

Audience Participation: Avant-Garde in Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and Femi Osofisan's *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*

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Abstract German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his Nigerian counterpart Femi Osofisan are noted to propagate the epic theatre tradition riding at the back of avant-garde creative consciousness. They challenge existing dramatic status quo and the tyrannical, Aristotelian, classical composition on stage. Given their epic theatre commitment, many critics interpret their plays from the prism of socio-political involvement, perceiving their works as social, critical commentaries with a Marxist bent. While these kinds of interpretations are valid and capture the playwrights' ideological enthusiasm, they disregard the more enduring legacy of audience participation which in effect has granted their works global acclaim. Using *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, I argue that audience participation is a practical theatrical technique which provides a genuine substratum for the two texts to flourish. I further submit that the two texts provide theatre practitioners an option to adopt audience participation technique to involve spectators on stage in a world caught viciously in the stranglehold of adverse social hegemony. By providing the option, Brecht and Osofisan uphold the argument that the playwright and the audience are active participants in restoring the theatre to its evanescent glory as an instrument of social reawakening.

Keywords epic theatre; avant-garde; Marxism; audience participation; classical period

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, one can profitably argue that theatre, stagecraft, and various dramatic expressive outlets seem to be gradually losing their social, creative, aesthetic, and artistic appeal. This is due largely in part, to the consistent infusion of different dramatic styles couched mostly in the theoretical convictions of playwrights some of which lack socially penetrating immediacy and ideological cohesion. Hitherto existing classical theatrical forms such as tragedy with its rigid, restrictive boundaries of unities (time - place - action) and comedy adopt a fixed subjective approach which emotionalizes the audience, entangling it in the dramatic thicket of events on stage. These developments have stagnated the evolution of theatre, whittled down its encompassing potential and circumscribed the roles drama ought to play as an instrument of public cleansing and social interrogation besides entertainment and didactic objectives. One of the essential components of theatre which has ensured its success over the years is the audience. Without it, the entire theatrical engagement is incomplete. According to Orr Shelly, “the presence of an audience is the key component that constitutes a theatre event” (369). The audience primarily functions as a barometer to gauge the success or otherwise of a theatrical production. However, in the classical Aristotelian era, the role of the audience was passive and unheralded until the advent of epic theatre which demands the involvement of the audience in the determination and outcome of dramatic enactment. German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s introduction of the epic theatre coincided with the inexorable rise of avant-garde, an innovative and experimental artistic mode which led to the revival of multilayered imaginative lineaments in arts and entertainment. Ribut Basuki remarks that “Brecht’s theatre—which is known as epic-theatre—, was clearly an avant-garde. In fact, it has been considered as one of the most important and influential modern avant-garde theatres. His aesthetics has continued to influence theatre until the present day, when the school of thought has shifted from modernism to post modernism” (137). The enduring impact of Brecht’s epic theatre remarkably ensures its dominance of two notable periods in literary development - modernism and postmodernism with a regional affirmation in Africa, Asia, and South-America. Audience participation, it can be argued, is one of the most distinguishing attributes of Brecht’s epic theatre.

Epic is an Aristotelian term which means that a work of art transcends time,

in other words, it is relevant throughout all the ages. However, given the practical evolution of epic in Brecht's hands, he renamed his epic theatre 'dialectical theatre' to capture the conversations, arguments, and public scrutiny which his drama provoked among the audience. Although Brecht christened his epic theatre 'dialectical theatre', the literary world is more attuned to the epic theatre label. He also broke away from the artistic, commanding heights of Aristotelian theatre by rejecting preconceived replication of events on stage, imitation and purgation in favour of manifest demonstration and capability for action. His dramatic depiction emphasizes socialist orientation through the inscription of Marxist identities. The Brechtian approach to theatre performance influenced many playwrights across the world with Nigeria's Femi Osofisan acclaimed as a genuine apostle of the Brechtian theatrical philosophy. Hope Eghagha is convinced that Osofisan's ideological proclivity conforms to Brecht's theatrical objectives. According to Eghagha "Bertolt Brecht's *oeuvre* was his strong views on how drama can be used as a tool for re-awakening. In this regard, the works of Osofisan have paralleled that of Brecht" (72). By his submission, Eghagha establishes a remote contiguity between the creative works of Brecht and Osofisan.

Brecht's epic theatre redefined the world of theatre by first challenging the classical notion of drama with its stereotypical themes both in composition and dramatization. His epic theatre directly confronted contemporary socio-political issues urging the audience to confront and oppose issues rather than reconcile and rationalize them. According to M.H. Abrams, in Brecht's epic theatre "his hope was to encourage his audience to criticize and oppose, rather than passively to accept, the social conditions and modes of behaviour that the plays represent" (84). Through his early plays, Brecht spoke and advocated for the underclass and in 1920, he publicly avowed to be a committed Marxist. Femi Osofisan, while borrowing from the Brechtian theatrical philosophy utilizes African traditional elements such as folktales, animism, history, and myth as potent catalysts to recreate and address class issues in his contemporary Nigeria. Thus, these African traditional elements become elastic, active ingredients that shape Osofisan's social vision in theatre and performance. There is therefore, an existing artistic, creative, and ideological affinity between Brecht and Osofisan which is why many critics, engaging their *oeuvres* juxtapose the two playwrights. Given this existing proximity between them, it is almost impossible to mention Osofisan without attributing his artistic inclinations to the Brechtian theatrical ideology.

While the successes of both playwrights have been attributed to new formulations through the epic theatre mode and the attendant avant-garde

intensity, audience participation has been the defining parameter in their theatrical composition. Brecht introduced the alienation effect, through which he encouraged the audience to detach themselves from the play on stage, de-emphasize emotions and accept that they are not watching reality but a recreation of reality. The most obvious audience participation approach in Brecht's theatre is the open-ended style where the audience is called to determine how the play should end. Osofisan utilized this method to good effect in most of his plays. However, besides Brecht's open-ended audience participation approach, Osofisan devised his audience participation possibilities by appropriating the African oral narrative style through songs and response where a rhythm is achieved between the narrator and the audience. Osofisan's oral narrative style of audience participation falls short of any ideological substance beyond entertainment. Therefore, his inclination to Brecht's open-ended style of audience participation is more plausible, profound, and popular. A closer scrutiny of Brecht and Osofisan's plays reveals that they have achieved artistic success based on the introduction of the following as new models to theatre which sustains their avant-garde fervency — the use of songs, music and dance, the introduction of a narrator who narrates events on stage, frugal, sparse setting, lightening and props, character disembowelment, the use of placards, and freeze moments. However, of all these new, radical theatrical variations, there stands out one which is regarded as the torchbearer of the avant-garde movement - breaking the fourth wall. As a style of audience participation, breaking the fourth wall is the most commanding spectre which defines the epic-theatre, avant-garde mode invented by Brecht and nourished by Osofisan respectively.

Breaking the fourth wall in Brecht and Osofisan's epic theatre significantly accounts for the success of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel* (henceforth, *Setzuan* and *Minstrels*) given that the outcome of the plays are determined by the participation of the audience who are called upon to make a decision at the end of each production. Brecht's epic-theatre, although political in nature, seeks to awake the audience from a seeming lethargy and provoke them into becoming active participants in contemporary social issues. In the same breath, Osofisan's theatre seeks to stir the people into action, to ask questions and reflect on their roles as social actors. Echoing Brechtian theatrical and dramatic philosophy, Osofisan unequivocally declares that “my aim, I must say, has never been to achieve a consensus, but rather to provoke dynamic exchange, to stir the audience into argument and discussions, into a revision of stale and sterile opinions” (22). This mode of ideological communication is evident at the end of each play where the audience is invited to determine their conclusion, thus they go away from the

theatre thinking, ruminating and masticating issues they were confronted with on stage. The concluding part of the plays provides a more penetrating inquest into social dynamics. By giving the audience the chance to participate in the plays, the playwrights subliminally divest themselves of omnipotent, all-knowing personality, a style which was more prevalent in the Greek theatrical, classical tradition. The open-ended, inconclusive style of the epic-theatre promotes a form of social awakening and consciousness by which the opinion of the society is assessed towards major issues. It gives the audience a sense of belonging and responsibility, infiltrating the inner recesses of the people's psychology, thus uncovering their temperament which may have been concealed due to a lack of platform to ventilate or express them.

Generally viewed as a reflexive instrument of collective and individual examination, theatre reinvents every aspect of society from politics to religion, love, vengeance, exploitation, gender issues and most importantly, class, social contradictions. It challenges different defining boundaries of social reality before a large audience and through the audience participation technique, gives every member of the audience a voice irrespective of social status. Today, European and Asian audience will react differently to various political issues in Europe and Asia when Brecht wrote his plays. For example, in *Setzuan* the twenty-first century audience will be divided in deciding Shen Te's fate whether she is guilty of character transposition, cross-dressing, and gender manipulation seeing that she needed to vacillate between male and female to perpetuate good in society. Also, in *Minstrels* the Nigerian and African audience will definitely have a different view in deciding which of the minstrels in the play deserves reward given that Omele used his magic boon to help the needy while the other minstrels used their magic boon to assist those who will reward them in return. In the two plays, the notion of morality and goodness is called to question by directly involving the audience to become part of the decision process. Thus, the society, through the audience is continually held accountable in the plays. Audience participation, therefore, is a vital component of Brecht and Osofisan's theatre and a conspicuous symbol of the avant-garde tradition.

Practical Marxism

I have decided to appropriate Marxist theoretical template as a critical interpretive tool in this study given that Brecht and Osofisan consistently gravitate towards class inequalities and the conditions that give rise to these realities in their texts. However, having critically diagnosed Marxism, I propose a new model christened Practical

Marxism. Karl Marx's variant of Marxism appears to lack direct penetration with the audience when applied as a tool to dissect and analyse class conflict and other social issues in theatre. Thus, its basic principles resonate more at an idealistic level with limited demonstrable practical template for social reordering. Although Brecht and Osofisan denounce conventional dramatic heritages in their works, their inevitable Marxist tendencies ensure that they profusely cling on to specialized forms of drama which demands more of the Marxist template in its primordial form. Nelson Obasi and Ikechukwu Orjinta argue that "both Brecht and Osofisan's works have contempt for traditional or liberal humanist drama which sees human nature as fixed and unchanging. Yet, they hardly depart from it completely. Whereas Brecht deploys the epic theatre in contradistinction to the traditional order, Osofisan deploys popular theatre tradition to a similar effect" (38). The apparent inadequacies of Marxism in its nascent character could be responsible for the playwrights' recourse to traditional methods where Practical Marxism equates their ideological and creative impulses. Brecht's epic theatre and Osofisan's African traditional practices, two models that have striking similarities, free the playwrights from the restrictive shackles of Marxist ideas while granting them the freedom to propagate Practical Marxism, a new category of Marxism where their class commitments are inaugurated and established through audience participation.

The critical kernel of Marxism in its aggregate praxis could be described as quixotic given that the capitalist class which it seeks to overthrow through revolution will inevitably be replaced by a new class of capitalists because nature abhors a vacuum. Given the idealistic complexion of Marxism and its seeming unrealizable possibilities, its affirmative prognostication as a future model for social reconfiguration has gradually waned, systematically ossifying into an unpopular change model in the twenty-first century. For example, the polarized socio-economic conditions in Nigeria which continues to regenerate and produce new capitalist masters and underclass in equal measure reveal the limits of Osofisan's Marxist ideological posturing in his works. Babasinmisola Fadirepo observes that "clearly, from a Marxian perspective, Osofisan shows how humans are products of socio-economic conditioning although the pervasive corruption that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian nation renders his dialectical approach clumsy. It is not only the rich that are oppressing the poor. Among the poor, they are also oppressing themselves. Class consciousness that Marxist ideology espouses is not so neat within the Nigerian political and socio-economic context that Osofisan dramatizes" (5). While Marxism may be ephemeral, suspended in idealistic patterns and removed from direct, immediate social penetration where the people are affected, Practical

Marxism typically and directly demonstrates to the audience the inherent socio-economic inequalities among members of society and how these class contradictions can be abrogated and corrected. For instance, when the audience is called to decide the fate of armed robbers in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, while some members of the audience will vote for the armed robbers to be spared, other members of the audience will vote for them to be executed. However, traditional Marxism will continually preach against capitalist tendencies that give rise to the menace of armed robbery without providing a platform to engage the people and seek their opinion on the issue. But through Practical Marxism, it is revealed that some members of the audience, considering the conditions that give rise to armed robbery in society, will vote for the robbers to be spared. Without this kind of open-ended technique which gives members of the audience the opportunity to participate in determining social outcomes, Marxism will preach against conditions that enable armed robbery while ignoring social temperament on the issue.

In their works, Brecht and Osofisan apparently convey Marxist ideas in an all-inclusive continuum which opposes the classical notion of theatre challenged by avant-garde consciousness. Therefore, since avant-garde promotes a new era in theatre and art, Brecht and Osofisan's Marxist deployment must be situated to conform with the practicability of the new avant-garde artistic complexion. The audience in Brecht's and Osofisan's theatre is a microcosm of society made up of different classes of people who represent diverse interests and persuasions. It is a theatre which does not draw class demarcations or discriminate who attends to watch a play. Therefore, when the audience is confronted with social issues, various social representatives react and respond in different ways. The exploiter and exploited will react differently to issues of exploitation on stage. Social inequality, corruption, political and economic criminality will elicit different reactions from an audience made up of different classes of people. While the original Marxism does not prescribe a practical way of addressing exploitation and different forms of class contradictions beyond revolution, the Practical Marxism which I propose directly engages the people by involving them in the actions on stage. Practical Marxism is suitable for this study because Brecht's and Osofisan's theatre are tailored towards its tenets which identifies the dilapidating aspects of society and directly extracting the people's reactions either immediately while they watch or subsequently having been provoked enough based on events on stage. While Practical Marxism does not discredit the original Marxism, it posits a type of Marxist renewal, reincarnating a new brand of theatre which advances the avant-garde radical designation.

Practical Marxism as a critical tool, flourishes in theatre by reviving all the

emotional and mental atrocities associated with capitalism before an attentive, involved audience. Through Brecht's alienation effect, the audience is detached from the characters on stage and from entertainment, emotion, and pity which allows them to become part of the dramatic procedure. Brian Crow points out that "the main outlines of Brecht's conception of Epic spectatorship have long been clear: an intellectually (and even emotionally) alert audience, which is enabled through the drama's formal devices or techniques to see anew by a process of "estranging" what has become familiar and taken for granted, thus provoking audience awareness that character and action is always embedded in, and in large measure produced by, causal socioeconomic structures" (191). Divested of all items of personal engrossment and attachment, stripped of every strand of connection with events on stage, the audience is able to establish a corollary between imitation on stage and reality in life. Given Brecht's and Osofisan's audience participation technique where the audience becomes active, functional participants in the drama, collective mass action is no longer postponed, therefore Marxism is retrieved from the original idealistic chamber where it is usually ensconced and preserved. While Practical Marxism directly involves the audience, the original Marxism is delivered in elevated, highfalutin phrases which can only be understood by a coterie of bourgeois, educated class. The original Marxism in its undiluted state argues for class equilibrium where the poor, marginalized will benefit and be vindicated. The theory is meant to arouse, awake and create awareness among the poor about the degrading conditions which they are forced to live in and accept. Unfortunately, the original Marxism in its linguistic communicative strategies, alienate the people, thus there is a disconnect between the problem and the potential solution. In order to accommodate the audience in his theatre, Osofisan creates a theatre of possibility without restrictions. According to Abdullahi Abubakar, "to remove the constraints that create barriers in the interaction between the actor and the audience (resulting from an over formalized stage setting), Osofisan creates a freer stage atmosphere" (178). Practical Marxism finds expression in Osofisan's 'freer stage atmosphere' because it establishes the theatre as imitation but at the same time gives room for the real world to be enacted among the audience. Although Practical Marxism retains the basic principles of original Marxism which includes awareness, rejection and revolution, it advances the concept of direct participation where the audience is called to action.

Audience Participation and Practical Marxism: Critical Voices

Audience participation in arts is not restricted to drama and theatre alone. It

extends to other artistic forms such as music, sculptor and painting, museum collection, traditional religious practices and even orthodox religious indulgence. It describes the level of involvement of the audience in either receiving artistic creations or the extent to which artistic creations affect it. However, in the modern era, theatre seemed to have lost its verve and vitality which is why Brecht's epic theatre ushered in a new attitude through audience participation. Brecht's epic theatre, hugely animated by the avant-garde consciousness, breathed a new life into twentieth century theatrical ideology. Elizabeth Sakellaridou points out that "the twentieth century has been most radical in its search for the revitalization of the dead relationship between the stage and its audience. The rediscovery of ritual in cultures other than the European set the orbit of western theatre to a reverse course and restored the initial role of the spectator as a participant in the action and the theatre event as a shared physical and emotional experience" (14). According to Sakellaridou, the ritual cultures in Africa, Asia, and many parts of South-America, which encouraged audience participation influenced the European theatre tradition which by extension increased the innovative strands of epic theatre. The emergent twentieth century theatre passion opened new vistas for playwrights to create spectatorship awareness where it was jolted into a degree of freedom to be radically involved in the process of artistic creations.

Robinson Joanne underscores the importance of audience in theatrical performance by asserting that "it is axiomatic by any definition of performance that it requires the presence of an audience: theatrical meaning is created in the interaction between performer and audience, between stage and auditorium. Yet the difficulty of addressing the identity and reactions of the audience in theatre history means that all too often in writing about performance the presence of the audience is elided, merely mentioned in passing: the audience is there, imaginatively necessary but critically unconsidered" (3). Joanne reinforces the importance of the audience and the interaction between it and the stage. However, she does not explain any clear-cut pattern of audience participation and to what degree it should enable the theatrical production. Thus, there is a big question concerning the role of the audience and its reaction in a theatrical production. Brecht's and Osofisan's theatres are explicit about the role of the audience which includes but not limited to getting involved and active in the theatrical creation on stage. Beyond the role of the audience in a theatrical performance on stage, the actors require the response of the audience to motivate them and to gauge acceptability. The playwright, director and all the elements of the dramatic crew sit in awe of the audience. James Penner suggests a method by which actors and performers on stage can provoke

reactions from the audience and force them to participate in the process. According to Penner “in many cases, the performer assumes a hostile position vis-à-vis the audience. In some situations, the performer attempts to antagonize the spectators in order to make them aware of their own political and moral delusions” (77). This is another important aspect of the avant-garde movement, a situation of improvisation where actors or performers on stage exercise their liberty to provoke and involve the audience in the dramatic process. Besides the actors and performers on stage, the narrator can directly seek the opinion of the audience in which case they are divested of passivity and become active members of the production. Given that Brecht’s and Osofisan’s dramas gravitate towards addressing class contradictions through a Marxist lens, Practical Marxism is demonstrated when the ideological imperative of the dramatic content penetrates the audience, eliciting radical responses from them. In both *Setzuan* and *Minstrels*, some of the characters directly address the audience in a bid to provide background information about the play or to scurry their sympathy over the developing circumstances concerning the individual characters. In *Setzuan*, Wong the water seller and Shen Te both address the audience at different times. In *Minstrels*, the Old Man and Omele also directly address the audience at different times. Their reasons are informed by an urgent need to make the audience part of the dramatic unfolding.

Kirsty Sedgman proposes another form of audience participation which goes beyond the confines of the theatre. It focuses more on the enduring effect the theatrical composition on stage has on the audience long after the production ends. According to Sedgman “the methodological challenge is to encourage people to go beyond simple valuations (‘It was good’; ‘I liked it’; ‘It wasn’t for me’), by encouraging them to speak about what it did to them in the moment, as well as what they have done with the experience since” (314). Sedgman’s observations could lead us to compartmentalize audience participation into two separate categories: primary audience participation and secondary audience participation. The primary audience participation deals with the immediate reactions and contributions of the audience towards the artistic enactment on stage. In this case, the audience becomes part and parcel of the entire dramatic orchestration. The secondary audience participation deals with the reactions and effects of the artistic enactment on the audience long after the spectators have gone home. Sedgman refers to the secondary audience participation which is sometimes extracted and reviewed through interviews and reactions in the media.

Sophie Nield makes the point that the effort to achieve a consensus of reaction from theatre audience is at once futile and irrelevant because according to her,

every theatre production must locate its audience and elicit the kinds of responses it deserves. These responses could be acceptance or rejection, positive or negative. She claims that “theatre, like the street protest, has the capacity to hold space and time for the immediacy of rage; theatre, like street protest, has the capacity to both locate and dislocate the audience” (426). This means that there is no guarantee that a whole theatre audience can agree or align with the dramatic content on stage. This could be described as a major shortfall of the Practical Marxist approach because the diversity of the audience ensures the lack of total acceptability or consensus of all radical echoes on stage. The intrusion and consequent exactitude of Practical Marxism is a product of Brecht’s radical idea of producing a new complexion of Marxism. According to Ronnie Bai “Brecht’s attempt to create a Marxist aesthetics of theatre, whether partly echoing Marx’s theory of alienation or not was predated by his search for and discovery of new forms and representational style” (411). Brecht clearly saw the inadequacy of Marxism but could not arrive at a definite label for his new Marxist approach which aligned with the avant-garde artistic consciousness. Perhaps, Brecht would roll and smile in his grave at the mention of Practical Marxism because it captures his epic theatre potential and breaking the fourth wall technique. His alienation effect is constituted in Practical Marxism since the later presupposes self-awareness and immediate detachment from events and actors on stage.

Sheng-Mei Ma argues that “alienation, by definition, involves a split, and for Brecht, alienation in drama entailed a departure from Aristotelian-Stanislawskian conventions. Such division is constitutive of Marxism, which posits dialectical forces vying for dominance throughout human history. Contestation of opposites within oneself and one’s world recurs in Brecht’s dramas” (444). The opposites created in Brecht’s drama is the tension between the audience and the radical, provoking dramatic contents on stage. Brecht makes no pretence about his intentions in his alienation effect. He, like Osofisan, is committed to provoking the audience into rejecting all forms of capitalist and exploitative, bourgeois tendencies that inhibit their existence. Even when both playwrights replicate different forms of drama like tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy, they find a way to reconcile all the attributes to portray a class-contradictory, capitalist reality on stage and at the same time, communicate these possibilities to the audience with the intention of shocking them into awareness and response.

One can profitably argue that all the ideological and artistic paradigm associated with Brecht inevitably accommodates Osofisan who practically adopts the Brechtian theatrical philosophy. Besides Osofisan’s appropriation of African

oral traditional impetus to involve the audience, his drama rehashes the Brechtian model. Brecht and Osofisan in *Setzuan* and *Minstrel*, besides other interpretive kernels in the plays, set out to use their plays as a model to sample public opinion on issues of morality, exploitation and goodness. Robert Cardullo observes that “characteristically, Brecht loved to direct his audience’s attention to the suggestive detail, the small, barely noticeable gesture that bears a huge meaning” (639). Brecht’s focus is the audience and the degree of their involvement in the dramatic spectacle, the same as Osofisan. David Wilson instinctively points out that Brecht’s audience focus is basically attributed to his Marxist proclivity. However, instead of direct politics, he indirectly participates in politics using drama as a convenient instrument. According to Wilson “as a Marxian playwright, Brecht’s aim was to ensure a radical paradigm shift of the theatre into a productive critique of society. He wanted his theatre to evoke a critical response from the audience so as to transform the society. He also called for a major revolution in the role and function of the actor” (60). Indeed, Wilson’s submissions instinctively captures Osofisan’s dramatic commitments as summarized by Muyiwa Awodiya who reminds us that “the major objective of Osofisan as a playwright is seems, is to catalyse the evolution of collective consciousness among all black people in an effort to liberate themselves from economic and socio-political oppression inherited from the colonial experience” (32). Awodiya’s remarks exalts Osofisan’s drama to the pinnacle of Brechtian artistic and dramatic engagements. It is within these critical, divergent perspectives that Brecht’s and Osofisan’s theatrical preoccupations will be understood and situated in this study.

The Good Woman of Setzuan and Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels: The Audience Decides

Setzuan can prodigiously be regarded as a dramatic encounter between the artist and the audience but subtly orchestrated by the playwright mainly to address issues of morality, capitalism, corruption, gender transposition and many more. Set in the fictional city of Setzuan, Brecht uses different characters to portray the multilayered contradictions of human behaviour constituting a superstructure at the root of social decay. As the play begins, Wong, a poor, unheralded water seller introduces himself to the audience. Wong’s first encounter with the audience unveils the dramatic import of the play and the social issues which confront the immediate Setzuan community.

WONG: I sell water here in the city of Setzuan. It isn’t easy. When water is scarce, I have long distances to go in search of it, and when it is plentiful, I have

no income. But in our part of the world there is nothing unusual about poverty. Many people think only the gods can save the situation. And I hear from a cattle merchant—who travels a lot—that some of the highest gods are on their way here at this very moment. Informed sources have it that heaven is quite disturbed at all the complaining. I've been coming out here to the city gates for three days now to bid these gods welcome. I want to be the first to greet them. What about those fellows over there? No, no, they work. And that one there has ink on his fingers, he's no god, he must be a clerk from the cement factory. Those two are another story. They look as though they'd like to beat you. But gods don't need to beat you, do they? (Brecht 17)

First, the audience can deduct from Wong's introduction of himself that he is a capitalist who capitalizes on drought to exploit the people by providing them water at exorbitant prices even when it rains. By relating with the audience, Wong reveals his identity instead of waiting for the audience to decipher his character. Also, by addressing the audience, Wong immediately involves them in the play with a sense of belonging as they all wait patiently to see the gods. Wong is at the city gate waiting for gods who are visiting the town in response to cries of anguish and supplication from the people. The three gods arrive and inform Wong that they need a temporary accommodation to sleep until the next morning. He offers to help them but unfortunately, everyone turns the gods away, refusing to give them a place to sleep. However, a character named Shen Te, who by her whole profession is regarded as an immoral person in the community, accepts to help the gods and provide them a place to sleep for the night. Shen Te's character and her kind attitude towards the gods operate at cross-purposes and raise the question about social perception of goodness. Although Shen Te is the social outcast, a prostitute that trades her body for survival, she is kind enough to accommodate the three gods, a gesture which other people considered to be good in the Setzuan community could not do. Thus, Brecht raises the question of public perception of morality and goodness.

The next morning, in appreciation of her kind gesture, the three gods reward Shen Te the prostitute with one thousand silver dollars and continue in their journey. Armed with monetary fortune, Shen Te rents a tobacco shop to engage in a legitimate business, quitting the immoral occupation of prostitution.

SHEN TE: (to the audience): It's three days now since the gods left. When they said they wanted to pay for the room, I looked down at my hand, and

there was more than a thousand silver dollars! I bought a tobacco shop with the money, and moved in yesterday. I don't own the building, of course, but I can pay the rent, and I hope to do a lot of good here. Beginning with Mrs. Shin, who's just coming across the square with her pot. She had the shop before me, and yesterday she dropped in to ask for rice for her children. (Brecht 26)

Having been rewarded for goodness, She Te decides to continue to be good with the conviction that goodness has a reward. In her tobacco shop, she freely and kindly gives people whatever they ask for without demanding the corresponding financial exchange in return. She immediately notices that her acts of charity and goodness will be counterproductive. In a bid to forestall further loss and possible bankruptcy, she devises a scheme to transmute her character from a female to a male cousin with the new name Shui Ta. Her reason for the character transposition is to instil the resoluteness and firmness required to resist pestering neighbours who always come for one favour or another. Sheng-Mei Ma captures the scenario by remarking that “to survive mounting debts and communal dependency, Shen Te cross-dresses, assuming the guise of a male cousin Shui Ta, a harsh yet pragmatic businessman, who manages with an iron fist to transform a failed venture into a thriving tobacco factory, simultaneously reforming hangers-on as self-respecting, self-reliant workers idealized in socialism” (454). Shen Te, in a new character as a male Shui Ta is resolute and firm in dealing with customers and neighbours. Shen Te successfully straddles two characters and the neighbours believe her but also miss her generosity. The villagers suspect that Shui Ta, Shen Te’s cousin murdered her and from Wong’s prompting, the matter is reported to the police. The police officer arrests Shui Ta and ask him about the whereabouts of Shen Te. Shui Ta could not give any reasonable answer. Wong, who has been relating with the three gods in his dreams, informs them that Shen Te was missing and if truly she has disappeared then “all is lost”. The three gods, irked by the sad news of Shen Te’s disappearance promise to return to Setzuan town to help look for her. Shui Ta is scheduled for trial and during his trial, before a crowd of villagers, the three gods appear disguised as judges to officiate in the trial. The audience is divided into two and they both support or oppose Shui Ta based on their relationships and dealings. Wealthy businessmen who have had a robust, profitable relationship with Shui Ta support him while the poor indigent villagers who benefitted from Shen Te’s generosity oppose Shui Ta. Shui Ta demands that the crowd should be sent away because he wants to be alone with the judges and make a confession.

SHUI TA (shouting): Because you'd all have tom her to shreds, that's why! My lords, I have a request. Clear the court! When only the judges remain, I will make a confession. (Brecht 135)

Alone with the gods disguised as judges, Shui Ta reveals his true identity, he is actually Shen Te in disguise to the consternation of the judges. She confesses to her frustration of having to be torn into two in a bid to be good and remain relevant in society. According to her, she had to become a bad man if she couldn't be a good woman. The gods are not able to help her reconcile her moral dilemma but instead encourage her to continue to be good. After their encouragement, the gods disappear into the unknown. In an epilogue, an unnamed character speak directly to the audience and urge them to decide a suitable ending for the play in the light of all the moral issues raised by the playwright. The audience thus becomes a critical component of the play since they would decide the play's resolution. Given that the audience is made up of different persons with diverse social background, there is a divergence of opinion as to the best way the play should end. Through the audience participation, Brecht does not hope to achieve a consensus but to provoke the people into thinking and becoming aware of all the prevailing issues arising from capitalism, love, morality, goodness and even gender transposition.

Osofisan's *Minstrels* dramatizes the activities of five indigent minstrels (Omele, Epo Oyinbo, Jigi, Sinsis, and Redio) wandering purposelessly following the government's clampdown on local musicians, dancers, and entertainers in the early 80s in Nigeria. Since the minstrels were no longer engaged in any meaningful occupation, they were inevitably hungry and therefore, wandered from one place to another seeking food to eat. In the cause of their wandering, they arrive at a popular crossroad called Sepeteri famously noted to be Esu's best locale. Esu is the Yoruba trickster god of uncertainty and indecision famous for always playing tricks on humanity while providing them with alternatives in their choice processes. Given its indecisive, hydra headed nature, the crossroad becomes his best hunt where it always lays in wait for people. The cross road in Yoruba metaphysics is symbolic of the warring dualities which inhabit people's consciousness when faced with indecision and uncertainties. When the minstrels arrive at the Sepeteri crossroads, they argue over which of the roads to take. In their indecisive plight, Esu manifest in human form as an old man. He promises to give them a magic boon which would enable them to heel anyone they chose and in return, the healed individual will make them rich. Four out of the five minstrels except Omele deploy their magic boon for selfish, egocentric reasons to help wealthy people who would in return make them

rich. However, Omele demonstrates a selfless, altruistic attitude by using his magic boon to make a woman who had been pregnant for nine years deliver her baby. He also cures a couple of leprosy but in the process contract the deadly disease. The old man, Esu in disguise, reveals himself to the minstrels and turns to the audience to ask them which of the minstrels deserves compassion, pity, and wealth.

The play's inconclusive ending and the invitation to the audience to decide the fate of the minstrels is a reflection of Brecht's audience participation technique. In Osofisan's case, he presents the inherent attributes of greed, selfishness, and kindness but also foregrounds these attributes with veiled justification. The first four minstrels demonstrate capitalist, selfish tendencies after they were ravaged by poverty. They seek self-gratifying objectives and only care for themselves. Therefore, they only deploy their magic boon to cure those who would in return reward them with wealth. For the four minstrels, wealth and material gain are the motivating factors for their acts of kindness. On the other hand, Omele is the only minstrel motivated by genuine compassion and love for humanity. Thus, there is a juxtaposition of greed and materiality versus kindness and compassion. However, Omele's fate of contracting the deadly disease of leprosy is a ploy by Osofisan to heighten the degree of choice by the audience. So, when Esu, disguised as the Old Man turns to the audience to ask their opinion about the fate of the minstrels, he was asking them to make a choice between greed, avarice, and selfishness on one hand and compassion, selflessness and love on another hand. At this point, all the actions on stage together with the actors freeze and remain still.

OLD MAN: (To the audience) You! Don't just sit there and let an injustice be done. Should Omele return the disease or should he keep it? Speak up, we need your answers to decide! Yes, you sir? And you madam? A debate is encouraged among the audience, while the actors freeze on stage. The auditorium lights come half up. The old man finally calls for a vote between the Aye's and the Np's. (Osofisan 90)

The audience, in response to the query by the old man to decide the fate of the two categories of minstrels, begin to argue among themselves. In the end, the audience decide that Omele does not deserve the leprosy, that the other four minstrels deserve it more given their lazy, unconscionable, and materialistic disposition. Immediately, Obaluaye, the god of smallpox afflict the four minstrels with leprosy and set Omele free to the joy and celebration of the audience. A comparison of the conclusion of the two plays shows that Brecht and Osofisan adopt the same method of making the

audience an important, integral part of the play. However, while Osofisan is more decisive at the end of his play, Brecht is not so decisive but allows the debate among the audience to continue afterwards.

Conclusion

Brecht and Osofisan are two renowned dramatists who deploy their peculiar theatricality to achieve multiple objectives through a redefinition and re-engineering of dramatic patterns on stage. At the apex of their radical innovation in drama is the bestowment of responsibility on the audience who must necessarily participate in the dramatic engagement not as passive observers but as committed, involved artists. The audience ultimately become part of the ideological renewal in the hands of the playwrights as is the case in *Setzuan*. David Wilson notes that “Brecht was of the conviction that theatre must be an agent of social and political change. To effect such a change, he modified the theatre itself and described it as epic theatre. The epic theatre enhances the audience with detached contemplation and judgement as opposed to the dramatic theatre that overwhelms them with passion and emotion with the audience sharing the actor’s experience” (62). Brecht’s epic theatre is animated by the audience who become agential to the attainment of theatre’s objectives which among other factors, includes social re-awakening and a degree of provocation to demand immediate answers which address subsisting malaise within humanity. We can thus infer from Brecht’s epic theatre that without audience participation, drama lacks immediacy and purpose and this is the defining moment between epic theatre and classical theatre.

Robert J. Cardullo underscores the importance of audience participation in Brecht’s theatre by remarking that “audience members proceed imaginatively from their own time and space through a fictional realm of more or less realistically rendered events, until they come to a plane of partially defined sources of insight, a plane beyond common appearance, beyond customary ways of seeing” (639). In a way, audience participation bulks large as the most prominent component of avant-garde tradition in the drama of modern era. It has also continued to sustain the inter-ideological role of the public in social and political participation across various communities in the world. Audience participation does not only respond to artistic needs, but also provides an avenue to gauge the general impulses of the people towards various social developments. Given its global acclaim and adoption by many critics and playwrights, Brecht’s ideology of epic theatre and audience participation have become defining parameters for twenty-first century appreciation of theatre and drama. Osofisan has consistently recreated the Brechtian audience

participation technique in most of his plays especially in *Minstrels*. According to Yemi Atanda, “Osofisan’s ideology is ideologically rooted in the theatre of Brecht’s epic theatre. Reason, rather than purgation is methodical as enunciated within the prism of alienation technique. In the dramatic text, members of the audience are invited to vote on what to do with the guilty minstrels who do not show compassion to human suffering” (3). Indeed, Brecht’s ideological alignment with Osofisan will continue to provide options in theatre and drama in many years to come as long as the audience participation technique is sustained and maintained by successive playwrights.

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