

BOOK REVIEW

THEORIZING THE NIGERIAN STAGE: STEPHEN INEGBE@60

Ofonime Inyang, PhD

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

University of Uyo,

Uyo, Akwa Ibom State

titiaofonime@gmail.com

TITLE: *Theorising the Nigerian Stage: Stephen Inegbe@60***EDITORS:** Chukwuma Anyanwu & Ruth Etuwe Epochi-Olise**GENRE:** Festschrift**PUBLISHER:** BWright Integrated Publishers Ltd, Ibadan**YEAR OF PUBLICATION:** 2025**PAGES:** 388**TYPE:** Theatre/Criticism**ISBN:** 978-978-772-692-1**Preamble**

I consider it a big privilege to be saddled with the responsibility of reviewing the book, *Theorising the Nigerian Stage: Stephen Inegbe at 60*. This is because both the subject of the book and the book itself have direct bearing on my career and scholarship in a number of ways. This also marks a momentous coming of age for both Prof Stephen Inegbe who is being celebrated in the publication and myself who stand here as one of the children of “his brain” the product of his academic “endeavour” “and the materialisation” of his “inventive genius” to borrow directly from James Ene Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* (University of London Press, 1956; JEHF/JAP, London, 2013, Pg 6). To therefore be the one to review his celebratory publication at 60 puts him at a high pedestal of good fortune of not only being alive to the age of 60 but also having the uncommon pleasure of having his academic children surround his table (according to the Bible in Psalms 128:3) at this monumental stage of his life. Be that as it may, I want to further thank my colleagues in the Friends of Stephen Inegbe group and the Editors for finding me suitable to play this role among the avalanche of equally cerebral and highly talented throngs of colleagues, friends and ex-students of the celebrator. I accept this task therefore in humility and pray that we all live to surpass the age and accomplishments of our teacher and today's celebrator.

The Book

This book falls into the gamutous genre of festschrift, a publication traditionally initiated to celebrate the achievement of a scholar through a collection of articles related to his work, research and academic throughput. The book is divided into six (6) sections consisting of twenty seven (27) chapters parading different papers directly related to the scholarship and creative production of Prof Stephen Inegbe or unrelated papers adulating the thematic focus of the book. It parades a bold front of contributors from different theatre and allied disciplines and from a rich spread of nationalities and research orientations. This extensive canvass of contributors adds to the breadth of the publication and orients it to increase relevance especially also coming at a time of noticeable laxity of theory or theoretical push especially within the theatre academe in Nigeria. We shall come back to this issue but before then, it is pertinent to engage this publication within the context of its public outing today and in line with the spirit of today's event.

The Issue of Theory and Theorising on the Nigerian Stage

The major gap that this book comes to fill is in creating an open space of scholarly engagement around the subject of theory or theorising as it affects the Nigerian stage in a generic sense. Ben Binebai, a professor of dramatic theory and criticism at the Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State acknowledges this in the foreword:

...theorising the Nigerian Stage implies the appropriation of theoretical frameworks, critical perspectives and analytical instruments to apprehend and interpret the complexities of Nigerian theatre and performance traditions...(ix).

What this establishes is the palpable imperative of the absence or culpable silence of a strong critical establishment positioned to “interpret the complexities of Nigerian theatre and performance traditions” while also complementing the burgeoning and expanding frames of theatre practice and scholarship in Nigeria. The opportunity presented by the emergence of this book therefore creditably ventures to fill a yawning gap left errant for many years either because of the lethargy of the critical and theoretical scholarship community or the dominance of attention on theatre of immediate benefits and transforming consequences. This book is therefore not only a fitting prompter to the need for the rise of critics and theorists to be heard on the Nigerian stage once again but also a clarion call to devote serious attention to the training and production of future critics and theorists actively positioned to engage the outputs of the Nigerian stage especially with rising new developments and upsurge in technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

The Chapters

All the twenty seven chapters of the book offer themselves as scholarly tributaries; all flowing into a large pool of homage to the academic career of Prof Stephen Inegbe directly or indirectly. As with most festschrifts, the onus starts from the decision to contribute to the book in solidarity with a man that has touched you one way or the other either as a student, colleague or friend. A majority of the contributors are unarguably colleagues, friends and ex-students of the subject of the publication. There is therefore a clear indication of limitless outpour of emotions, idolisation, relentless identification with his scholarship and a notable commitment to celebrating “our professor.” The themes and angles of each chapter speaks to the diversity of the Inegbean dramaturgy and criticism. As a publication with obvious bent towards theory and canonisation of a criticism through the work of a critic, a voluble positionality actuates a certain level of phenomenality in celebrating a scholarly practitioner thereby drawing closer to what Noam Choamsky describes as “immediate corollary of such privilege” (*Doctrines and Visions*, 2003, Pg 7). Starting with Ben Binebai, who generates an effusive yet engaging foreword that downloads his perception of his beloved Prof Inegbe, we are plated with a sumptuous eulogy that unpacks the Inegbean persona: “Prof Inegbe, the subject of this book (is), a man calm, gentle, humble, humane and morally uncompromising” (vii).

Nothing could enthrall as these outpour of salutations from your academic acolytes and well wishers. For truly as his ex-students and later colleague, Prof Steve as he is fondly called typify a good percentage of the attributes (agree that he is calm (sometimes and much better than me), gentle, humble, humane (lots of evidences abound) but...the last one 'morally uncompromising', my response is...hmmm). Also, it is through that insightful foreword that we are given a dialectical appraisal and explanation of the concept of theorising theatre as applied in the book. According to Binebai:

In theory of theatre, our memory connects us to dramaturgy, performance studies, theatre history and cultural theory and practice, to explore how theoretical ideas are represented in performance and as well examine the rhetorical and dramatic approaches deployed in theoretical writings (ix).

This therefore sets the stage for examining the various Chapters in the book along the lines of the contextualisation espoused here. The first section of the book focuses on culture and performance. Chapter One, written by Olatunji Sampson Sotomirin engages a traditional Yoruba ideology as a template for moral armament of the younger generation especially in a very dire season of moral wars in

our society, Hannah Akpodiete reflects on the convergences and divergences of our local culture and politics in Chapter Two while Andrew Nyikaa idealised on that cultural context by looking at folklore and playwriting in Chapter Three. Chapter Four that ends that section of the book is written by Dora Ekeke and it looks at digitalisation and its place in contemporary technical theatre practice.

Section Two puts its focus on Media and Film Studies. In this section, Ihuoma Okorie sets the stage with a semiotical study of *Jagun Jagun*, followed by Emmanuel Atansek's advocacy for good governance and democratic probity through the agency of film and theatre. The section ends with yours' sincerely co-authored chapter with Idaresit Inyang on the dialectics of development communication via script based theatre using Stephen Inegbe's *Things Men Do* (2007). The chapter interrogates the extensions of applied theatre into new realms including the appropriation of conventional drama texts as emojis of developmental theatricalism. The main section focusing on theorising the Nigerian stage is in Section Three. Anietie Udofia and Aniekan Akpan take us through the rough route to theorisation and the nexus between revulsion for theory and criticism, a core concern of the book and which I already centre-staged in my earlier comments. Here's where the problem seems to reside, in a rather blatant aversion to theory and criticism especially by the current generation of Nigerian theatre and media arts students.

Whether there is need to simply locate the malaise with students or there is need to probe further to see whether the teachers and scholars of theory and criticism themselves need to reinvent the field, review their teaching methods, re-energise their thought and recalibrate the pedagogy is certainly a story for another day. Glory Peter's focus on script interpretation through theories seems to offer a possible model via one of the plays of Effiong Johnson. Sola Adeyemi ropes in emergent directors and their innovations into the theoretical fray and this corresponds with Iquo Okon's review of a classic of theory and criticism, Eric Bentley's *Theory of the Modern Stage*.

Section Four directs its attention to play criticism and appreciation bringing to the fore the specific appreciation and interrogation of plays by Jibril Mohammed-Kabir, Blessing Ikwuji and Faith Salami. Following in that trajectory are further analytical appraisals by Anietie Udofia, Bassey Ekpe, Emmanuel Iroh, Nnanake Ekeke, Adekunle Ibrahim, Miriam Inegbe (the subject's spouse and an academic in her own right), Chidiebere Ekweariri, Ikechukwu Ejelonu, Emmanuel Thompson, Aniefiok Ufot-Ekpo, Olusola Balogun and Sola Adeyemi. This vast outlay of critical appraisal offers a ready model for aspiring students of theory and criticism and could possibly activate interest in the field from the younger generation.

The final section of the book is dedicated to tribute poems, plays and conversations by Siji Fatosin, Kelechi Nwaucha, Cyprian Ajudua and Ruth Epochi-Olise. Cyprian Ajudua captures the multiple layers of poetic vision and the flexible underpinnings of lines crafted by a devoted mentee to his mentor as he clocks 60. For him, the beauty of poetry is not really in conforming to the established rules of the genre but in pouring your heart to a subject you adore. That is why he sings:

But I choose to bless you with the birthday conception.

The poetry of a diamond jubilee.

My poem may be sweet to your ears.

Or beautiful in your sight.

But still accept her as she comes.

So that nature will bless her in return (345).

What a way to celebrate a man with an unrelenting flow of genuine emotion and camaraderie.

Final Words

This book, as stated earlier, is a viable and timely contribution to the scholarship of theory and criticism. It fittingly celebrates a man who has dedicated his life to interrogating this aspect of theatre. The editors have done well in conceiving of this project and pushing it to the finishing lines especially in a most challenging economic environment and a most unfriendly atmosphere for scholarly publishing. The

cover design is creative and inviting in that bold relief of the photo of Prof Inegbe placed atop the imposing and alluring backdrop of the National Theatre/Stage. That says a lot about the future of theory and criticism in the Nigerian stage. That it should be taken out from the Drury lanes of academic shelves to the public arena of engagement and discourse in the media outlets, digital platforms and other channels as it was once the case in this country and continent.

The devastating truth of the presence of good and highly provocative criticism and theorisation on the Nigerian stage residing in forgotten dissertations and thesis in Nigerian universities remains an anathema to the growth of a field of theatre that once dictated the tune of scholarship in this country and continent. Where are the critics and theorists of today's Nigerian stage? The critics and theorists have to come out from hiding, become active and conduct the much needed surgeries on our performative and creative installation offerings. Some adjustments in future editions of the book will certainly bring the full colour of its intellectual merits.

The section on theorising and criticism for example would have done better as the opening section and the chapters in that section of the book would have beautifully emblematised the thematic core since the title and focus of the book is primarily about theory and theorising the Nigerian stage. Some grammatical blemishes are also trusted to be taken care of in a future edition of the book. On the whole, I am happy to present and recommend this book to students, scholars and researchers in theatre, the humanities, the sciences and other fields and for general readership. Congratulations Prof Inegbe for yet another feather on your intellectual cap.

References

- Ajudua, Cyprian. 2025. "A Celebration of Diamond Jubilee" In *Theorising the Nigerian Stage: Stephen Inegbe at 60*, Anyanwu, Boniface and Epochi-Olise, Ruth Etuwe (eds), Ibadan: BWright Publishers.
- Binebai, Ben. 2025. Foreword. In *Theorising the Nigerian Stage: Stephen Inegbe at 60*, Anyanwu, Boniface and Epochi-Olise, Ruth Etuwe (eds), Ibadan: BWright Publishers.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2003. *Doctrines and Visions*. London: Penguin Books.
- Henshaw, James Ene. 1956/2013. *This is Our Chance*. London:JEHF/JAB.
- Inegbe, Stephen. 2007. *Things Men Do In The Battle and Other Plays*, Inegbe, Stephen & Anyanwu, Boniface (eds.), Ibadan: Soul & Beam Publications.