



Songs of Gold

Fresh Perspectives on Clark

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The Challenges of Interpreting the Poetic and Lyrical Depth of Lighting in J.P. Clark's Plays

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Abstract

From a humble beginning, lighting has gone beyond illumination. The need has always been there but lack of technology limited its full potential until the twentieth century. Like the Classical Greek plays, African plays appear not to have been written for stage lighting until African elite dramatists began to write in the European tradition. However, in telling African stories, the total theatre approach is hardly ignored. Yet some Nigerian playwrights have brought their deep poetic language to dramatic dialogue which thus challenges the creativity of the lighting designer. J.P. Clark is one of such playwrights. This essay discusses some of these challenging poetic lines and dramatic atmosphere which an ambitious designer can pursue through sound and light in the total theatre and illusionistic styles in Clark's drama.

Introduction

Lighting is illumination. To illuminate is to reveal; revelation brings about insight, knowledge and understanding. In the theatre, stage lighting serves basically to illuminate the action on stage; in doing this, art and science cohere to interpret a script for a viewing audience. The script/play being the primary idea to be interpreted provides the designer with clues and cues to help his/her interpretation. In the play, the playwright has the poetic license to present his ideas while exploring techniques and styles that can advance his/her dramaturgy.

The playwright's settings, language dialogue, characterisation, dramatic actions and atmosphere, rhythm

and tempo, stage instructions, etc are the elements the lighting designer interrogates for the lighting interpretation of any script. All together, these elements are propelled and driven by an inner aesthetic language. This is the language that an interpretational process seeks to first understand in order to communicate effectively with them and in turn communicate them to an audience. The process of achieving effective communication with the script and the audience presents challenges that the designer has to contend with.

J.P. Clark is an accomplished Nigerian poet and dramatist. His poetic ingenuity, to a large extent, has telling influence on his dramatic compositions just as his penetrating research into the African world and her traditions. His play therefore presents a unique character that provokes layers of meaning. The challenges of getting at these layers of meaning through lighting are the preoccupation of this essay.

Myths and Design Concepts

Lighting is usually subjected to some religious and philosophical foundations in most academic and intellectual discourses where its origin proceeds from the proclamations of deities on which particular faiths are founded. This is not limited to the two major religions, Islam and Christianity, but also trickles down to other creation myths the world over, which attribute the existence of light to the wondrous mysteries which gave rise to such myths. Most Nigerian folklore attributes light and its associates, the thunder and lightning, to some gods like Ogun and Amadioha known to brandish fury and fire to accompany their wraths. There is no doubt that these myths influence the design concepts of most dramas based on traditional African folklore where such gods play active parts. Sango, god of thunder and lightning, in Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* is a fitting reminder here.

Lighting these African plays has also transited from ordinary sunlit approach of traditional oral performances and displays in our village squares to the highly imaginative theatrics and

structured patterns adopted for the richly structured patterns of those of their European counterpart. In other words, we can say that the African plays are the archetypes of European plays in terms of artistic plots. No doubt, staging techniques have also borrowed from them thereof. Therefore, we can say that just as the classical plays moved indoors to receive the technology provided by modern stage light to discover the theatre experience hidden by the rocky mountains of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, it has also aided Clarks *The Raft* to rough through the Niger Delta creeks. Yet Clark did not lose sight of the almost inevitable call of African total theatre. As Bakare Traore (1972) observes, African theatre performance is a people oriented activity and usually in open spaces of the village squares for people participation. *Ozidi* is one play that lives up to the fullness and combines the interactive richness of African theatre and its aesthetics. It combines the physical bravados of the living and the fantastic figures of the ancestral world. It also plays in the open sky and calls for the infusion of surrounding bushes where the people stand around to see the display of the gallant against his vicious enemies. The "public square of Ododama" is one of such, "a game of kolo is drawing to a close for a group of boys.... In the game of kolo a group of competing archers try to hit a moving target.... On this occasion only one boy hits it successfully. This instantly makes him a target for attack by all the others", (Act 2. Sc. 1, 3).

Often than not, developing countries readily assimilate and integrate into their social systems attractions brought about by the products of advanced technology. This suggests that these countries are equally in tune with most of the items available to the industrialised world so long as the given product is available for commercial patronage. This is an inevitable shift. As Saint Gbilekaa notes considering the insufficient input of lighting in Nigerian drama performances, "this situation would have to change in a computerised age where the future of dramatic presentation would be dependent more and more on lighting technology", (6). Therefore, modern African plays

of the European tradition have had to receive European staging styles from their outset. In this regard, the works of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark are so rich in poetic images that the lighting designer could feel himself lifted from the pages of the text and transported into the metaphoric worlds of the author and his character. Another type of environment is that which the worlds of the deities portray in the mind of the designer. Beyond the sometimes voluminous and robust flow of costumes, lighting has the most inexhaustible characteristics that can capture and express the mythical ambiances that harbour those ethereal phenomena which are perceptible only to the human brain. These attendant phenomenal lighting characteristics have become inevitable in the prosecution of African plays in their entirety. The gods call for them, the seas in our plays invite them, the moving clouds require them and the transitions of day into night need the intensity sliders of the lighting dimming units to express them. The African language used in dramatic dialogue is rich. For the lighting designer, the poetry of each dialogue is between the various colours of light, the metaphors are also hidden in the combinations held by the myriads of colours which only a good translator can attempt to express. In *Song of a Goat*, Clark's many references to your "gate", (4) which means Ebriere's womb and cervical passage for childbirth equally holds same for the designer's open creativeness.

The Designer's Search for Clark's Ecological and Geomorphological Descriptions

In trying to give a technical explanation to an author's work, one cannot ignore some of the many ambiances of the environment from which an artist imagines, creates, and paints the metaphors around him. As Egbe Ifie observes, a number of J. P. Clark's plays contain these "ecological as well as geomorphological descriptions" (1994: 1). A look at these environmental forms would reveal enormous beauty that is

best enjoyed in their natural states. These ecological features rarely receive attention on stage at most of our local performances. The reasons are not unconnected with the paucity of technical equipments, especially in lighting but sometimes, the designer's imaginations has not gone as deep as that of the author's. This view is true if the author is a playwright with strong and deep ideological commitment to the attendant environmental features within the cultures of the story. For some authors, these ideological commitments stretch to cover the perceivable length and breadth of not only his geographical detail but also history, language, clothing, food, family and inheritance of the region and on which the people's identity greatly derives. One of them is fishing to which Clark refers to in *Song of a Goat* "A little away sits Tonye, working on floats for nets and hooklines" (Third Movement, 23). This is one familiar feature of scenery in Clark's plays. Another reflection of this occupational visual appears in *Ozidi* "Orea seated on the verandah, is mending a fish-trap and singing...", (30).

Drawing from Physical and Philosophical Information

The Playwright is an extraordinarily gifted object that dominates every other object in his environment. He learned to read and write, using that power of expression he dissipates information from the unlimited capabilities of his brain. Among these his preoccupations are the political, social and economic issues which stay at the centre of man's desires. Whichever way the playwright approaches his work would no doubt pose a challenge to the designer during the performance of that play. One of the most significant features of the Niger Delta Region which frequently engages Clark's attention is the creeks with their various tributaries constantly emptying into the Forcados Sea. This general description is divided into three; the upland area, the fresh water swamp area, and the mangrove swamp region. According to Ifie,

In this first region, streams and rivulets are seasonally flooded leaving room for the abundance of fish. Farming is practiced intensely in this region, the major crops being staple food crops like cassava and yams. In the swampy parts of the upland region, rubber trees are planted as cash crops. Palm trees grow in this region; therefore palm-nut collecting forms a substantial proportion of the men's occupation. The second region has seasonal farming and fishing as the main occupations of the people. Canoes are carved in this area both for sale and personal use. Lumbering has been a very important occupation of the men from this region (2).

Finally, Ifie adds that women of the fresh water region do mat-weaving, piassava weaving, bush-mango collection, fishing, trading in *ogogoro* gin and foodstuff peddling (2). For the designer, each of these items mentioned above is a veritable scenic background, and each location as well has its appropriate lighting shade. This is the relationship between background setting and lighting. Whatever mood awaits a scene has already been pre-empted by the set. Some of the greatest evils besetting our scenery are the total dependence on the scripts. The information provided by Ifie above, is the kind of research expected from every set designer. These types of scenes contrast the modern day socio-domestic life in growing African city found in *The Wives' Revolt*, where Clark confronts us with "a street", "a frontyard", "a verandah and sitting room", etc. In this kind of locations, it is easy to picture the semi-village setting of average families caught up in the brawl of sharing a windfall from oil companies operating in the region. There is nothing eerie or weird or fantastical beyond day to day domestic plain illusion of such scenes. Except where the scene is a box set, a combination of some of the ecological information should suffice in capturing Clark's external scenes. From these, lighting begins its cue.

The Challenges for Lighting

First, there is the need to look at the creative shortcomings of designers, if most plays we see on the Nigerian stage are anything to go by. In some cases, the problem is as much that of the director who may wish to 'experiment' using fragmentary, symbolic or no physical facade at all. In such cases, especially in the University theatres, the option is to fall back on the use of lighting completely. That is, where the stage has that equipment to do so. There are other situations where multiple scenes would negate the use of a single background. Once again, lighting comes to the rescue. This was the case with Femi Osofisan's production of J.P. Clark's *Ozidi* in the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in 2008, which also was the University's convocation play for that year. In proposing the production of the play, Osofisan observed that

Ozidi ...is a stunning feast of fantasy and prodigious imagination, a chef d'oeuvre of brilliant narrative and consummate craftsmanship...It] presents the Ijaw traditional world in all its splendour and fascinating wonder...recreating the original atmosphere of magic and myth, of fantasy and fanfare, of spectacle, dance and music, in a play replete with characters and scenes always larger than life, mingling monsters and demons, giants and gnats, gnomes and grotesques the play is therefore, because of all these, a veritable challenge to the skills of any director (9).

Interestingly, the above observation is also critical to the skill and ingenuity of any stage designer. Attaining the feat of design the play demands on the limited space of the stage is one hell of a task. This is essentially one of the reasons that critics such as Titi Adepitan insists that:

the medium best suited to the material is one that can give the freest play to the tale in the same or greater

degree as that afforded by the fictive, mythopoeic language of the bard. That medium is film (132).

One of the most difficult problems faced by designers in Nigeria is multiple scene plays because of the extra demands it makes on the technical team through scene changes. Getting people to effect the changes is not only the issue but also the time it takes to do so. Elsewhere, the problem is almost a thing of the past due to revolving stages or fully equipped flying system to take in and take out scenic drops and pieces as required.

Absence of Background Research

The importance of appropriate background to enhance lighting or vice versa cannot be overstressed. In one way, scenic interpretation through light and sound usually propel performances to a different level. These material behaviours are usually not the author's lines, but the designer's vision, and their effects on the audience are as affective as an actor could creatively interpret roles. Then sometimes, there is need to look beyond the immediate description offered by the playwright; this is where Egbe Ifie's history becomes helpful for the designer. Take the opening of *Ozidi* for instance; falling back on canvass painting that would capture the ecological background of the people is usually fantastic. Molinta Enendu did this in an experimental lighting class for his design students in 1988². A lot of effort was made to evolve transitions as the Storyteller switches character in the scene where "Ozidi is played by the storyteller; other prominent people are Ofe the Short, Azezabife the Skeleton Man, Agogidi the Nude and Oguaran the Giant" (10). These are interesting characters visually but something extra had to be put in. The Skeleton Man of course combines visual awe with physical agility. Each time, his movement is introduced by few seconds strobe light and sustained with ultra violet tubes. His awesome character was captured through visual outline of his entire bone structure

on black costume. A good lighting designer capitalises on these little visual promptings to thrill the audience. The inviting atmosphere of rich green trees splattered with white paints was supported with green lighting beams hitting the backdrop from behind.

In *Ozidi* the designer is faced with helping the director to overcome the demands of verisimilitude. This is a common problem with most mythically based African drama. This is because a number of the scenes often take place outside familiar physical space. For instance, references like "People of the sea" (Ifie, 5) from whom comes wealth, good wives, and good children forms the environmental visuals in Clark's plays whether it is stated as the playwright's scenographic prescription or not. Creating and transmitting convincing visual effects to the audience for richer theatre experience depends largely on the effects of light on costumes and makeup on characters like Skeleton Man or Boukarakarabiri, and scenes where Ozidi junior avenges his father's death. It is a battle with spirit beings and only effect lighting can produce desired result for the audience.

Stage Instructions, Dramatic Atmosphere and their Under-meaning

Play after play, stage instructions or directions of Clark's drama suggest the quality and quantity of light required to achieve the dramatic atmosphere of each action unit. Time and the prevailing atmospheric condition of the dramatic actions are hardly in doubt. To be sure, these suggestions are often time risky to be taken on their face value because the deep poetic meaning they portend may be lost. Let us consider a sequence in *Ozidi* for instance:

In the front yard of Ozidi's house. His shrine stands a little to the front, a mere shadow to the early morning light. He is moving towards it when his young wife, Orea, holding up a lamp, calls to him from the door

step. All through the scene, there is a muffled rhythm of drums in the distance...

OREA: Ozidi, do not go into the **night**.

OZIDI: It is not **night** when you hold before me
Your **lamp**.

OREA: I smell a foul wind blowing from the swamp
that may **Put out the light**.

OZIDI: Then we will **rekindle our lamp** and carry
On with the journey.

OREA: Ozidi I still do not think you should go on
today's raid. ...

OREA: (she slips out of his arms angry.) **You make
light** of whatever I say.

OZIDI: Well, aren't you the sunbird of
Our world, **scattering laughter like light**
About us? (22-23; highlights ours)

In this sequence Clark plays on "night" and "light" not just for poetic effectiveness but also for dramatic effectiveness by foretelling the death of Ozidi and the birth of his son, young Ozidi. Orea expressed premonition of Ozidi's death by smelling "a foul wind blowing from the swamp that may/Put out the light". When a light is put out, darkness falls and terminates activities. Ozidi therefore charges his wife for regeneration by requesting that they "rekindle our lamp and carry/On with the journey". This is precisely the mission (journey) the young Ozidi comes to fulfil and his triumph in all his battles scatters "laughter like light" for all those who identified with his revenge and redemptive mission, especially Oreama, Orea and his dead father. The full abstruse nature of the night would therefore be lost if presented as just a night scene without invoking the ominous essence that hovers around it. Lighting ingenuity is

certainly required to achieve this gloomy aura in a night that barely hides the "early morning light", which suggests a ray of hope. Other examples abound in this play as can be seen in the following pages: pp. 63, 102 107, 129, 136, 138, 140, 141, etc.

Decoding Clark's Metaphoric Language

The next are those scenes which are hidden in Clark's metaphoric language. A good example is found in *Song of a Goat*, "Day is breaking, and the tall stem of the sky-god set up in the frontyard is lost in the slowly lifting light" (Final Movement, 30). There is no limit to lighting designer's creative management of this short description. The first thing is not to conclude that it is dawn. The real question is what time of dawn? Day is breaking could be anything from 5 am. Again, we know that daybreak in the cities with electricity is different from daybreak in our villages without electricity. The important step for a creative lighting designer would be to approach the scenery with lanterns built for throws of light beams. The necessary caution is that the scene cannot be effectively realised without the use of intensity control unit. Clark of course, gives a hint when he says, "the tall stem of the sky-god... is lost in the slowly lifting light". That is, the bluish night shade that is gradually giving way to the approaching brightness. Finally, the combination of colours to use will determine how realistic the audience would get the impression of "breaking day". When Clark says the sky-god is "lost", he merely means that only part of the sky-god is revealed at very low intensity of the ambient blue-black light. This situation is perfectly realisable with a combination of blue and green gels not coming from different lanterns but doubled into one lantern. A gradual fade-in of white light produces a brilliant result of an amazing slow decline of a pitch dark night from a previous blackout. Overcoming this type of challenge comes with practice and frequent experimentation.

Light as Scenery

Another evident lighting challenge in *Song of a Goat* is Clark's consistent use of light to define his scenic atmosphere, a design trend designer-directors like Adolph Appia (1862-1928), Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954) and Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) had envisioned but truncated because of technological inadequacies of their time. In the first movement through the third to final movements of the play, for instance, we are guided with stage directions such as: "In half-lit room, Ebieri is lying face up on a mat", "Out in the Concession, Dusk is thickening", "A late afternoon, Ebieri is bathing Dode on the verandah" and "Day is breaking and the tall stem of the sky god set up in the front yard is lost in the slowly lifting light." respectively. The overriding scenic atmosphere in all of these examples is determined by light. Ernest Agoba rightly concludes that

In *Song of a Goat*, J.P. Clark is more obsessed with the quality of light with which the locale of his play is rendered than with the forms and concept of set carried by the locale. This is evident in his consistent reference to the form and quality of light in all Movements in the play (120).

The import of this engraved scenic concept of light as scenery is that J.P. Clark is informed of design possibilities and that as poetry, a simple statement can open up a gamut of visual interpretations. He therefore achieves the economy of scenic descriptions and sparse deployment of scenic objects through the medium of light.

Complexity of Staging Requirements

Some of J.P. Clark's plays have witnessed few staging history due to the complexity of their staging requirements. One of such plays is *The Raft*. The opening stage instruction for instance is brief but requires a lot to be achieved in terms of imagination and creative resourcefulness:

Night on a creek in the Niger Delta. **In the milky light the shadow of a cabin is squatting on a raft** (which may as well be the board or the stage itself). Through the near end of the cabin showing a cross-section like a pyramid and **a shade darker**, one or two figures can be seen lying about, half asleep and with yet **an inner shade of dark to them. Above them flickers a lamp.** Outside is **the shadow of a man** shuffling and mumbling to himself about something. The others would like him to stop but he seems altogether lost in some discovery known only to him (93; highlights are ours).

Others are: "Late morning. **Bright sun shuttered now and again behind clouds**" (105), "Late afternoon; **low slants the sun**, and the raft drifts on", (114; highlight is ours). In these cited examples, the lighting personnel is required to create darkness, shadows and flicker a lamp, all under milky light and yet reveal the ensuing actions. Perhaps a rich depth of technical resources can rescue a complex lighting plot that these examples require.

As countable as performances of *The Raft* is concerned, perhaps one of the most detailed attentions it ever received came from Molinta Enendu's production in 1988 at the University of Calabar, as a personal research experiment. The encouragement to do so came from the abundant facilities of the University of Calabar in the area of sizable stage space, flying systems and stage lighting equipments which are uncommon in most Nigerian theatres. Enendu's production of *The Raft* is also likely to be the most complex of the designs ever done of the play by any Nigerian designer. He had the endurance, the craft and the material to prosecute it. Enendu designed a real raft through a network of crates comprising of ½ inch by 2 inch wood batons built in two divisions. It was then carefully bound with heavy duty iron chains hooked into detachable clamps which made it possible to disintegrate when

the storm struck. The rest was a function of lighting.

One of the many remarkable aspects of creating lighting was in giving effect to rising issues from the actors' dialogues. A situation is when the lumber men were lost and were trying to determine their direction by determining the direction of the tide. The only means was to float any light object and a white plate was agreed upon.

To give effect to this spectacle dictated by tidal wave, a white bowl is knotted onto a transparent string (invisible under light) which travelled at the gradient of the string when released. Observing the undulating rhythm of the water movement, and the stage once more flooded with black light as the white bowl glides along like a lark in a reflection that could only be described as brilliant. Although, the cantankerous lot still had course to disagree:

OLOTU: That tells nothing. What if the raft
Had swung completely round while we slept?
It then would mean we are moving inland-
In the direction of Odi! (97).

The Introduction of Naked Light on Stage

The Masquerade we have "tapers burning on the lawn", (62); "flickering lamp", (135) in *The Raft*; "blue flames of the fire in the pit" of the blacksmith, (63) in *Ozidi*; three funeral "oil lamps", (363) in *The Return Home*; "the lamp burns lower and lower", (384) in *Full Circle*; Okoro and Idama "go on their knees and begin making the fire,... They strike a match...they apply the flame to the wood splinters...", (419) in *The Wives' Revolt*; and Col. Moorhouse "lights his pipe", (502) in *All for Oil*. The challenge here is how to effectively establish the functional presence of these naked lights within the high intensity of the artificial stage lights. The lighting designer who needs to strike a balance between the two, chooses when to highlight one above the other so that the reasons for introducing the naked

lights are not lost but sustained. Besides, managing the naked lights on stage to avoid stage accidents is also part of the challenge the lighting designer has to contend with.

Managing the Transitional Progression of Time

Managing the transitional progression of one time of the day/night to another is another challenge: Indicating time of action and setting is a constant feature of Clark-Bekederemo's plays. His dramatic actions are also often woven around the tempo-spatial demands of the plays. We are told out rightly that *The Masquerade* is a "Drama of one night somewhere in the Niger Delta of Nigeria", (52) and the action runs from "Early evening", (53) through "midnight", (68) to "Late morning", (80). *The Raft* is also set in the "night on a creek in the Niger", (93) spanning through "late morning", (104) through "late afternoon", (115) to "night", (135). Action in *The Boat* commences from "evening", (271) through "Afternoon", (291, 297, 309) to "Early morning", (302, 305) and "later the same day", (326). "Late afternoon", (335) is when action starts in *The Return Home*, moves to "almost night", "early evening", (348), "late evening", (354), "night", (358) and "early dawn", (363). In *Full Circle* we have a slightly different approach. We are given the period and time of the play and action respectively: "In the fifties. ... It is night, and the town is almost asleep...", (375) and "morning" (384). Action resumes "early one evening", (401) runs through the "morning after" (414) and terminates at "about noon", (421). *The Wives' Revolt* is set in "early one evening", (401) and runs through the "morning after", (414) to "about afternoon", (421). *All for Oil* is also given a definite period: "Sometime between 1912 and 1915", (461).

Interpreting all these time frames with their transitional values within the context of their dramatic atmosphere is sure to put pressure on the lighting designer because each time frame is also often a poetic elocution. Perhaps one of the easiest

ways to ease this tension is to design a comprehensive lighting plot and cues. It is extremely difficult to find at the beginning or end points of his action unit lighting terms like 'fade in' and 'fade out' respectively. Or other terms like, 'black out', 'sharp black out' 'gradual fade out', etc. What we find often are stage directions describing the actions that end a scene. These are the only guide available to the lighting designer to decide on what quantity, quality and intensity of light that would be suitable to start or end a scene or the entire play.

Conclusion

There are numerous situations in J.P. Clark's plays that go beyond surface interpretation through dialogue and vague lighting. In fact, every line offers a challenge to both the director and the designer to decide what degree of entertainment to offer the audience. But in all, a near perfect production of *The Raft*, *Ozidi*, *The Boat*, require space, equipment and artistic discipline.

Clark's fascination with the night and atmospheric condition should engage our special attention when producing his plays. His 'night' has many shades and meanings with subtle ambience of esotericism, calmness, gloom, vivacity, hope, mysteries and spiritual elevation. Every shade has a glint of story to emphasise and it is our thorough understanding of these shades of Clark's 'night' that can help our lighting options and choices with which to illuminate that night for our audience to see the core of his poetic and meta-critical dramatic narration.

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