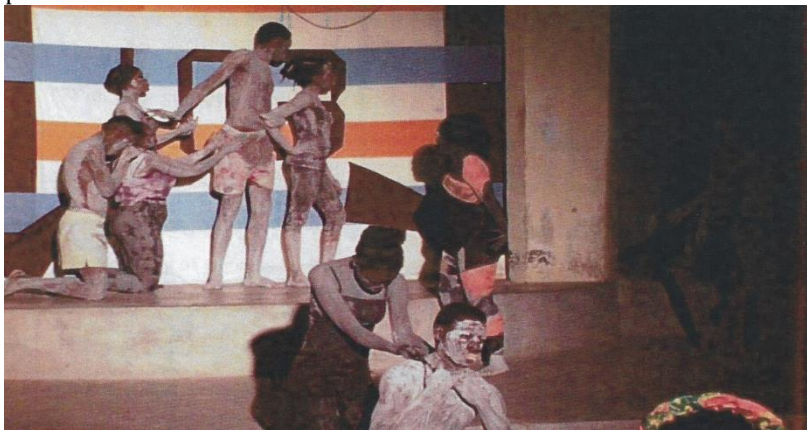
Thus there is a continuing alternation of empathy and distance (much like that created through the alternation of episodes and choral odes in Greek



drama). One might also get the impression from reading Brecht that settings and costumes played little role in his productions. But, though scenery was restricted in quality in his own theatre it was always designed and executed with great care; each piece was meticulously crafted often looked used and worn, in accordance with the character and situation, but many were elegant (p. 187).

Today, in most of our educational theatres, Bertolt Brecht's idea of the theatre is being experimented in spite of all the limitations confronting the industry to ensure good communication that can provoke social change in the society even though some of our directors and designers today combine two or more styles to communicate to their audience because of our individual peculiar limitations. While western theatre is machine driven, contemporary Nigerian theatre attempts to copy but is ill equipped.

Playwrights in Nigeria such as Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Sonny Oti, Saint Gbilekaa and many others pattern their writing and directing style to that of Brecht's when directing plays for an audience. This is because in most of their works they use narrators in some of their episodes whether to end or start a scene. Realism has always been a part of the styles to get across to the audience. In line with Bertolt Brecht's idea, they also try to distance the audience from the performers. But in some cases performers enters the stage from the audience in line with Grotowski's style which does not see anything wrong in artists mingling with the audience. Theatre designers in Nigeria are really making effort to be as realistic as possible in designing for any play in spite of the limitations around them so that they can communicate and educate their audience. Sometimes the style of Meyerhold is being implored by using characters as stage properties when the need arises. In this manner, they make sure the artists are physically fit and their voices properly trained to meet up with the challenges of the day. They save money, time and materials since there will be no need to engage in construction works to get stage properties and scenery ready for the play. A sample of this is in the picture below.



**Plate 4, Installation Arts at Drama Village, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Picture by Segun Abodunrin**

In all the images presented in this work, they are to give vivid explanations on the styles of the director and the designers mentioned in the work. Plate 4 is seen in one of the installation arts used in a play, in Ahmadu Bello University's Drama Village, Zaria that has to do with Grotowski and Meyerhold styles.

### **Conclusion**

It is observed that Grotowski built all his argument on the concepts and theories propounded by Aristotle, while Brecht felt they are not ideal enough for the theatre and sought for a change by introducing his own concept of the epic theatre to make a difference. His new concept invariably gave him an edge over Grotowski's views.

These two great dramatists and practitioners though had different views of what the theatre is, both views moved towards the goal of theatre that informs, communicates and educates the society. It was again observed that their plays also fulfill another aim of the theatre that of a revolutionary tool to effect a change in the society, more especially those of Brecht. Aesthetically, the involvement of the audience/spectators, the use of body gesture by the actors in the Jerzy Grotowski's theatre simplified his works and the introduction of design elements further enriched the works of Brecht in his own theatre to achieve his aims and objective in effecting positive change in the society.

The rejection of empathy by Brecht, his delegation of power of thinking to the spectators, his insistence on the pedagogic role of the theatre and all the dramatic methods implored to realize his plays influence or serve as sources of inspiration to the Nigerian radical dramatists and designers today. Among those dramatist and designers who shared the same believes, ideas and styles like them today in the theatre are

Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Sonny Oti, Saint Gbilekaa, Ayo Akinwale, Ahmed Yerima, Duro Oni, Molinte Enendu, Sunny Ododo, Daniel Omatshola, Alphonsus Orisaremi to mention but a few. The aforementioned are playwrights and designers who in their own right initially are presentational in their ideologies and styles while writing a play to popularize their culture or trying to correct some ills in the society but are now more or less representational in their approach towards using scripts to educate, inform and communicate with their audience.

They sought to deviate from the initial style to a simpler one because of the challenges facing the profession so that they are not handicapped and can meet their set target and still be relevant. Brecht and Grotowski moved away from the ideas of the realist which to them are cumbersome, time consuming and expensive to achieve. More attention is paid to acting, dialogue, music, costume and less attention to lighting and scenery. In line with their ideas, some of our directors and designers today are laying emphasis in the use of lighting to replace scenery and use of symbols for most of the scenery needed for a production to cut down cost since funding of productions are difficult to come by. Today many of familiar theatrical conventions as observed in the days of Ogunde and his contemporaries with the use of curtains are not visible. (No front curtains to hide the stage, the use of fragmentary scenery and visible lighting instruments and other practices that call attention to the theatrical medium) are derived largely from Brecht's struggle, although Brecht's intention of provoking social change is often ignored. (Brockett, 1941:190).

To be able to achieve excellence in the area of design therefore efforts should be made to provide adequate facilities needed for training. Practitioners should go for retraining to update their knowledge on current facilities, styles and happenings in their field.

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