

Digital Directing Aesthetics in Lagos Theatres: An Examination of Austen-Peters' *Wakaa* the Musical

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Abstract

In Lagos, Nigeria, the exploration of multimedia in theatre directing as an act and art is gradually gaining ground even with the paucity of funding and technical deficiencies in most Nigerian institutional theatre practice culture. This paper applies Nadja Linnine Masura's concept of digital theatre to assess the nature, types, and impact of multimedia design inclusion in the theatre directing practice in Lagos. Two objectives were formulated for this study. First, to investigate to what extent Bolanle Austen-Peter's (BAP) *Wakaa* the Musical actualized the concept of digital theatre directing, and second, to find out if the twenty-first-century Nigerian audience will be receptive to the introduction of this new theatre technique. Data is collected from BAP production's online sources on YouTube and Terra Kulture. The study is analytical hence an exposition of the extent and essence of the application of multimedia to *Wakaa* the Musical, a digitally inclined stage production performed at Terra Kulture, Lagos State. The study is pivotal to understanding and appreciating digital relationships with theatre thus, relevant to theatre practitioners, theoreticians, academicians, students, and policymakers.

Keywords

Nigerian Theatre and Performance, African Total Theatre, Multimedia Design, Digital Theatre Directing, Digital Media and Globalization, Global Theatre and Performance Studies, Nigerian Directors

1. Introduction: Digital Theatre Directing in Nigeria

Globally, the influence of new media has taken over the propagation of theatre practices. This is because people constantly push the frontiers of theatre and entertainment, in general, to conform to the dynamics of taste civilization, world

views, and ideologies. Digital theatre directing is an experimental and non-conventional practice that is gradually taking over theatrical performances globally. This new existing medium has in the past been theorized by renowned theatrical scholars from the early mid-eighteenth century to the modern period. Major proponents such as David Garrick working with Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg in the famous Drury Lane theatre in London, as what began in the 1770s would only grow larger and more elaborate in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, in *Stage to Screen*, A. Nicholas Vardac would attribute the origins of the aesthetic impulse that ultimately culminated in the creation of the movies directly to Garrick and De Loutherbourg (Vardac, 1949), alongside other leading exponents such as Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and some of the famous avant-garde theatre directors and designers like Joseph Svoboda, Vsevolod Meyerhold and some other leading contemporaries such as Daniel Fine, Josh Lindberg, Arnold Mittelman, Mark Reaney, Tyler Perry and a host of others.

These practitioners whose theatrical philosophy is influenced by the desire for a “total theatre” are in control of the whole process of production to realize their artistic vision. This makes Iain Mackintosh propose that if TV watchers are to leave their comfortable armchairs and go to the theatre, they want either to see the spectacle that cannot be created within the confines of their small television screen or to be close to a live action. Thus, the introduction of TV made the contemporary theatergoer, except when attending the latest mega-musical, more receptive to small, focused spaces whether in the round, environmental, or with thrust or sparsely furnished end stages (Mackintosh, 1993). Film cinema attendance encourages traditionalism in theatergoers and hence dull theatre experience in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

From the time of Garrick, theatre directors have been concerned with scenography, costuming, lighting, and spectators and there is a trend in modern theatre for the designers to play a dominant role. This can be achieved by challenging the conventional supremacy of the theatre director, and the two roles can be subsumed into one, which gives us a director/designer. Though these theatre directors cum designers will apply technologies in their staging and not restrict it to artistic elements alone. Over the years, the rise of ICT in daily practices has created a lacuna in the theatrical approach of the old and proposes a more digitally theatricalized production.

In Nigeria most importantly to this study, history goes as back as the times of Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo who tried in their own space to create marveling theatrical illusions with special and cosmic effects on a theatrical stage. Oni states that during the times of Ogunde’s theatre, indigenous theatre groups transitioned into filmmaking, and this enhanced their approaches to lighting. These indigenous theatre groups transitioned from simply applying floodlights and ultra-violets on switches to advanced lighting instruments like spotlights and Strand

Pattern 252 fire effect with control equipment and dimmers. Ogunde was particularly interested in the use of effects, and achieved outstanding results in the use, for instance, of the fire effect for his production of *AporinNt'enia* in which the “evil doer” was thrown into “hell fire” (Oni, 2004).

The theatre of Ladipo based in Osogbo created huge successes with historical and legendary dramas in which costumes and props with some “magical” effects played a major role. Especially in his play *Oba Koso* but he did not have a strong lighting legacy (Oni, 2004). In digital theatre, there is no limitation to the performance space as was prevalent in the old.

Over the years, there has been a form that is adopted as the Nigerian Theatre mode which is the African Total Theatre mode. The influence of technology in Nigerian theatrical performances happens to be used often for just entertainment's sake but not serving as an integral part of the directing or playmaking. Digital media/technology happens to be the core of where theatre is tilting the world over. The African total theatre if tailored towards harnessing digital media may best the contention of African theatre mode for the world because of its eclectic approach. Migration also meets this new media approach to directing where Nigerians in the diaspora can always have a feel of their cultural nuances, in the pieces of the traditional customs and rituals during a theatre performance. Hence, promoting these Nigerian indigenous values in the new space with the aid of digital live-streaming devices.

With the aid of digital media, African traditional theatre can be performed in any African contemporary space and still be given a global view. In conclusion, using some vital elements of digital media, the audience can be linked from several parts of the world who stream this audio-visual life as it is being performed on stage, thereby, still not breaking the fourth wall. However, it still retains the basic elements of liveliness, immediacy, and co-audience participation. Even though they have had a tremendous impact on theatre directing in Africa, they are just recycling modes. These African directing modes cannot fit into the future which is a world in a space that exists in a space and most African theatres are yet to fully tap into the space. The African directors will embrace and start adopting the digital media approach when we can create a multimedia space in an African theatre.

The latter informs my study focus on the director because the director keys into this vision, every other crew member will approach the production from that perspective. Furthermore, if the director still applies the analog technique, every other artist will approach the performance from that same point of view. Finally, if the director's mind, interest, and efforts towards this new media mode of directing are captured, the African theatre practice by its definition and focus will experience the digital technology benefits. This paper employs Nadja Linnine Masura's concept of digital theatre to examine discourses on the evolution of multimedia directing to properly contextualize the technological aesthetics of directing in Lagos theaters.

2. Western Evolution of Digital Theatre Directing

The growing rise of technology in the modern era during the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century hunted the conventional theatre space as the inventions of film and cinemas were gradually taking control of the known traditional theatrical activity of the time. However, at this time, it is in the ideas of artists including Craig, Piscator, Svoboda, and the Bauhaus and Futurist movements that we can see the strongest connections between the present-day use of digital media and live actors. In their ideas, we also see, earlier experimental theatrical use of non-human actors, broadcast technology, and filmic projections (Masura, 2007). Similarities can be seen between theatre and film in the spectacle of transforming place in Italianate scenery, and other physical staging methods. Craig, Piscator, Svoboda, and Walter Gropius supported the integration of the use of new technology in theatre (Innes, 1998).

Craig, Artaud, Appiah, Piscator, Svoboda, etc. started experimenting with dynamic approaches with the use of scenography to create realistic illusions that will provoke the emotions of the audience creating a wide reaction through the use of special effects. However, most of their theories were not realized on stage due to the paucity of funding and technological development at that time. Computer technology has not come of age to aid the mode of application and actualization of their visions of the theatre which was in that period termed unrealistic and unachievable especially when Craig spoke of the actor in his famous essay on acting, *The Actor, and the "Über-marionette"* which was first published in 1907 *The Mask* which is a periodical that was a vehicle for his opinions of theatre, contributed under many different pseudonyms. Craig's essay appears to call for the abolition of the actor and his/her replacement by a puppet, the über-marionette.

He claims that the actor is merely one element in the overall artistic vision of the director. Craig's approach is anti-naturalistic especially when he asserts that the actor should "represent" not "imitate", or "show" rather than "create". In a similar vein, by 1932, Artaud argument in *The Theatre and Its Doubles*, on his idea of the theatre of cruelty was that theatre will never be itself again. According to Artaud, a solution to this problem is by providing the audience "truthful distillations of dreams where their tastes for crime, its erotic obsession, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even in cannibalism, gush out, not in illusory make-believe, but on an inner level." (Artaud, 2004)

These were examples of what will now become digital theatre in pieces of creative imagination from Craig and Artaud to the early-twentieth-century theatre exponents who could not actualize their ideas on stage but still penned them down in manifestoes and articles as visions for modern theatre. Piscator, Meyerhold, and Svoboda tried in attempting to infuse technology into theatrical productions. Meyerhold was blamed in 1906 for his production of *Komissarzhevskaya* for his system as critics maintained the notion that he reduced the artist to a mere puppet just as Craig had envisaged. It took the intervention of one-man

Peter Yartsev who according to Edward Braun “came as close as anybody to the truth” on Meyerhold’s style. Yartsev stated that “Meyerhold’s theatre is seeking to express technically forms that the theatre of the future will have to fill out with content. That is why the new theatre concentrates exclusively on the visual side.” (Qtd by Braun, 2014)

Piscator in turn “was among the first theatre directors to utilize film to create a scenic variety of places. Though originally implemented as a cost-effective and time-saving device, Piscator’s clever use of film on stage created a new type of visual setting and stage action.” (Masura, 2007) The set design was a mere structure of steps and blocks behind which the screen viewed floods, the sea, a naval battle, and crowd scenes: “a living Background,” and Piscator called it, “the theatre’s fourth dimension. In this way, the photographic image conducts the story, becomes its motive force, a piece of living scenery.” (Willett, 1979) From the 1950s, Svoboda started his experiments with moving screens and filmic technology on stage. Svoboda’s ground-breaking work was with the application of multiple projection surfaces where he created “kaleidoscopic interactions between the live performer and planes of projected images.” (Masura, 2020) Multiple filmic and still images were projected on a good number of projection surfaces arranged in a playing space while live performers interacted with the projections.

Svoboda’s *Laterna Magika* and later the *Polyekran* achieved most of its visual magic through multiple projection surfaces and mobile screens which could follow actors and film clips produced for specific productions to create mirroring and well-timed “interactions” between live and filmic (or mediated) actors. Svoboda integrated new technologies into his theatrical productions (Svoboda, 1993). As practiced in the early twentieth century towards the end of Svoboda’s career, he began to work with television and video. He was joined in these explorations by multiple artists who explored live versus mediated performance from a live art and video art (plastic arts) background (Günter, 2005). The extracting of these pieces of live art and video art made contemporary/futurist and post-modern theatre theorists who are now fortunate to be met with advancement in computer technology to start devising means to explore this old knowledge. Soon Artists from the Fluxus group, such as John Cage, started an international movement to combine video, film, and TV with live performances.

“The electronically mediated image simultaneously displayed with the live stage action creating a juxtaposition of the discourses of the body with the electronic medium in earlier video art is equivalent (in most aspects) to that of the ‘live’ body and the digitally manipulated video image body in dialogue in Digital Theatre.” (Masura, 2020) For a greater part of the late twentieth century and the twenty-first, taste civilization and digital globalization have influenced most present-day theatre directors in the USA, UK, South Africa, Russia, etc. It is now possible for digital theatre directors such as Mark Reaney, Robert Delamere, Becky Hope-Palmer, Sarah Henley, Tyler Perry, David Loumgair, Arnold Mitelman Josh Lindberg, etc. to make great progress in producing successful digital theatrical performances in their respective countries. Other parts of the world

are still warming up in welcoming this new digital mode of theatrical production which applies a creative approach of multi-media directing to satisfy a highly engaging and intensive IT-savvy generation of theatre lovers.

3. Discussion and Findings: The Digital Theatre Director and Austen-Peters' *Wakaa* the Musical

The digital theatre director is different from the traditionally acclaimed Artistic theatre director as it is called. The Artistic theatre director can also become a digital director if only he is willing to learn basic manipulators or techniques of the multimedia system while the digital theatre director breaches the gap of not only the artistic and technical theatre but also the technological space. Digital theatre directing encompasses a holistic understanding of the artistic, technical, film, and multi-media application of animate and inanimate entities in a theatrical interpretation and production of a live performance before a co-present audience at the same time and space (Masura, 2007). According to Svoboda, the actor's theatre and actions cannot exist without the film and visa-versa for they can become one thing. "One is not the background for the other; instead, you have simultaneity, synthesis, and fusion of actors and projection. Moreover, the same actors appear on screen and stage interacting with each other. The film has a dramatic function." (Qtd by Burian, 1983)

3.1. Conceptualizing the Traditional Director as a Modern Digital Theatre Director

The concept of a theatre director just being the overall artistic overseer of any theatrical production is fast fading and has given rise to a theatre director who now serves also as a digital voice that is tech-savvy, skilled in the effective use and manipulation of the multi-media entities. Traditional Theatre over time has been greatly affected by the rise of the internet, film, and cinema worldwide because the central focal point of any successful theatrical performance is at the reception by the spectators termed "Audience participation." Max Reinhardt posits that the audience must take its part in the play if we are ever to see arise a true art of the theatre—the oldest, most powerful, and most immediate of the arts, combining the many in one (Qtd by Carter, 1914).

Due to the prevailing trend in a computerized age where most people just want to be in their comfort zones and still have the privilege of being entertained through their hi-tech phones, laptops, tablets, notebooks, televisions, cinemas, and so on. They sometimes prefer paying for online movie streaming whenever they feel like relaxing in the comfort of their homes, offices, leisure parks, bus stations, train stations, airports, Beaches, and even in transit. Despite the importance of mobile smartphones and the radio in connecting places in new ways, the invention of visual (TV, Satellite, and now Web) broadcast makes possible the efficiency of the digital theatre performance discussed in this study.

Perhaps one of the first performances in history; "to integrate real-time broadcast of performers in different locations into a 'live' staged performance (in

addition to telematic art experiments in the 1960s) was a work staged by Joseph Svoboda.” (Masura, 2007) This was achieved in Svoboda’s 1965 TV broadcast production *Intoleranza*, which used real-time broadcasts from outside the theatre, and in a sense, all these performance works integrating Internet broadcasts followed. This is what this study discusses, a digital theatre space that still maintains the core of live performance which is its audience participation in a more unifying and gratifying way in a period where the cravings of the spectators are tilting from the restrictions of the traditional theatre to a more technologically captivating theatre. This also helps to create an interactive media space due to the advancement in technology given providence for the cohabitation of two kinds of audience which can be identified as the “co-audience”.

This type of audience relationship is unique as they both share the same live performance in time and space with no restriction to the performance venue or auditorium. It is worth noting that “While in many ways Virtual Reality sets resemble the filmic projections of the past or even the thrill of shifting places in Italianate scenery, what is truly remarkable about this new form is its immediate responsiveness not only to cues, but to actors, and to the audience as well.” (Masura, 2020) In line with the latter, when writing a play every playwright must conform to Sam Smiley’s position that from the playwright’s viewpoint, the selection of physical elements for a stage setting has two key criteria: to make the actors move in certain patterns and perform certain activities, and to present appropriate and affective visual stimuli to the audience (Masura, 2020).

3.2. Nigerian Traditional Directing vs Digital Theatre Directing

The twenty-first-century theatre directors especially in Nigeria may grow with the trends of time by first accepting that technology has come to stay and thereby equipping themselves with the basic requisite computer know-how. For this study, it is pertinent to note that even though modern Nigerian theatre directors acknowledge the rising trend of the digital media space, still yet our crop of generational directors sticks to the old conventional practices that lack creative ingenuity because everything remains static in our productions. The audience witnesses the same kind of stage effects that have been abused over time because most directors do not want to accept the dictates of taste civilization either due to paucity of funding or redundancy in advanced learning. This has affected greatly the quality of our experimental output and theatre acceptance in Nigeria on a large scale. Many theatre houses are falling due to the low turnout of an audience for a live theatrical show and the government refuses to recognize this medium which should serve as a major tourist export and means of livelihood for theatre professionals.

One city in Nigeria has come to understand the relevance of investing in theatre performances and this is Lagos though the government was propelled by the forceful rising of some theatre houses to revisit the need for theatre to dominate in a technologically advancing economy. One of the theatre houses that is pivotal

to this discourse is the Terra-Kulture Arena, which has Bolanle Austen-Peters as the Theatre director cum CEO. Some of her theatrical productions that incorporate multimedia elements were *Saro—The Musical* in 2013, and *Wakaa—The Musical* in 2015. *Wakaa the Musical* was first brought to the Nigerian stage and later attracted huge sponsorship endorsements from both national and multi-national companies in the country as the performance was taken to London in 2016. The theatre does not only make money for itself but also for its cast and crew members gradually disposing of other theatre houses that have failed to appeal to the 21st-century Nigerian Audience.

3.3. Critiquing the Digital Theatre Directing Style of Austen-Peter's *Wakaa the Musical*

Digital Theatre performances incorporate 3D projections of animated worlds, and their aesthetic into a live stage production (Watkins & Watkins, 2000). An example of this type of integration of live actors and virtual places can be seen in the work of director, Mark Reaney and the University of Kansas Institute for the Exploration of Virtual Realities. Reaney explores layering physical and animated elements in his directorial approach. Hence, by examining the works of Reaney, contemporary directors will learn to enhance their creative manipulations of animate and inanimate coordinates such as the use of digital puppets, digital media sets, etc. Austen-Peter's works align with Reaney's directing modes and give insight and hope to what shall later serve as the future of Nigerian Theatre.

Austen-Peter applied moving elements like digital characters in the representations and presentations of *Wakaa the Musical* before a highly expectant twenty-first-century audience who have paid so much not to see less. *Wakaa the Musical* serves as an attempt to achieve a multi-media theatre performance in line with the concept of a digital theatre because the production pays due cognizance to the dictates of new media and technology, thereby satisfying the contemporary audiences in Lagos State, Nigeria. No wonder people troop out in hundreds just to see this performance that is taking Lagos by storm just like in the days of Ogunde and Ladipo's theatre. There was variety in the use of light and sound effects produced by an enhanced computerized system and the addition of lapel mics. See **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.



Figure 1. Lapel mics on performers to enhance voice projection in *Wakaa the Musical* photo credit: BAP productions (online).



Figure 2. Lighting effects in *Wakaa the Musical* photo credit: BAP productions (online).

The scenography of *Wakaa the Musical* pictured above, made use of limited onstage constructed set and furniture unless the properties are functional and symbolic to the scenes and actions. Instead, animated, and projected moving imagery were displayed in the background to depict the story, atmosphere, and mood just like that witnessed in early Piscator and Svoboda's idea of filmic projections and moving screens. The use of Computer Assisted Designs (CAD) aided in reinforcing the meaning and directorial vision of the performance, in addition to the excitement and escape for the audience members. Audiences could visually interact with the actions and dialogues of the performers alongside the lights and images on the screen projection. The screen projections continuously aided from scene to scene, to establish the period and location where actions and events on stage are happening. See **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**.

The only thing lacking from the multimedia production of *Wakaa the Musical* was the online and virtual media presence and this is due to the inability of the director and producers to hijack this modern facility in the making, presentation, and promotion of this live performance. For instance, imagine a situation where anyone in or outside the city who is eager to see the performance but is restricted by condition and distance, can subscribe online, and stream the live performance as it is done in sports and other online facilities. Viewers pay to see it online in the same space and time and actualize the same picture frame effect of distancing the live performer from the audience.

Svoboda's theatrically staged works influenced many artists to begin experiments with making telematics art and performance in the early 1960s and using the technology of various means of data to relay and broadcast as they evolved and became available. "Perhaps the most exciting use of digital technology in theatre and performance is the use of Internet broadcasting, or video conferencing, to expand both the playing space (linking performers in multiple locations possibly anywhere on the globe into close visual and auditory proximity) and audience space (allowing for numerous online viewers and multiple co-present audiences to be linked to one event)." (Masura, 2007)

Research conducted by the Nigerian Communications Commission discovered that as of 2015, Nigeria with a population of over one hundred and seventy million (170,000,000), experienced an increase of 83,362,814 in the number of



Figure 3. Passengers at the airport in *Wakaa the Musical* photo credit: BAP productions (online).



Figure 4. A Church service in *Wakaa the Musical* photo credit: BAP productions and OnoBello.com.

internet users on the country's telecom networks. Nigeria is currently the biggest Internet market in Africa, having the number of Internet users on Nigeria's telecommunications networks increased to 93,591,174 as of August 2016; the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) stated this in a report compiled by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) (*Premium Times*, 2016). Hence, Lagos theatre companies and houses have the potential to incorporate advanced digital media into their artistic mode of production. It is in this light that *Wakaa the Musical* lacks its strength with no presence of a "co-audience" relationship which is a vital aspect of a digital theatre performance.

4. Conclusion

The study describes a variety of theatrical directing ideologies utilizing digital theatre technology in terms of how they expand notions of the actor, audience, design, time, place, and community. But connections have been made between this new theatrical ideology of digital theatre and the ideas of past theatre scholars including Craig's Über-Marionette, Futurist experiments with space and the plans for the new Total Theatre formation, the spectacle of transforming place in Italianate scenery, and the projectionist theatre of Piscator and Svoboda. Without a critical review of the past, a vision of the world of today would be inconceivable to proffer sound justification to Digital Theatre by grounding it in the continued theatrical tradition of utilizing new technologies. Imagine the digital possibilities of creating and projecting an illusory depiction of the "sun or moon" on stage and transforming the playing area into either an open park or a lovers' midnight garden. See **Figure 5**.



Figure 5. Lovers at Night by the Moonlight in *Wakaa* the Musical
photo credit: BAP productions (online).

Furthermore, Digital Theatre has the power to challenge our supposition about the borders between actor, audience, place, and community thus extending them in our consciousness and simultaneously creating a perceived place (cyber-place) through telematics, virtual and co-presence performer, and audience interactivity.

On this premise, the researcher proposes that our Contemporary Nigerian theatre directors and potential directors need to be skilled not only artistically and technically but mechanically in combining the basic application and manipulation of digital media technology. Modern directors need to be digitally inclined towards digital technology and keying into the online and virtual media facilities, for theatre to continually remain relevant in an information technologically (IT) driven economy.

The country is technologically ready for this new media theatre and serves as a clarion call to policymakers, theatre scholars, academicians, and practitioners especially directors in Lagos and Nigeria at large to embrace and start adopting the digital theatre approach in the staging of productions that will appeal to the cravings of the modern digital enthusiastic audience. A few theatre directors in Lagos have integrated multimedia directing, nevertheless, and more still needs to be done through sensitization and orientation of the indigenous theatre directors and intending directors.

Primary Data

Visual Credit: *Wakaa* the Musical by Bolanle Austen-Peters

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-euS44_duZlxxQWwdZeAqtzxtQLQxmRs; <https://www.youtube.com/@BAPProductions/videos>.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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