

The Symbiotic Functionalities of Properties in Bode Sowande's *Mammy Water's Wedding*

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Abstract

Theatrical production is a collaborative action that engages the teaming together of the artistic, managerial and technical units. While the artistic consists of the director, stage manager and all who perform before the audience, the management consists of all who work for the promotion, recruitment of staff and artistes, hiring of theatre, logistics and financial success of the production. Technical unit comprises of set, light, costume, make-up, props, sound, mask and special effects. Among all these, the set, light, costume, make-up and mask have attracted the attention of theatre scholars. The use of props is often merged either with the set or costume designs as embellishments or accessories. Little is said about the effectiveness of props as visual communicator like others. Using the 2020 Lagos State University convocation command performance, Mammy Water's Wedding, this paper examines the effective use of props in the stage play. It adopts the semiotic functionalism theory for the analysis of data. The chapter concludes that no aspect of theatre production is insignificant, and that props, should be given more focus in the parlance of academic discourse.

Keywords: symbolic, symbiotic, aesthetic, props, functionality

Introduction

Among the various segments of theatre design, the most likely less discussed is the property [props]. Historically, the use of the visual elements at the beginning of theatre did not categorize or identify any production element as props. Costume, mask, set, light and sound are recognized with their contributions to the overall success of the interpretation of the dramatic message. Additionally, at the inception of theatre performances, the use of set and costume accessories subsumed its compartmentalization as an inevitable segment of design (Brockett & Hidly (1999).

The performative elements as identify by Brockett & Hidly while discussing the ritual origin of theatre do not include props in any form. With the discussion of defense as part of human activities that gave birth to theatre, such items as bows and arrows and other defense tools expected to be used and mentioned. The representations of the gods are projected in the use of masks and costumes or body paintings which represented the spirit. It also treated time and space as necessary elements that affect theatre and ritual performances at

the very inception. Also, costume and mask are treated as essential performative elements employed by both ritual and theatrical performances. According to Brockett & Hidly(2003) performance:

Place may vary from space designed to meet the specific needs of one type of event, or it may be adapted to multiple needs. Events, such as a ritual, might take place in one space or might involve a procession with portions of the ritual being performed at various places along the way. Masks and costumes are often used to represent supernatural powers in the belief that a spirit is attracted by and enters into its likeness. Masks or body paint also be used to represent an animal to be killed or as an aid in bringing about desired events.

The place as projected above represents the set, while the performance, occurred during the day or night depending on its purpose. The use of masks, costumes and body paint helps to transform the performer into the desired character. No doubt, verbal rendition of invocation or incantation would accompany the actions. The historical account of the festival celebrations across different regions of the world mentioned pigs, wreath of flowers, giant phallus as physical objects employed at the performances.

The use of sacred objects, articles and various jewelry outlets for artistic expression featured in the European and Middle Ages theatre and drama. These elements looked upon as objects of worship and kept in monasteries for security reasons. Although certain emblems were associated with specific biblical characters for easy identification, but are towards the provision of “conventionalized costumes” within “extensive sets of visual signs that could be used to communicate with an audience that was largely illiterate. Beyond the costume embellishment, props were used in Spain in conjunction with façade of stage house (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2004, p. 241). The props were not seen as such visual elements that can and should be given independent treatment in the life of the theatre structure and performance.

Theatre in Britain laid emphasis on the scenic and costume accuracy, yet with the accomplishment of some other handy elements of spectacles to depict reality whereby “setting became more specific”. With the reintroduction of lighting and its reform, there was an increased emphasis on illusion. With the introduction of different colours and headdresses to depict change of mood, character’s status and historical accuracy, attention shifted to expressive and expensive costuming between the late 17th and early 19th centuries. The twentieth century use of “symbols, such as wedding ring, dove, subterranean pools and grottoes and blood strains: made straighter forward actions”. From then on, efforts of the craft artists were geared towards realistic accuracy. However,

concentrations were on light, set/scenery, costume and masks/makeup. Props, were regarded as embellishments to these other performative elements.

Outside Europe and America, the utilization of performative elements played significant roles in the interpretation and understanding of message. To theatre of Asia, in Beijing opera, stage properties were first mentioned as deserving attention, but not without reference to setting. Here, they serve as demarcation of the setting. However, according to Brockett and Hidly (2003):

Costume and makeup for each character were also strictly prescribed. The makeup indicated the character's caste, social position, and place of birth, as well as the historical period. Ornaments such as earrings, bracelets, necklace and headgear differentiated character within categories. Properties were used symbolically: as examples, the presence of an elephant was indicated by the use of a goad, a horse by a bit, and a chariot by a whip.

The place of props goes further, thus, with the use of table and chair which designated different places during the performances. Tables, chairs and other bulky props could assume multiple roles in a production. They can be used as set designation as well as props, depending on their usage in the course of the performance, however, they often act as set props. The use of props became popular in the contemporary theatre. Beyond the scene changing, the props were used to indicate many places for easy understanding of venue, action and social status of the characters. Accordingly, Wilson and Goldfarb reiterated that:

The table and chairs might symbolize a law court, banqueting hall, or other interior scene, for each of which furniture was arranged according to a prescribed formula. The significance of the table and chairs was further extended through their combination with other simple properties: an incense tripod on the table indicated a palace; paper and an official seal indicated an office; an embroidered divided curtain hung from a bamboo pole signified a general's tent, an emperor's chamber, a drawing room, or a bride's bedroom, depending upon the other properties with which it was combined. The table and chairs might also be used less representationally. Other properties served to clarify setting and action.

Properties helped the actor of Beijing Opera a great deal in the performance and interpretation of roles. It also helped with the identification of age and occupation along with their half-spoken, half-chanted dialogue. This aided the audience's understanding of the roles, place of the actions as well as the characters displayed. The Kabuki theatre also enjoyed the influence of properties in its stage and costume utilization.

The mentioning of props on the western stage did not gain prominence until the 17th century. They enhanced the actions, although not intended to be convincingly real. However, items such as armor, swords, human heads, tigers, elephants, monkeys, household goods, were represented on stage.

Among the various nations of Africa, the performative elements were employed as part of the rituals. This then made the performance complex for understanding because all the elements – masks, costume, gesture, drumming and others, as employed in their performances become means of communicating the message. These elements signify meanings to both the performers and the spectators (audience) who are both the initiators and deciphers of the symbols used.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Theory

Props in theatre fall under the visual elements that are employed by the designers to give, add, interpret and enhance information about the performer[s], the acting environment and geographical location of the action for the understanding of the intended message. As visual elements, it often does not give any explanation on itself, but helps the understanding of the character[s], situation and circumstances surrounding the action. Props are sign symbols that give additional information about the character, the geographical location of an action and the overall setting of a theatrical performance. Since semiotics is “the study of signs and symbols, and their use or interpretation” in a given circumstance and which point to something else, props are symbolic items that in themselves do not necessarily convey meaning, but lead to other things. Functionalism on the other hands holds that “the design of an object should be determined by its function rather than by aesthetic considerations; the concept of function to mean the interrelationships of parts within a system”. The visual elements of set, light, costume, props and make-up a play production is readable elements that tell the location of the performance. Although each stand on its own at creation, but all work together as the visual interpretation of the production, hence, are interrelated to one another. Theatre visual elements, Chandler (2005) and Sebeok (2001) call non-verbal communication signs that are peculiar to their creators who use them, and the signs are not subject to universal meaning and usage. They are objects of specific function and symbolic in meaning. The props elements in this production are peculiar to fishermen in Yoruba setting and are not viewed from aesthetic or decorative perspective, but their functionalities within the context of the performance and the location of the action – riverside.

Visual Elements and Performance

Asomba (2002) describes theatrical scene design as the art of “conceptualizing, planning or conceiving suitable environment to house a dramatic action. A dramatic environment in this context is the totality of all pieces of scenery including stage properties that culminate in defining the locality of the action”.

Oke (2011) further describes the components of scene design in the theatre to consist of:

all the inanimate things that contribute to the visual effects of the performance. The design elements aid in the interpretation, understanding and overall aesthetic of a play performance and owing to the fact that various designers come together in unison to achieve different designs towards a common goal, their relevance and importance become alloyed in the theatre.

Designers work towards the achievement of a common goal, which is the creation of a dramatic environment that will enable the director, actors and dancers to represent the illusionistic life before the audience. Hence, Nazir (2011) highlights the importance of every stage design in the theatre:

The visual interpretation of artistic concepts unifying the various visual elements of the theatre, being an intended arrangement of materials to produce certain effects, it also aids the audience's further understanding of production. A means of ordering visual and emotional experience to give unity and consistency to a work of art and allow the observer to comprehend its meaning.

Theatrical production as work of art depends on the audience's understanding to be adjudged successful. These design elements spice-up the overall aesthetic interpretation, understanding of the performance, since every part and items that go into the production are important to its success. Oke (2011), further reiterates that;

No matter the extent of dialogue and other movements of an actor on set, the entirety of the visual design and makeup does a lot to a production. If the actor and the technical elements are in chaos, then the collaborative venture of theatre is no more sacrosanct. The images created by designers have a lot to do with one another and the actors on stage as they enhance the production mode and essence.

The designers in creating the entire environment in which the action occurs uphold the unity of the theatre team and production concept through their artistry by working as a sub-team. The artistry of the designer. Dean and Carra

(1980) say helps in the provision of the technical requirements of the production, hence:

The stage picture is the look or physical appearance of the stage for a play. It reflects the way the stage is composed artistically in regards to props, actors, shapes and colours. The stage picture should express good principles of design and use of space. It should be visually appealing for the audience or should express the concept of the production and it is also crucial for the creation of the atmosphere of the play for the audience. This reveals the importance and unique part of the visual/design elements take in any production process ranging from set, costume, light, make-up to props.

The designers no doubt work behind the scenes, however, their artistic, aesthetic and technical prowess should be accommodated in the whole production process because, their roles cannot be pushed away for the overall success of the production. The designers interpret, enhance and project the production idea visually to the audience. The designers express the setting/location, period/time, culture, race, mood, event, occupation, sex, religion and tradition, and other salient necessary information about the production and its character[s] visually to the audience.

Properties in the Theatre

The props are essential and integral part of scenography. Scenography in theatre according to Adeyemi in Fosudo (2011:105) is; “the art of conceptualizing, designing and constructing any type of scenery on a stage for the performance of a play”. Fosudo (2011) states further that “a stage design most often, serves both the functional and decorative purposes and it encompasses, stage setting, lighting, properties, costuming, make-up, sound and other visual effects”. In its bid to fulfill its functions as part of the scenery, properties lend hands to the setting as well as to the costume. The props according to Asomba (2000) are the:

Indispensable supporting elements of an environment in aid of an actor. They include all practical (functional) and non-practical parts of an environment such as furniture pieces, door and window shutters, tree trunks, roots, flower vases, photographs, photo frames and paintings.

The properties can be divided into three basic groups based on their functions in the performance. The divisions are: trim, hand and set props. The trim props are oftentimes referred to as the decorative props and are used by the designer to decorate the stage. These kinds of props help to establish, identify and enhance the period and locale of the dramatic action. They are usually hung on

the wall or suspended in the environment occupy by the character. The hand props on the other hands are according to Adekoya-Oduntan, (2012) are:

property directly employed by an actor in playing his role in a given performance. Its main distinguishing feature is that the actor on stage carries it on him while executing the action, it is part of him and, more often than not, goes a long way in achieving characterization. These could also be referred to as character and/or costume props depending on, principally, how they are used.

The set props are relatively heavy, immobile and “they assist tremendously in articulating the socioeconomic status of the character and geographical setting of a drama”. The props, though do not stand on their own in the theatre, their presence goes a long way in articulating and enhancing the works of other designers who have gained credible recognition in the theatre over the years.

Properties use in Mammy Water's Wedding

The play *Mammy Water's Wedding* is a fictional work set both on the sea and on land. It is a folktale about the wedding between a mermaid, Tarrela and a mortal Akila. The play is set in a riverine area of Lagos, a beach. It is also a clarion call to man to love, cherish, respect and protect his environment. The setting of the play, either under the water or on the land was indicated with the use of set properties. Properties such as bed, throne and water painted backdrop were used to depict the marine environment. On land settings were revealed through the use of fishing baskets hung on the wall. These elements, since they are meant to complement the dialogue and to enhance the performance visually, they were conspicuously displayed for the audience to see and go along with the progression of the play.

The set properties of the sea scenes were played against the backdrop which projected the marine creatures and the rich blue sea. This background ordinarily could be taken to be anywhere and serve as a good work of art, the presence of a blue decorated bed with same material on the throne of the water goddess, Tarrela, shows the correlation between the bed and the owner of the kingdom, Tarrela.



The same glittering blue material on the water goddess and the bed. Pix courtesy of Dolapo Adejumo

It is not natural for human beings to wear the same clothing materials used in the decoration of the environment, but because of the uniqueness and scarcity of clothing materials to the creatures of sea, which is reflected in the picture above.



The same material is seen on the arms of Tarrela's throne. Courtesy: Dolapo Adejumo

The glittering of the material also depicts the environment, marine world. The shades of blue in this scene helped the audience to follow the actions and

clearly understand the environment and the actions that occurred there. The water creatures depicted in the backdrop complete the needed information of the environment. The use of 3D setting which shows the swimming fishes depicts the marine world and its creatures. It is not natural for fish to swim around human beings, or for human beings be so comfortable under water without any life support devices. The sea-blue colour of the background material depicts the presence of water and its inhabitants. The bed and the throne, which are major props for this scene, depict royalty, wealth and affluence of the occupants.

Their constant movements also show the transition of the action (compare their positions in the pictures). Akila's dressing in this scene shows he was at a kind of party before he drowned and become hostage underwater. This then buttress the essence of scenography in a theatrical production as posit by Adekoya-Oduntan (2012) as:

Consists of the entire visual elements that are used and incorporated into play productions for the interpretation and understanding of message. It is an indispensable aspect of production, working in harmoniously with the artistic for effective communication. The scenographic consist of scenery or set, light, costume and make-up, properties and sound. In order words, visual elements lend authority and authenticity to the dialogues and actions.

This is corroborating Asomba (2000) who views scenography as that which:

Support the life of the actor on the particular stage, living his imaginative life, if he is to effectively communicate. Scenery, costume, make-up, sound and stage lighting are indispensable embellishments that complement and aid an actor in his efforts in articulating and communicating the idea of a drama to the audience.

Other set props utilized could also be seen in the house of Baba and Mama Eleja, the parents of Akila. Being professional fisherman and seller, their place of abode, the main land scene in the performance. The house is decorated with local fishing materials. The use of the cone basket and *Pansala*, a local tray made with palmstick, both made from bamboo materials, a readily available riverine material used in catching and selling of fish tell the audience the occupation of the inhabitants of the house.

The communicating aids rendered to the interpretation and understanding of the performance extend to the hand props used. The hand properties, contribute greatly to the overall interpretation and understanding of the message, as especially utilized by Akila, Adagun-odo men, Baba and Mama Eleja

and other fishermen in the play. The fishermen with their cone fishing baskets approached Baba Eleja's house to show him the dead fish caught. This shows that the fishermen authenticate their words with props for meaningful interpretation and understanding. The two *Apoti* – local stools, in front of the house were used by the characters during the performance. This shows the setting and give additional information about the occupants of the house. The costumes of Baba Eleja as seen in the pictures show casualty of the atmosphere. He is simply dressed for his daily activities, even at the return of Akila from under water.



Fishermen at Baba Eleja's house with their fishing tools and dead caught fishes in their cone bsakets. Courtesy, Dolapo Adejumo

Several hands props used by the characters show different moods and occasions that happened in the performance. One of such is the Eleja's preparation of gift for the water goddess for giving back their child alive. The fishermen's costumes show they were out on the water for their usual expenditure on the water while Mama and Baba Eleja's costumes show celebration mood. Their items of appreciation are also new to depict the mood at display.



Baba and Mama Eleja, offering their fishing tools in appreciation to the water goddess at the celebration of regatta. Pix: Courtesy, Dolapo Adejumo.

The use of hand props by the men of Adagun-odo to depict his illicit dumping of toxins into the water in the play shows how props can aid understanding of play performance message. The men, in carrying the heavy boxes had to use their legs to support their hands. This shows the heaviness of the boxes. Also, because Adagun-odo knew he engages in and make his money from illegal business by dumping whatever in the ocean, he armed his men, who used their weapons to hit Akila when challenged. The costume is a uniform with beret, belt and being shorts to enable them perform their duties effectively. Adegun-odo is richly dressed to depict his wealth while Akila is seen in a short and top while composing his music by the beach.



Adegun-Odo man carrying one of the heavy toxin content boxes.



Adegun-Odo and his armed aides, Akila with his writing materials. Courtesy, Dolapo Adejumo.

The above picture clearly shows the intent of the characters, Akila and Adagun-Odo. While Akila was at the beach for his writing inspiration, and perhaps at the prompting of “his lover” – Tarella. Adagun-Odo, a man with dubious illegal business at the beach came handy with armed men prepared for any confrontation any kind. This is an indication of someone who knows his action is inimical to the wellbeing of the society, can be arrested and ready to do anything to have his way. It is also an indication of insecurity, desperation and violation of societal laws by Adagun-Odo.

Conclusion

The scenography of a play production deepens the understanding of happenings in the performance. It enables the actors to live out their imaginative lives convincingly before the audience and enhances the understanding of the audience. This paper looks at the connection between the visual elements of scenery or set, props and costume usage in Lagos State University 2020 convocation play of *Mommy Water’s Wedding* as directed by Sola Fosudo, Set and Light by Ayodele Vincent (of Blessed Memory), costume by Toyin Gbajumo and Adekoya-Oduntan Paulina, props by Edun Opeyemi and their team of designers. The collaboration of the designers shows a great deal in the overall visual interpretation of the performance. The highlight of this work on the use of props is to call attention to this aspect of design that seems neglected and passively acknowledged in stage and screen performances. Props are enhancers of both set and costume appearance of the characters. Props also lends additional mean-

ing to the use of other visual elements of set and costume to give background information to the occupants of the set as well as depict mood of the characters. This writer therefore solicits that more attention be paid to the treatment and involvement of props designers in stage and screen productions and more students to specialize in this area of design for wholesome performances in order for our institutions to raise more hands in this area of design to handle productions in the industry.

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