

AESTHETIC AND SEMIOTICS OF THEATRE DESIGN, THE STUDY OF ESU AND THE VAGABOND MINSTREL: THE OLABISI ONABANJO UNIVERSITY SUG AWARD EVENT AS A PARADIGM

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Abstract

The concepts of aesthetics and semiotics have been extensively studied in fields such as photography and linguistics. While there has been research to understand their impact in arts, particularly performance art, few studies have considered theatre design. Although the primary function of all elements of theatre design is aesthetics, they also serve the purpose of communicating and interpreting symbolically. This symbolic communication is regarded as the semiotics of theatre design. However, the interpretation and communication of theatre design vary depending on the context of its use. This essay aims to prove the legitimacy of this claim through qualitative methodology, and analysis of the paradigms adopted for this research. The researcher finds that, indeed, theatre design serves as a functioning element in performative arts, despite being a non-verbal communication mode. Thus, theatre design possesses aesthetic, communicative, and interpretative abilities through a comprehensive study of its usage in both theatrical and non-theatrical performances.

Keywords: Semiotics, aesthetics, theatre design, communication

Introduction

Theatre Design has remained both largely practical and theoretical in learning. However, it can only be more appreciated and understood in practical performances than in theories. Although, both theory and practical contribute immensely to the creation and interpretation of meanings in theatrical performances. The drive to create meaning that the audience finds relatable is what makes theatre design thrive. In scenic design, a symbol or colour holds no inherent meanings unless it is constructed and utilized to embody meanings in performance depending on the context. This is to say set design isn't a haphazard creation but an entity obligated with the apt interpretations of a creation. These designs are not borne out of a mere inspiration or personal interpretation of a random creation, but the interpretation of a creation in which it exists, as dictated by other constituting elements of such creation. To comprehend

the creation beyond its surface presentation, its in-depth meaning must be studied and analysed through semiotics. Semiotics by definition is the study of signs and symbols. Campbell et al. (2019, p.25) extensively explains:

Semiotics is the study of sign processes (semiosis), which are any activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, where a sign is defined as anything that communicates something, usually called a meaning, to the sign's interpreter. The meaning can be intentional such as a word uttered with a specific meaning, or unintentional, such as a symptom is a sign of a particular medical condition. Signs can also communicate feelings (which are usually not considered meanings) and may communicate internally (through thought itself) or through any of the senses: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory (taste).

Semiotics, as a field, considers how people create and interpret the meaning of signs and symbols, encompassing visual communication and other means of expression. Pierce (1958, p.172) declares that “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”. In today’s world, there are different elements around us that provoked meanings aside from their surface meanings. When we read meanings to them, they become object of vivid comprehension. These meanings can be informed by our personal experiences such as psychological, social, or religious factors. “Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something referring to or standing for something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics” (Chandler 1958, p.2).

Semiotics in theatre concerned itself with the study of meaning in performances through sign and symbols analysis that has contributed to the interpretation of various meanings. Theatre, as a communicative and performative art, adopts spoken words, actions; signs, and symbols to interact and interpret its intentions to heterogeneous audience. Thus, theatre itself is a symbol with which the society has a reflection of itself through synergized actions and elements other than itself. Aston and Savona (2018, p.1) disclose that “everything that happens during the performance is a signifier and it is used to express a particular concept either by the director or by the writer. For this reason, a semiotic analysis does not only take account of the text but also investigates everything else that makes the performance”.

Theatre design as a complementary and contributive art combines the component of lights and scenic design to enhance the intentions of other theatrical units. For through this medium of combination and incorporation of lighting and scenic components, aesthetics is achieved to overtly turn a passive audience into an active spectator. Beyond beautification, aesthetics is needed to emphatically interpret colours and light to the audience. It helps prepare the emotion of the audience for the messages being communicated. Cooper (2024, p.2) expounds

that “the aesthetics of stage set design play a pivotal role in captivating the audience and setting the event's tone... and create an immersive environment that resonates with the event's theme”

Constructively, aesthetic and semiotics as investigative acts are interwoven, and any attempts to impulsively separate them can jeopardize the intention of this study. Aesthetic as the study of beauty in theatre performance carries emotions; these emotions are condensed by a theatre designer into lights, colours and designs that transcend its physical form. Semiotic interprets these components of colours, lights and designs as signs and symbols to create meanings. These emotions inherent in signs and symbols can only be explained through the study of semiotics in performance.

This essay explores aesthetics and semiotic interpretation of set design in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*, a theatrical performance and *Olabisi Onabanjo University SUG Award night*, a non-theatrical performance. This exploration would help determine the communicative tendencies of set design in these performances.

The Nature of The Paradigms

These paradigms are two major productions in the university: The *Olabisi Onabanjo University SUG Award event* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*. The former is a non-theatrical event established to identify and compliment outstanding students from various departments for their creative, academic, and individual heroism towards the sustainability of the University's good name and morale; while the latter is a theatrical production: a convocation play. This play functions as a reflective mechanism into the human mind, behavior, and responses toward one another. These two productions are best fit to discuss the manner in which the theater designer uses symbols of light and set design to communicate and create aesthetics that give the performance meaning. Many researchers have made theatrical productions the crux of their analysis when discussing semiotics and aesthetics of theatre design, however, the results despite being outstanding, are monotonous. That is, they come with results that appreciate the significance of technical design in theatrical performances and ideas for creative innovations. How about non-theatrical performances like concerts, award nights, dinner nights, clubs, etc.? The communicative tendencies of the technical design in these areas are quite limited, except for the fact that people regard lights and the design of these entities as mere art of beautification.

Synopsis of the Play

Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels follow the story of five impoverished musicians as they roam hungrily through the streets, hoping to find work. Their journey has brought them (literally) to a crossroads. There they encounter the mischievous god Esu who gives them the power to heal anyone. He tests them to see who uses the power most wisely and unselfishly

and who allows corruption to rule their decisions. The corrupted ones were cast aside while the compassionate ones received accolades.

Semitotic Analyses in Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel

Semiotics in theatre largely is the study of meaning in performances through sign and symbols analysis that has contributed to the interpretation of various meanings. Thus, theatre design has been diagnosed as a communication tool that adopts spoken words, actions; signs, and symbols to interact with and interpret its intention to the audience. Aston and Savona (1991, p.1) disclose that “everything that happens during the performance is a signifier and it is used to express a particular concept either by the director or by the writer. For this reason, a semiotic analysis does not only take account of the text but also investigates everything else that makes the performance”.

The Set Design



Figure 1. The set design from *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*. The minstrel at the crossroad

A theatre designer never acts impulsively outside the premise of the script. Whatever informs the creativity of a designer is surely incorporated in the script by the playwright. One may savor the subtle construction or the backdrop and then find them disinteresting or uncorrelated with the narratives of the play. To understand the nature of the set design and the philosophies behind the subtle backdrop, one must understand the underlying attitude of the script, the importance of the dialogue, the relationship between the setting of the play, the fate of the characters, and the incident that informs the creativity of the playwright. To have a clear understanding of set design, a quick detour into the Yoruba pantheon.

Cosmologically, Esu is one of Yoruba's most powerful and relevant deities bestowed with multidimensional powers such as being a “divine trickster, a disguise-artist, a mischief-maker, a rebel, a challenger of orthodoxy, a shape-shifter, and an enforcer” (Aiyejina 2010, p.4) amongst others and he’s widely believed to reside at the crossroads. Crossroad in Yoruba

mythology is a very complex word than its literary meaning of the intersection of two or more roads. Crossroad means “to be at a place of uncomfortable indecision, at a place where one's life path might forever change. The crossroads is also a site for encounters, where we come upon friends, strangers, and, in some stories, beings from outside of our reality” (“The crossroads as a literary symbol” 2022). This explains why Esu presents the wandering minstrels with opportunities that could change their lives for good while reclaiming that the opportunity is actually a test. Crossroad signifies a portal between two worlds presided by one-and-only Esu. The essence of this is to open the gateway for sacrifices; he's as well saddled with the responsibility of taking sacrifices to any target deities.

Having said this, the designer uses the backdrop as a signifier that signified the crossroad. The play conforms to the unity of time, place, and action, as Aristotle has explained. The designer uses this idea to erect the set of the stage. The stage communicates a logical meaning rather than haphazard creation. The set design here is a sign (semiotic) used to communicate a very complex, yet beautiful idea to the audience.



Figure 2. A scene from *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*.

The paintings on the set are not basically for aesthetics, they are signs intended to communicate the environment around the crossroad. A crossroad might be one located in a dense area or a titled street in an urban or rural area. The signs here explain the nature of the crossroad as one situated in an urban area with houses around. The interconnected paths or sections around the house painted with white are the crossroads. This also explains the mounting of Esu's shrine at the downstage Centre in line with the painting of the crossroad to offer significance and express the power of Esu at the crossroads. If the shrine was mounted at any otherwise angle, there would be less concentration and less emphasis in the play.

The Esu's Cottage



Figure 3. Esu's cottage. Image from the performance

The significance of semiotics in theatre design, aside from its symbolic message, is clarity. One need not be told what a setting like this represents. The painting and the eerie appearance have already given up the meaning it signifies. Semiotics, therefore, become a connector that ties every figment of the play to a particular meaning. I.e. the red curtain, the black painting, the danger, or the skeleton signs all form a meaning in the mind of the audience. The meaning accorded to the setting might be different; however, it doesn't transcend a spiritually-inclined setting.

Nevertheless, upstage left is a reserved area for supernatural beings or actions. Supernatural influences in drama or performances cannot be exempted as though theater itself is an offspring of ritual. *Deus-de-Machina* is a literary device used "to resolve complicated or even seemingly hopeless situations in the plots of their plays. The phrase is loosely translated as 'god from the machine' this translation refers to how the *Deus ex Machina* was often performed in ancient theatre. An actor playing a god or goddess would be lowered on stage by a "mechane" which was the name of the crane device used" (Mulvey & Baily 2020, p.1). This explains why upstage left is left out for spiritual or supernatural forces to evince the superiority of higher forces over human beings. This element extends to the play production and it explains the construction of Esu and his henchmen's cottage at the upstage left. Whenever any of the minstrels' clients came for restitution, as instructed by the Old man, the minstrels shall sing and dance a means to gain favor and resolve the issues of their clients. By so doing, the henchmen of Esu would come from upstage left the dance with them.

The Hideout



Figure 4. Image from the performance

According to the name “The hideout” to this segment of the stage based on several reasons. First, the nature of the setting, the painting on the set, and the manner that which the characters utilize this segment. A hideout is a casual place where one can hide at the sight of trouble. How does it relate to the play? Semiotics involves the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the nature of the set and all elements listed out earlier and the signified is the hideout. Explanatorily, the characters do not utilize this segment of the stage for entrance, they often take their cues from the wing of the house. This segment is always in motion when the characters were to hide from the thugs, Esu, or the people that came for supplications. Also, considering the painting on it, a big tree. A big tree is a perfect place to hide for trouble, especially at the crossroad. Conclusively, the theatre designer uses figurative symbols and signs to communicate the importance of each segment of the stage to the audience.

Symbolic Nature of the Set Design

The set is divided into three clear segments. The hideout for the minstrel is at the upstage right, the crossroad at the upstage center, and the spiritual or transitional entrance of the gods at the upstage left. These segments with different backdrops signify entrances for characters at different levels of the performances, however, the technical designer uses these three entrances, with the figurative drawings and inscriptions to signify what Soyinka called the phases of existence: dead, the living, and the unborn. A cursory look at the thematic preoccupation of the play and the atmosphere of the performances explains nothing but the importance of fate and destiny. Humans, at the crossroad, are to make decisions that will determine their fate and destiny. The crossroad here serves a dual purpose, the transcendental realm where our fate or destiny is decided. We will inevitably traverse the crossroad to determine what will either be our fate or destiny. For the unborn, their Ori will take them to

the crossroad, the transitional portal between the dead and the living where their fate will be decided. These interpretations explain the significance of semiotics in theatre design.

The Aesthetics Analyses of Lighting Design in the Performance

Andrew-Essien (2020, p.4) queries, “But, how best can the efficacy of solutions given to theatre design problems be assessed?” the only unequivocal answer to this question is that the assessment can be done by the beauty of what is been communicated. Theatre design uses the aesthetic value of design to communicate intentions in theatrical performances. The emotion provoked by the elements of theater design is an extension of what it means and stands for. All elements that constitute theatre design during a dramatic performance are placed to primarily and aesthetically suit the nature of the performance, others ulterior interpretations came second. Without this aesthetic value or beauty of theater design, nothing can be communicated. Aesthetic clears the path for the interpretation of each and every element on stage. This is to say no interpretation can be done without aesthetic attitude or value therein.



Figure 5. The use of Lighting in the performance.

Lighting and set design are interwoven. Both perform diverse functions in theatre or non-theatrical performances. One of the most important aesthetic functions of lighting design is illuminating the action on stage. Lighting is needed so that the audience can see clearly what is happening. Lighting shows the audience where the production is set. “For example, a play set in a hot country may use warm, orange lighting to demonstrate that the climate is hot. Lighting can also show different times of the day. For example, bright lights can create the effect of a hot summer’s day, while lower light levels may indicate night.” (“The purpose of lighting design”, 2020). These lightings are combinations of different colors that are aesthetically pleasing to the sight.

Also, the aesthetic function of lighting in the performance dictates the mood and tempo of the performance. It complements various actions to substantiate their mood and tempo as the performance unleashes. The designer uses light to communicate the high intensity, low intensity, and somber mood, cold, etc. example of such is found in figure 6.

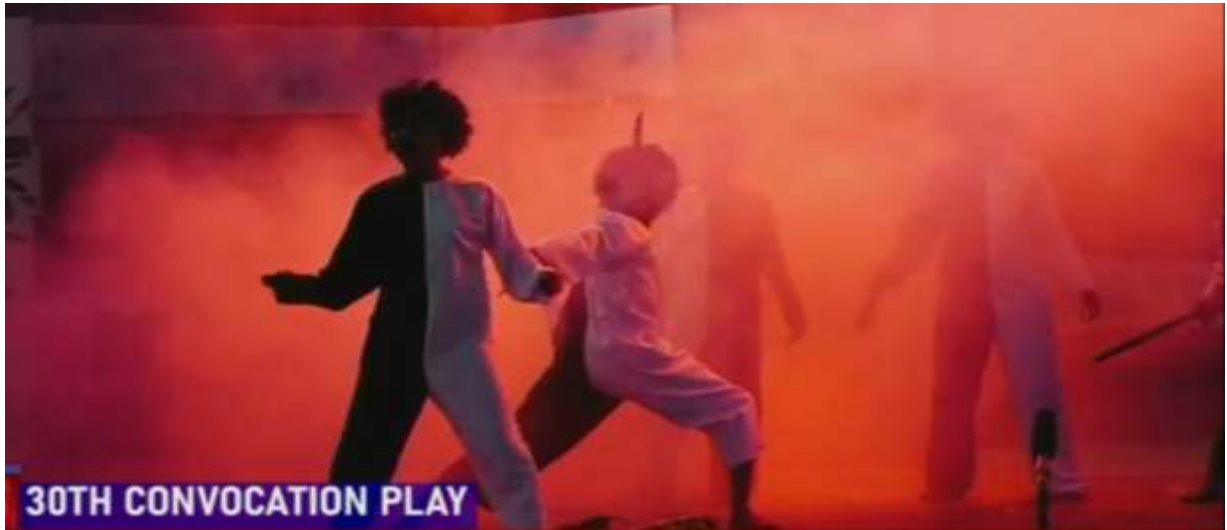


Figure 6. Lighting helps create high intensity for the performance

The high intensity created by the aesthetic in lighting design, coupled with the other dramatic element avails the understanding of the scene to the play performance. It tells the audience where to focus and the effectiveness of the scene in the performance. However, the ultimate aesthetic function of light in the performance is that it was used to communicate symbols and support the style of performance.



Figure 7. Light to communicate symbols

In a performance, light can be used to communicate themes or provide a symbolic dimension to the performance. For example, the color red might be used to represent love or danger, blue

might represent heaven or water, etc. such as in the case of Figure 7. The deployment of blue lighting communicates water. In the context of the performance, the scene was about fishermen dancing and to complement the scene is to give a symbolic representation of water. Furthermore, Lighting can support the style of production. Plays in a naturalistic style often use lighting to create the illusion of real life, while non-naturalistic performances often use more theatrical lighting effects.

Semiotic Analyses in Non-Theatrical Performance

Both aesthetic and semiotics are systematic approaches used in studying the nature of theatre design; however, their *modus operandi* differs. Semiotics construe a performance through signs and what it signifies while aesthetics studies the physical appearance of a performance to determine whether there are inherent values or not. In determining or measuring the communicative tendencies and magnitude of aesthetic and semiotics of theatre design it is pertinent to investigate the nature of the performance.



Figure 8. OOU SUG EVENT.

In the OOU SUG Event, themed, “The Inclusive”, the communicative tendency is limited because theatre design serves as a subordinate to the main event. The audience immerses themselves in the event with less concentration on the background, however, the deployment of theater design, especially lighting, determines the sensation the audience perceives or receives from the performance. Lighting help dictate the tempo and mood of the performance. By so doing, each piece of lighting equipment serves as a signifier directed to interpret the event as they unfold.

Unlike the former analysis, which is a one-way performance- a play performance. Every element in it was informed by the script and creative process of the theatre designer. OOU SUG EVENT is a multifaceted performance that includes not only an award night but also a fashion parade, cultural show, contemporary dance, artists' night, etc. These broad features of

the performance made the concentration and communication of the scenic design more complex.



Figure 9. *Scenic design for OOU SUG EVENT*

The nature of the scenic design is informed by the nature of the event. Setting up a stage for an event like this is more creativity demanding, because of the complexity in the process. The indifference here is that the stage will serve multidimensional purposes, beautify the event, and must correlate with the lighting and color of the venue. In this process, the designer uses the set as a signifier to represent the award itself. A thorough look at the scenic design and the award given to the winner. There is a semblance. This designer uses this medium to create a sense of intimacy between the set and the performance night. See figure 10.



Figure 10. *Images from the award night*

To compare the logo of the award and the creativity of the scenic design, the logo shows that of a figure who is celebrating with two hands above the head. The designer uses this instinct to create a stage that represents the intention of the event to celebrate people. The scenic design has its two wings raised above the front flat to capture the mood of celebration.

Aesthetic Analysis in the Event

The aesthetic has been seen as the study of beauty in works of art. In addition, it is not necessarily about beauty but the value of beauty. The lights deployed in this event weren't to create beauty alone but to add value to the nature of the performance. The value of light cannot be undermined. In a non-theatrical performance, such as the one understudy, light is used to add value to the performance, beauty came second. It is the value that determines the level of beautiful experiences the audience savor in the performance.



Figure 11. Image from the performance

Although in an event such as this there is lighting equipment concentrated on the performance, unlike the play production, however, the value significance cannot be overlooked. The value-beauty of lighting design in the performance serves multiple purposes. The most basic function is to illuminate the performers on stage. It's most important task. However, is to set the mood for the entire performance. The value of beauty creates a connection between the audience and the artist's music, providing a full-on sensory and phenomenal experience for everyone. Lenozo (2023, p.2) expresses that "aesthetic lighting does not only focus on functional lighting, but emphasizes the creation of a visually attractive environment in which light plays an essential role." The designer understands the demand of the event and the component needed to add value to the performance. In performances like this creating an accurate mood for the performances is the key element to fascinate their interest in the event, or else, their sensory organs will be subjected to fatigue which will consequently lead to disinterestedness or apathy.

Also, the coordination of lights adds to the aesthetic communication of light in the performance. If the lights are wrongly placed or coordinated, it will create a wrong impression and mood for the event and suck out the energy therein. Appropriate coordination, placement, and deployment of lights create positive reactions throughout the performance. This essay and results from copious analysis of the paradigms, this essay finds that theatre design indeed has heterogeneous significance which cannot be summarized in the body of this essay. It also discovers that:

1. Set design is a conscious attempt profoundly rooted in translating and interpreting the narrative into a conceivable environment, to emphasize the value of the dramatic action more effectively and profound beyond the writer's conception.
2. Emphasizing the remarkable communicative and aesthetic impact of theatre design on performances, the essay discovers that scenic and lighting design can forge intimate connections between performances and audiences giving them everlasting memories of the performance art.
3. The essay discovers that every aspect of lighting and scenic design, regardless of the specific performance, serves a crucial purpose in conveying the intended message effectively. It posits that each element of theatre design acts as a symbolic representation, signifying the underlying intentions of the performance at every stage of the action.
4. Through the analysis of paradigms, it becomes evident that semiotic and aesthetic examinations of theatre design serve as invaluable tools, enabling a deeper understanding of its intrinsic features beyond mere appearances.

"Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel" and "The OOU SUG Event" stand as testament to the profound importance semiotics and aesthetics analysis of theatre design in performances, showcasing how diverse forms of design can optimize the impact of a concert or event

Conclusion

The essay reveals that every element of light and scenic design has a communicative function regardless of the environment of the production. To have glimpse of these communicative functions of light and scenic design beyond what is witnessed, semiotic and aesthetic analysis is significant. Within the context of the discussed paradigms, theatre design manifests in various forms to maximize the potential of a performance. By delving into the potentials of theatre design, this essay sheds light on the multifaceted ways in which design elements contribute to the overall success and immersive experience of theatrical productions.

Semiotic and aesthetic as investigative tools are very crucial in the understanding of performance elements. Set design, being one of performative elements, employs light and set design as sign language to compliment and interpret dramatic performance. This essay has

demonstrated how this element can be understood in a performance through the understanding of semiotics, as the study of sign and symbols, and aesthetics, the study of beauty in dramatic performance. This essay, therefore, encourages the continuous investigation into the nature of theatre design to help the academic study reach its full potentials.

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