

THEATRE SCHOLARSHIP AND THE AGONY OF MISCONCEPTION AND MISINTERPRETATION: A READING OF JOE DE CRAFT'S *SONS AND DAUGHTERS*

EKWEARIRI, Chidi

Department of Theatre Arts

Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education

Owerri, Imo State

elderses5@yahoo.com

Abstract

Theatre scholarship, in Nigeria and indeed, most African countries, has been a subject of serious attack by both the informed and uninformed in the society. This has stemmed from the fact that most people see the profession as an area only good enough for the rejected and never-do-well in the society. This has orchestrated a sentimental and prejudiced stance of parents in choosing the course as a career for their children. This paper is therefore, an attempt to debunk such biased, misconceived views and misrepresentations of theatre and its potentialities to make for a holistic being; using Joe De Crafts *Sons and Daughters* as a case study. Investigations have shown that parents are usually at home with answering 'mama' or 'papa' Doctor, Engineer, Lawyer' and detest such names as 'mama' dramatist or actor. As such, they vehemently oppose any idea of allowing their ward to study theatre arts. The paper finds that, even though parents discourage their children from studying or venturing into theatre arts, they ironically are usually glued to the television set whenever a dramatic piece is going on and even keep tabs on such dramatic programmes. The paper therefore recommends among other things that theatre arts be viewed as the professional discipline that it is and should be given its pride of place alongside other humanistic and scientific disciplines.

Key Words: Scholarship, Agony, Misinterpretation, Misconception, Reading

Introduction

The history of theatre as a profession is full of negativities in terms of how people see it. Johnson (2014:22) asserts that, "theatre as a profession has always been enmeshed in controversies, right from its earliest beginnings" as theatre artists are regarded as miscreants or social misfits. Indeed, "he is perceived not only as a joker, a mischief and a vagabond, but also described as vain, unserious, loud and incapable of any meaningful act" (Asagba 2012:6). Apart from the Greeks who saw theatre and artistes as noble people who should be placed amongst the elites in the society; perhaps because of their power of imagination and creativity, all other views and perceptions about the discipline has been that of hatred, bias, degradation, disrespect and an unnecessary prejudiced stance. Some of the elites in the profession have recounted their woes in the hands of their parents, colleagues in other professions and the society at large because of their preference to theatre studies. It is on record that so many of them passed through the crucible and suffered tremendous deprivation in the hands of their parents/guardians in their bid to frustrate them. Even in the global arena, the story is the same. Employment wise, many of them have and are still suffering. In the opinion of Nwamuo (1992: vii) in *Issues of Theatre*, "before this time many an employer had denied graduates of theatre, employment as a result of the mis-education that theatre simply meant dancing" Throughout the history of theatre, there has existed varying views as regards the purpose, values and significance of theatre. This probably originated from the interpretation of the functions of the theatre by scholars after the fall of the classical period. This negative interpretation is captured in Whiting (1954) thus:

To the Romans, theatre was a little more than a degraded pleasure; a project by slaves for the titillation of their masters. To the church, theatre was an evil to be crushed along with thievery and prostitution.... to some parents, the theatre is an evil bound to wreck the personality of a child who succumbs to its lures (P. 124).

Furthermore, Osofisan (2008: xx) corroborates the above when he calls attention to the activities of some pastors by stressing that, "we must not forget that the theatre is in most instances portrayed by the pastors as a haven of evil, to be scrupulously avoided by believers who wish to make paradise." In consequence therefore, the Nigerian populace regards theatre as anybody's profession or a profession for the never do wells. According to Nwamuo (1990) in *The Faces of Nigerian Theatre*:

Some still think it is the profession of vagabonds whose attitudes help to render unsuitable either as wives or husbands, for proper men and women. As a result, some parents vehemently object to their children

studying theatre arts. Even among university lecturers, some see theatre arts as a non-academic discipline made up of a non-serious group of dancers whose major aim is to provide emotional support for other students of the university (Pp. 31-32).

Some of these lecturers are so educated in their discipline that they are completely uneducated and uninformed about any other discipline. To such people and their likes, this paper is essentially designed to put theatre as a profession in proper context and as Iji (2001) says:

evaluate and re-evaluate, to adequately highlight the theatre arts discipline, with the view to educating those, even within the humanistic discipline whose knowledge of theatre arts is still vague, opaque, obliquely focused, erroneously biased and very myopic. Such highlights purport to dispel misleading myths, stereotypes and misconceptions about theatre arts and its practitioners; notions that denigrate its deep intellectual, philosophical and aesthetic contents, at the expense of its potentials as a nation builder; in terms of the development of man's total mind and character (P. 117).

This has become necessary in view of the fact that, society continuously downgrades an artiste and still treats their likes scornfully. This transcends to the uninformed opinion, stigmatization and degradation meted to them. Therefore, since arts and science share things in common, it is expected that at the end of this discourse, "both the artiste and the scientist will commingle into one monolithic entity, and generate thoughts that would kindle their minds and generate a new way of looking at something which was earlier considered familiar" (Nwabueze, 2013, p. 2) or at the very least, inform adequately an ignorant set about the virtues and values of theatre studies and thus enable some mutual respect between co-disciplines.

Theatre Studies in Perspective

Theatre is life and it seeks the meaning of existence with the same passion and dexterity that has characterized the work of great philosophers. Anyanwu (2005) opines that:

There is a relationship between theatre arts and life. Where life is nature lived as it comes, undiluted, unpolished, unedited, raw; theatre arts is life lived at the highest plain, more intense, more refined and therefore more exciting, almost larger than life (P. 61).

He goes further to state that, in the theatre of life, we encounter Peter Brooks' 'Deadly' and 'Rough' theatre while in the theatre of existence, we have his 'Holy' theatre and this is the doing of theatre artists – professional as well as academics (Anyanwu, 2005:61). Therefore, theatre serves man's purpose and cannot be separated from man's existence. Agaku (2010) substantiates this when he writes that:

The dawn of humanity created the expressive arts, which intervened in various ways in their lives; from the expression of desire to the ritual invocation of the spiritual, entertainment and education. Thus, theatre served to express change in almost all facets of life (P. 104).

This ritual invocation is made manifest in the quest for the primitive man to hunt for food and commune with his ancestors. Sotimirin (2008) lends credence to the above when he observes that:

To ensure stability and sustainability of his society, the primitive man uses ritual drama to propitiate the gods for a bountiful harvest and through his imitative magic, he imitated animals while hunting in order to get to his prey more easily (P. 161).

It will be right therefore to say that theatre arts is the literature of life and of existence which is designed to complement man's activities on earth with the purposes of edification of the spirit, education of the mind, information dissemination and entertainment of the body, soul and spirit. Sotimirin (2008:168) went further to say that "theatre is a form of human resource put at the society for cultural, social and technological development. The artiste particularly the dramatist is usually seen as a visionary, a privileged ambassador of his people." Aristotle's postulation that the purpose of theatre is to delight and instruct is very apt and well founded, but to see the theatre only as a means of entertainment is indeed unfortunate. The reason may be due to the old prejudice of theatre as a mere recreational activity which accounts for the snobbish attitude of the academic community in particular and the society in general, and of course, the feelings that theatre is a course for training artisans – like in technical schools-... (Bamidele, 2003:68). This does not only negate the essence of theatre studies but also ridicules its attempt to produce a holistic being capable of affecting lives in the society at a significant level. Akinwale (2001) sums it up when he says that,

Theatre is a medium of artistic expression mirrored in a dynamic form. A metaphorical image of reality, it reflects the total cosmic, moral and

metaphysical order of life of the people. It is an arena where human beings are presented in a cosmic totality, acting and reacting to forces around them and within them, perceiving and being perceived by those interacting with them, and by those in the audience who experience with them, the enigma that is the common lot of humanity (P. 24).

In spite of the overwhelming evidence to the potentialities of theatre studies, many people, especially, in Nigeria, have refused to see anything good in theatre arts either as a profession or as an academic discipline or in theatre artists as useful members of the society. Notwithstanding this prejudice, however, theatre arts according to Anyanwu (2005:61) as both a profession and as an academic discipline and theatre artistes, in whatever aspect of the field they may be involved, are not only vital to the society in general but they are also pivotal to humanity's total and complete existence socially, economically, politically and spiritually.

Theatre Scholarship and the Agony of Misconception and Misinterpretation: *Sons and Daughters* Contextualized

Sons and Daughters deals with family life and the tensions that result from the clash of two different generations in the era of rapid social change. This clash epitomises the hidden tensions and squabbles between parents and their wards in the choice of a course of study. James represents one generation while his children (Awere, George and Maanan) represent the other. He (James) is desirous to give his children professional training and sees nothing professional about Acting, Dancing and Painting. To him, what matters is the money and prestige it brings to the family. This appears to be the mentality of most parents who only think of the prestige and honour a particular course of study will bring to the family before they allow their wards to study them. Whether the person studying it has any interest in it or not and the issue of whether he will do well in the programme is not usually considered. This is reflected in the play when Aaron and Awere argue thus:

Aaron: but really it is not a sacrifice at all: he has plenty dough, if it comes to that; but he likes to think of it as a sacrifice, and there is nothing I can say to that. And then there is the prestige to the family, to say nothing of his long cherished hope that all his children will become professional men and women.

Awere: What do you mean 'professional women'?

Aaron: I mean precisely that.

Awere: He doesn't want Maanan to do Mechanical Engineering too, does he?

Aaron: Man, you make me laugh! My elder brother, George, is a doctor, don't forget; and we are expecting Kofi back next September – a fully qualified Chartered Accountant. You want to hear the old man telling his friends of his son who is a medical man, and the great things he expects of his other son who is going to be a banker (De Graft, 2006:2).

The dialogue above is synonymous to what is obtainable in most Nigerian homes and has invariably become one of the problems in the society today. Often times, audacious children quarrel with their parents over the choice of course to study especially those who have already identified their interest. Earliest practitioners in the Theatre Arts discipline experienced these challenges and pushed on irrespective of the threats and deprivations they suffered in the hands of their parents. Because of these negativities erroneously ascribed to the discipline, most students loathe the department.

According to Bamidele (2003):

They would want to avoid it like the plague. These are the religious puritans and the academic bigots. Their distance only goes to prove that they are inadequate in themselves for their inability to be part of a humanizing discipline. ... Those who have taken an elective course in the department have "proved to other students who still sit on the fence that theatre arts is not just only dancing, jumping and acting but a discipline that re-charges the intellectual curiosity in theory and criticism of the arts" (P. 73).

Money they say rules the world, and most parents are infatuated with money. To them, theatre studies is another means of perpetuating poverty in the family. They believe it is not professional enough to sustain the family let alone generate wealth. This is captured in the ensuing conversation between Aaron and Awere,

Aaron: That is the trouble with the old man, with this world of ours, with everybody. Art must bring money, or there will be no art – no painting,

no writing, no drama, no dancing, no music. Our society is sold on money: nothing is worth anything unless it brings in money....

Awere: Money is also important, you know. You cannot do without it.

Aaron: But I'm dammed if I'm going to treat painting merely as a source of income; what's more, I'd rather kill myself than make the old man think that I have chosen to paint simply because of the money it will bring me (De Graft, 2006:8).

Apart from the monetary aspects of it, theatre artistes are usually regarded as loose and wayward. They merely dance and act in order to attract the attention of men or women. This of course forms part of the negative perceptions and prejudice on the discipline. As a matter of fact, the decision of James to deny his daughter her preferred course of study hinges on this. This is captured thus:

Hannah: All the same, he must feel some concern for your good name and welfare. He has always said that one of the reasons why he hates the idea of you going to a dancing school in England and coming back to dance on the stage is ...

Maanan: That the men will be after me. I've always known that

Hannah: Your father doesn't put it exactly that way. He says he doesn't want anybody to think that you are a loose girl; and of course all the men who will be making for you.... I am sometimes minded to agree with him, you know Maanan

Maanan: At least we can make him realize that a girl need not go on the stage to draw the men after her. As things are now, lawyer Bonu's office holds more menace than any stage in the world (De Graft, 2006:17).

This is exactly what parents do not understand. It is true that dancing is part of the programme and that they perform before a given audience, but that does not in any way make them loose or wayward. Moreover, every profession dances depending on the angle one looks at it. To Uka (2009),

...all professions are dancers and dance performers: the librarian and archivist dances with books and book catalogues in huge space and shelves; the lawyer in huge libraries and court-rooms, even in prisons; the doctor in huge theatres with may be, computerized gadgets to aid therapies and surgeries; the economist with statistics that may regulate or determine the poverty or richness of a country and its citizens; the political scientist with the innumerable traits of violence and terrorist acts worldwide, from Osama Bin Laden and his impact on the World Trade Centre (W.T.C) of new York on September, 11, 2001, to the unmanned missile bomber of American military war-lords over Afghanistan. The professional 'dances' are endless, perpetual, and in terms of theatre, serve to remind human society how inextricably tied to 'Ixion's Wheel' man is in all ways as he gropes his way towards eternity (Uka (Pp. 2-3).

Every profession has its own hazards but it is equally a misconceived notion to think that theatre profession attracts loose behaviour. In Nigeria today, most of the loose girls are not products of theatre arts departments. Majority of them are from the so called professional disciplines. There is nothing wayward about the profession rather what is needed is the encouragement and the necessary support to excel. This is gleaned from one of the passages thus:

James: Must I be told that to the face before I know? But this is the result of being an indulgent father. I toil all day all through the year to make enough money to educate my children, to give them the best profession that only rich men's children can have, and what do they tell me? 'I don't want to be an engineer and I don't care about law'-as if what I'm offering them was so much cow dung! And what do they want? Dancing half naked on a bloody stage and painting a lot of foolish pictures that nobody knows the worth of money will care to pay a penny for....

Hannah: You don't seem to know your daughter, James.

James: Don't I know her?

Hannah: Maanan is more proud than you think her, and I'm sure showing off her half naked body on a stage is the last thing she wants to do. As to her falling prey to wicked men, well, I used to agree with you on that going

on the stage would be the surest way of bringing such harm upon herself but I'm now beginning to have doubts.

James: You approve then, of this dancing craze? I don't see how any mother who cares for the modesty of her daughter can coolly sit down there and defend such waywardness.

Hannah: There is nothing wayward about dancing, James. Do I need to tell you that? You like to dance to '*Mpintin*', don't you?

James: That's different

Hannah: What about the '*Adowa*' women dancers you rush to the windows to look when they come along the street with their songs. Do you go to see them to look at them because they are naked? (De Graft, 2006:23-24).

This is the case with most parents who detest theatre studies. Such parents usually know when a new film arrives the market. They are synonymous with the picture Armah painted in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* about a certain bird called *Chichidodo* who "hates excrement with all its soul but feeds maggots that grow from the excreta" (Armah, 1968:45). Similarly, Uka (2009:8) argues that "... all those learned, or desirous parents who made the pronouncement were spending good money watching American Westerns in public cinemas showing the films made in Hollywood, acted in by other people's children". Okome (2008:7) further affirms that, such parents who hate theatre professions contradict themselves by telling you how many films they have watched and the names of the leading Nollywood stars. According to him, "they are those who see plays and video films in the 'dark' and denounce them in day light." They usually glue their eye to the television set whenever a dramatic piece is going on, yet they detest such names as 'mama' or 'papa' dramatist or actor. But the questions that readily come to mind are, if these parents enjoy the product from the theatre scholarship, why do they detest their children from being part of it? Why do they think theatre is not professional enough and cannot generate funds? The world is changing and things that were considered sacrosanct in the past are no longer seen as so in this modern era. If a child has identified an area as his preferred choice, this paper is of the opinion that there is no point forcing him against it because it may spell doom and catastrophe at the long run. Hannah and George (De Graft, 2006) echoed this when they argue thus:

Hannah: But why should he be forced to do something he knows very well he doesn't want to do?

George: Father, I think mother has something there. If Aaron seriously objects to doing engineering –

James: Who talks of objection? If I was good enough to choose you your profession, I think I'm still good enough to choose Aaron his. And you have never told me you regretted the choice, have you?

George: I shouldn't say so, father. But then, I liked the profession you chose, had always wanted to be a doctor, so I just went ahead and did it. If Aaron is still determined to go on with his painting, in fact, I don't see what is wrong with it. I personally don't care about painting, and at first I couldn't believe that he was serious; but obviously he is serious, so –

James: But my son a mere painter?

George: You said a while ago that you wanted the best for your children, didn't you, father?

James: Yes!

George: Then you couldn't do better than help them to do what they deeply feel they have the ability or talent for (P. 48).

Furthermore, because of the hatred for theatre scholarship, most parents prefer their wards studying any other course and in most extreme cases, become apprentices to firms and establishments. More often than not, some of them are exposed to occupational hazards and risks. In the play *Sons and Daughters*, James thought he was doing his daughter good by sending her to work as an apprentice in Lawyer Bonu's office, not knowing that he was sending her to a lion's den. Of course she came out unscarred but the result would have been of great consequence if Lawyer Bonu were not to have been caught in the act. This, indeed, is a lesson to parents.

Conclusion

Although the term theatre arts is often misunderstood and erroneously so, by people who claim to be doyens of humanistic discipline, but the fact remains that people nowadays are gradually becoming aware of the potential of theatre scholarship. Nwamuo (2003) in *Essentials of Theatre Administration* puts it thus:

theatre which hitherto was written off as a profession for vagabonds, never-do-well and whose artistes were considered unsuitable as wives or husbands for proper men and women because they were exotic, is fast growing into an acceptable and decent profession in Nigeria. The government and people of Nigeria have accepted theatre artistes as effective and stimulating teachers, as promoters of fashion and culture, as fostering the spirit of democracy, curriculum instruction in Nigeria's educational system and as a strong force in promoting Nigerian unity, hence the establishment of theatre and communication departments in almost all Nigerian universities. The existence of councils for arts and culture, the promotion of cultural studies, tourism and the hospitality industry throughout the country and the inclusion of drama in the Nigerian secondary school curriculum are pointers to the new attitudes towards the theatre profession (P. 28).

This paper does not advocate that parents should not guide their children in the choice of course to study but is rather of the view that, the wishes of their children should be sought after and respected. What is then needed is proper advice and support. Often times, students have failed in their academic career because of lack of interest and enthusiasm. Theatre arts is just like every other discipline with deep intellectual exertion. Art itself, of which theatre is one, is a creation. According to Sofola (1994), its deep intellectual discourse is designed:

To heal and restore the life of a sick and battered humanity; to create a new vision for growth, renewal, regeneration and edification of man for a wholesome life, and a better community. To mobilise a collective conscience for a particular desired objective (P. 5).

Parents should therefore endeavour to identify their children's interests academically and channel their thoughts towards them. The era of compulsion, threat and preference over a particular discipline against the other is gradually dissipating. There are different specializations and if everybody tilts towards becoming a Medical Doctor, Engineer or Lawyer, the world will be chaotic and no meaningful progress will be made. There is therefore no basis for the undue preference accorded sciences over the arts. In the words of Sofola (1994:),

We are familiar with such saying as "we need space ships, inter-planet bridges for outer links, and computerized cosmic order for better living; not art, particularly the art of performance, which wastes peoples time and is only good for those who have useless time on their hands to burn" (P. 1).

But according to Schelling as quoted by Sofola (1994:3), "art is the prototype of science; and where art is now, science will come only later ... as an invention". Ekweariri (2008:85) also supports the above assertion by Schelling by saying that "science and technology involve a significant amount of art elements in its execution. This is because art combines processes, knowledge and product". Potential students in the profession are therefore encouraged not to give up their plans or rest in their ores. The advice of Awere in the play is quite instructive and a key to achieving one's theatrical academic dream. Awere (De Graft, 2006) says to Aaron:

Awere: ... I still think you can do something about it, you know! Persuade him; make him see how frustrating the whole business is bound to be for you. Surely, he ought to know that one can take a horse to the water, but cannot force it to drink P. 1).

Keep fighting back and do not allow our philistine public to browbeat you into submission. Just as James finally realized his mistakes and allowed Aaron and Maanan to have their way, we are optimistic that all hope is not lost and that there is definitely flickers of light at the end of the tunnel for "theatre indeed, has gone beyond the often cynical, dismissive underestimation given it by a sector of Nigerians when they simply call it the business of clowns, and dancers, and under employed men and women" (Uka, 2009:2).

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