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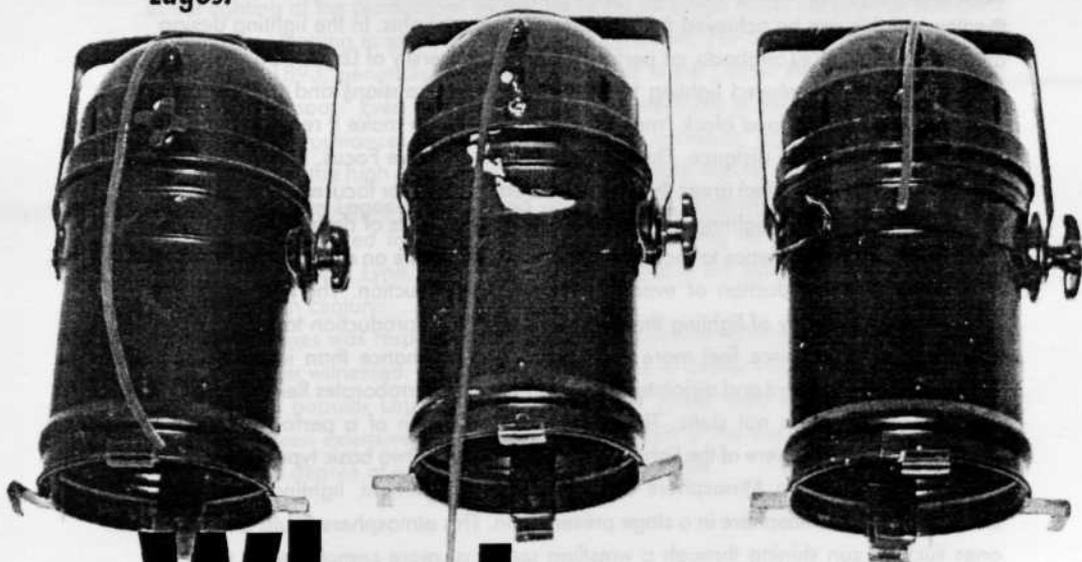


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# Lighting

## Up the Arena

Duro Oni examines the role of lighting in the contemporary Nigerian theater with emphasis on theatrical activities in Lagos.



## What

is Lighting? A good starting point will involve returning to Francis Reid's<sup>2</sup> observation that "Stage lighting is not an exact science: it is science in the service of performing arts. Rules are very few if indeed there are any." Lighting is a combination of science and art; science being the understanding of the technology in the production of lighting instruments and equipment and art being the creative use of such instruments and equipment. For lighting is as much a part of the artistic process as any of the other aspects of the theater, helping to create the necessary atmosphere and mood for

a dramatic presentation. In defining stage lighting, Reid<sup>3</sup> summarized the main aims of lighting for theatrical productions thus: Stage lighting is a fluid, selective, atmospheric, sculptural illumination appropriate to the style of a particular production. Reid's definition prescribes the primary functions of stage lighting – and accepted by most writers on the subject – as illumination, selectivity, fluidity, atmosphere, mood, dimensionality and creating effects. It was not until recently that the functions of stage lighting were further elaborated upon. Richard Pilbrow has suggested that lighting can also provide information about a production, while Boone (1997) proposed that lighting can have its own meaning within the *mise en scene*. The basic functions of stage lighting are further discussed below with examples from recent Nigerian productions.

Stage lighting functions in six main ways. The first is Illumination, or Visibility. This identifies the primary function of lighting in a dramatic presentation. It also establishes that for an actor to be heard clearly, he or she needs to be well lit. Poor illumination can lead to loss of attention on the part of the audience. There is also Dimensionality, a process in which a designer employs multiple design strategies to convey multidimensionality and project an illusion of depth. The need for an actor to be separated from the background set has always been of utmost importance in the theater and this can be achieved through the use of back lights. In the lighting design of Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*, as performed at the University of Lagos Auditorium in 1994, this writer employed lighting to create multiple dimensions and depth to the essentially white, gray and black "mountain" set, not only to make it realistic but also to create an illusion of distance. The third element is Selective Focus. This deals with employing lighting to select areas that need to be emphasized or focused upon through a careful distribution of lighting instruments during the process of designing a lighting plot. This helps the audience to focus attention and concentrate on areas of importance in a multiple set production or even in a single set production. Then we come to Fluidity. It is the fluidity of lighting that enables a theatrical production to have a flow that makes the audience feel more at home in a performance than in a situation where there are frequent and disjointed light changes. This corroborates Reid's<sup>4</sup> position that "Stage lighting is not static. Throughout the time span of a performance, the selectivity and atmosphere of the light is fluid with changes of two basic types: conscious and subconscious." In Atmosphere or Mood, our fifth element, lighting is used to create a desired atmosphere in a stage presentation. This atmosphere could be simple ones such as sun shining through a wrestling scene, or more complex ones such as helping to portray the mood of the production. Finally, there is Style. Different productions have different styles of presentation, and lighting can assist in establishing and enhancing the particular style. Tragedies are usually dimly lit while comedies are traditionally brightly lit.

#### Early Lagos Theater

Taking the history of world theater into consideration, stage lighting has made considerable impact in the presentation of theater. It is significant to note that within the Nigerian theatrical environment, stage lighting has also featured prominently— dating back to the concerts and theater of late 19th century Lagos. During this period, the venues for these performances varied. Most were held in school rooms such as the St. Paul's Breadfruit, the St. Gregory's Grammar School and the Holy Trinity in Ebute-Ero. Halls and public buildings used for these concerts and entertainments included The Academy on Awolola Street, the Phoenix Hall located at Tinubu Square, the Ilupesi Hall, the Court Hall in Tinubu as well as the Lagos Club House and the European Club House. Richard Pilbrow<sup>5</sup>, notable lighting designer and writer on stage lighting stated that stage lighting did not begin with electricity and had in fact been around for hundreds of years before the introduction of electricity. For as the art of stage lighting preceded the introduction of electricity in the western world, so did it also in the Nigerian situation. Recorded evidence, mainly from newspaper reviews of the concerts of late 19th century Lagos confirms that stage lighting had been a part of

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the theatrical art before the introduction of electricity in 1896 in Lagos.

While the *bozze* (a lighting instrument) was used in the early productions in Italy, the concerts of late 19th century Lagos used Chinese lamps and after numerous criticisms from the critics of the period, notably Cherubino and Dionysius of the Lagos Observer, suspending lamps were later used<sup>6</sup>. These lamps burnt *colza* or paraffin as sources of their energy for illumination. The period appeared to have experienced great difficulty in the lighting of the productions as the use of the oil lamps could not provide sufficient illumination, leading to general complaint by reviewers. For the lighting of the concert of May 12, 1893, generally regarded as the first in the Glover Hall, the lighting was described as "poor." Even with the installation of electricity in the Glover Hall in 1901, most of the performances were still lit by candles, kerosene, gas, palm oil and *colza*. This was due to the high cost of electricity and its erratic nature, a situation that has not changed much in Lagos one hundred years after. In reviewing the case of the stage presentation designed by the energetic and enterprising Mr Jones during the time under consideration, Lynn Leonard<sup>7</sup> offers a glimpse of the state of the arts at the turn of the twentieth century:

In 1912, Jones was responsible for the most elaborate lighting of a stage show that Lagos had ever witnessed. During the performance at Glover Hall, in an entertainment featuring the popular Lagos comedian Amgoza, Jones used a concentrated follow spotlight as seen extensively in the English Music Halls of the day, which "showed up to a remarkable degree of excellence the different costumes."

## Modern Nigerian Theater

Theatre in the Lagos and Nigerian context has witnessed a diffusion of indigenous festival performance tradition with western dramatic models, evolving from the colonial through Christian contacts and church Morality Plays and concerts to the contemporary literary performance traditions. According to Veronica Esohe Omoregie<sup>8</sup>,

... most theatre scholars in citing the roots of modern Nigerian theater, agree on the meeting held in October 1866 by a section of the influential Lagos elite "who had been raised to an intellectual level of appreciating music and drama" to set up The Academy, a social centre for public enlightenment dedicated, for the most part, to promote the arts science and culture.

It was Hubert Ogunde, acknowledged as the doyen of Nigerian theater, who succeeded in pushing his theatre as a vehicle for social commentary and entertainment, with the full complements of staging facilities. Ogunde's awareness of the theatricality of the performing arts manifested early. In 1946, he traveled with his wife to England and purchased lighting and staging equipment worth two thousand pounds sterling.

In examining the styles of productions and the use of stage lighting by performing theater groups in Lagos, we agree with Femi Osofisan<sup>9</sup> in his analysis of the economics of production:

(L)ive theater survives nowadays only on the university campus. Elsewhere, except for sporadic occasions when some bank such as the NBL [read NIB] accepts to sponsor a

production, the stage has fallen grimly silent. The costs of maintaining a company, paying actor's wages, buying costumes and props, mounting adequate publicity, paying for rented space, and so on, all those expenses which a producer must think of add up nowadays to a sum few promoters can afford.

Further, Osofisan proposes the "packaging" of the theater as a necessary and expedient orientation of the theater in a capitalist economy. He asserts that what we may be ignoring (because it is painful for us to accept or assimilate) is that even a revolutionary theatre must sell itself nowadays as a commodity, and therefore learn to present itself like all products, if it must sell, as a necessary and glamorous item of consumption to consumers.

One of such universities where theater still survives is the University of Lagos, a federal university established in 1962. Lagos is regarded as the cultural and economic nerve-center of Nigeria, in spite of the fact that political headquarters has moved to Abuja. From 1974 to 1997, the Centre for Cultural Studies coordinated theatrical activities at the university. Conceived as a research and performing center, it had a core of playwrights and directors who researched into, and engaged in performances created from their research<sup>10</sup>. The Center engaged in a number of dramatic and musical productions for the twenty-three years of its existence. Most of the performances had Abayomi Barber designing the set while the present writer designed the lighting. Prominent among the productions staged included Wole Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero*, Uwa Hunwick's *Ogbanje*, Bode Osanyin's *Ogedengbe and Woman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*. The performances were held in the two standard theaters of the University—the University Auditorium and the Arts Theater. Built between 1974 and 1977, both theatres were well-equipped and afforded the Center the opportunity to have standard productions, using the twenty-five member Performing Arts Troupe<sup>11</sup>.

As the in-house lighting designer, this writer's work featured prominently in the lighting of productions emanating from the University of Lagos. It is significant to note the declining fortune of the Nigerian economy. While in the mid-seventies, about 70 lighting instruments, considered a sizable number, were available to light a production, only about 20 instruments are easily available to light most shows in the new millennium. The approach to the lighting of the productions has been to achieve basic illumination while also making some attempts at realizing the atmosphere and mood of the productions with a sparing use of effects.

At some period in Lagos, Yoruba theater groups performed plays in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria. These theater groups belonged to the Association of Nigerian Theater Practitioners (ANTP). Since the foray of these theatre practitioners into the film and video media, however, they have practically abandoned live theatre. The indigenous theatre groups thrived largely among the Yoruba in the south-western part of Nigeria. Lagos was an attraction in view of the city's commercial nature and the number of available performance venues. According to Biodun Jeyifo<sup>12</sup>, the themes of their dramas range from the historical to the mythological, and the folkloric, with doses of comedies and social commentaries. Because of the itinerant nature of these groups, they employed a minimum of sets and props and therefore depended on stereotyped lighting for the portrayal of mood and atmosphere in their plays. Red color gels were used for war scenes, green for forest scenes and blue for the romantic and love scenes. Ghost scenes were portrayed with the use of ultraviolet tubes or blacklights. The incursion of this group into film and video productions has enlarged their wardrobes. It has also made significant impact on their approach to lighting, which has broadened beyond the simple floodlights and ultraviolets on switches to the use of some dimmers and control equipment along with a few spotlights and effects such as the strand fire effect. Major artistes in this genre include Sunday Omobolanle (otherwise known as Aluwe), Jide Kosoko and Bayo Salami (Oga Bello), all previous members of the *Ojo Ladipo Theater*.

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has been attributed to the difficulties encountered in making a living out of theater practice by the English-speaking theater groups. Prominent semi-professional groups that have made some impact on the theatrical scene include Sola Fosudo's *Centre Stage Productions*, Olu Jacob's *Lufodo Productions* and Israel Eboh's *Fezzi Productions*. Others include Felix Okolo's *Tempo Productions*, Rasheed Gbadamosi's *Phoenix Playhouse*, Fred Agbeyegbe's *Ajo Productions* directed by Jide Ogungbade, Ayo Oluwasanmi's *Gangan Productions* and Chuck Mike's *Performance Studio Workshop* and *Collective Artistes*. In the last few years *Lufodo Productions* has been the most successful in this category. His Christmas production of *Holy Child* was staged for three Christmas seasons from 1993 to 1995 with an all-star cast of professional actors that included Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, Joke Silva, Richard Mofe-Damijo and Ayo Mogaji. The production was directed by Yomi Layinka while technical direction and lighting was coordinated by Duro Oni with John Johnson and Demola Tejumola handling the set design and construction.

Recently, the company also hired the 'expensive' Muson Centre Agip Hall for a run spanning over four weekends in April and May, 1997, of an adapted play, *Digging for Gold*. Chuck Mike's *Performance Studio Workshop* and *Collective Artistes* has become a positive studio for theatrical endeavors by attracting funds to tackle topical political, social and development issues. Stage lighting for the performances of the amateur and semi-professional groups has largely depended on the theaters in which their performances are held. In some cases it has also depended on who is handling the lighting. This writer has been responsible for the stage lighting of over a hundred productions by groups in this category and can therefore draw on his personal experience in analyzing lighting design for this genre. First, the funds available to this category are limited. While most of the directors are aware of the importance of lighting design to their productions, they have been seriously constrained in terms of available financial resources.

An example is the production of *Lufodo Productions, Digging For Gold* which was staged at the Muson Centre Agip Hall. As at the time of the production which ran over a four-weekend period, the lighting equipment at the hall was severely limited and comprised a few one kilowatt spotlights and fresnels with a twenty-four channel dimmer board. The producing organization could not hire additional lights to complement those in the hall. As it were the theater had sufficient lighting instruments without a complement of lamps. This is not unusual in Nigeria as most shows hardly have more than twenty lighting instruments to light an average production. In Europe and the United States, the same show would have had a minimum of fifty lighting instruments. Such is the limitation that is encountered by the Nigerian stage lighting designer: using insufficient equipment to achieve some measure of creative lighting.

Experiments in the establishment of professional theater groups in Lagos has had varied reception and successes. In 1982, the PEC Repertory Company, founded by J.P. Clark and Ebum Clark, employed "a core of resident actors, complemented by part-time and guest actors."<sup>13</sup> By 1994, the PEC Rep had stopped running shows at the J.K. Randle. The venue was eventually taken over by the *Performance Studio Workshop*. During the period that the PEC Rep was in existence, it purchased some spotlights,

fresnels, floodlights, dimmer boards and control equipment for use in the J. K. Randle Hall. The Center for Cultural Studies at the University of Lagos also assisted in supplementing the PEC Rep lighting system, offering technical advice and support. This way, the performances by the theater achieved a degree of lighting.

## The Music Arena

From the theater stage lighting is also moving to the worlds of musical concerts and corporate product launches. Dapo Adelegan with his Lekki Sunsplash at the beaches of Lekki in east-central Lagos created a yearly package of musical concerts that featured popular Nigerian music artistes with some lighting razzmatazz. This marked the highpoint of the involvement of the big multi-nationals in the promotion of shows in Lagos, as it attracted the patronage of Seven-Up Bottling Company. Following in the footsteps of Adelegan, the Benson and Hedges and Rothmans Groups became strong promoters of musical concerts in Lagos. In order not to be left out of this wave of productions, the Coca-Cola Group, Guinness Nigeria and Nigerian Breweries Plc also engaged in musical promotions and concerts in and outside of Lagos. Musicians featured included Mike Okri, Onyeka Onwenu, Ras Kimono, Sunny Ade, Shina Peters, Adewale Ayuba, Femi Kuti and Lagbaja. Of recent, Laitan Adeniji, the *Heavy Wind*, has become a regular feature in these concerts which have incurred support from European cultural centers in Lagos. NIB's sustained sponsorship of live theater in the early to mid-1990s is perhaps paralleled by the French Cultural Centre's annual *Fete de la Musique* which is staged every June 21. These promotions have been responsible, largely, for the unprecedented influx of stage lighting equipment into Nigeria for these concerts, which have been held in various arenas such as the Water Parks grounds in Ikeja, the Tafawa Balewa Square in Lagos and at some beaches and open fields.

Many of the outdoor venues had to have complete mobile lighting rigs, initially with scaffold pipes. Later, following the lead of companies like Zmirage Multimedia Limited, stage lighting trusses came into use. Many design companies like DSV Limited, Total Consult and Pat Nebo have effectively used stage lighting in the rapidly growing industry of product launches for the corporate world. Among the products that have been successfully launched are Legend Extra Stout, John Players Gold Leaf, FSB International Bank, Artemis Elite Soap and a host of others too numerous to mention in a study of this nature. Primary lighting consideration for these launches are the use of special effects lighting and spectacular stage effects. It can be said that the explosion of these product launches and musicals has helped in spawning the somewhat moderate growth of lighting companies in Nigeria. Going by developments in this field in the last five years, there are strong prospects that this growth level will continue. Companies that import stage lighting include Demas Nwoko's New Culture Studios, Aibtonia, and DSV (Durolights, Sound and Vision) Ltd. Others include Zmirage Multimedia Ltd., Dolphin Studios and Captain George's Strong Tower GoldMyne Int. Limited. Of recent, Total Consult and Market Place have joined in the business of providing stage lighting facilities for a number of productions that range from musicals to theatricals.

## Lighting Equipment for the Musicals

These performances were packaged with imported lights since local sources were usually few. The ranges of equipment initially imported were in the parcans types with some chaser controllers and computer-backed controls. From the era of the parcans, spotlights, fresnels and floodlights that were in use in the seventies, the eighties and most of the nineties, the range of lighting equipment for these concerts became more hi-tech. This was as a result of the moving and robotic lights that had the ability to form shapes and patterns on the stage and be remotely controlled by computerized programs. These moving lights are not only thrown onto the stage but would occasionally be directed at the audience areas to form patterns and enhance the creation of

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excitement. The ranges of these lights include the Roboscan 1220, Robozap MSR 1200, Robocolor Mobile, Series Sweepers and Robotic Controllers. Olu Adeniregun, Chairman of the Lagos State Chapter of the National Association of Nigerian Theater Practitioners (NANTAP), confirmed that the lighting deployed for these *musicals* did help in boosting the audience attendance and making the concerts more interesting and attractive.<sup>14</sup>

## The Ipi Tombi-Sikulu-Langbodo Phenomenon

Three productions have significantly influenced the direction of the stage lighting of productions in Lagos. These productions are Ipi-Tombi, Sikulu and Langbodo. All three productions depended more on lighting than on scenic effects. In the case of Ipi Tombi, the South Africa-based production was staged with a lot of design and technical support. Stage lighting effects such as the Rank Strand clouds and flame effects with a generous use of smoke effects and huge fans planted backstage to 'blow' on some costumes played a major role in interpreting the dramatic presentation. This effectively made the production the spectacle that kept the 3, 500-seating mainbowl of the National Theater in Lagos filled to capacity during the run of the show. The production was thereafter performed in other theaters in Kano, Zaria, Jos, Enugu, Benin and Ibadan with the same success for a cumulative run of almost two months in October and November, 1976.

In 1993 the South African Production of *Sikulu* was staged in the University of Lagos Auditorium with resounding success. This was a long-awaited follow-up to the successful tour of *Ipi-Tombi* to Nigeria in 1976 by a similar troupe from South Africa. *Sikulu* had a relatively simple set of a stage platform and a netted fabric in the background with stage lighting providing the overall visual effects. The hi-tech and colorful lighting was achieved with the use of special fresnels that had automated color-changing mechanisms attached to the front runners of the equipment. Each fresnel instrument could therefore be "programmed" from the lighting console to change to whatever color was required, irrespective of whether the instrument was on or off. The implications of the use of such instruments are quite enormous. First, it offered the possibility of using one instrument to perform the job of four instruments. Second, the space that would have been required in terms of rigging for four instruments was reduced to the hanging of only one.

Apart from the fresnels referred to during the production of *Sikulu*, several lighting manufacturing companies have developed lighting instruments that are now commonly referred to as "intelligent", "robotic" or "moving" lights. Apart from their ability to change colors by remote control, they can also change their directions and angles of focus from the control board as well as creating patterns on the stage floor.

Wale Ogunyemi's production of *Langbodo* was also staged at the University of Lagos Auditorium in 1994 as part of the annual NIB drama productions. In the case of *Langbodo*,<sup>15</sup> the success of the production is attributable not only to the enormous support from the sponsors, Citibank Nigeria Limited, but also to the spectacle achieved by the design and technology elements of set and lighting and the set of the 'Mount Langbodo' built by Biodun Abe.

## Lighting Equipment in Nigeria

The performance of high-tech lighting equipment, however, has not been a success story in Nigeria especially with regard to the use of computerized memory dimmer boards. The initial one installed at the National Theatre Main Hall in early 1976 stopped functioning after only a few years. Similarly, the memory board installed at the Muson Centre Shell Hall has not functioned since inception. On the other hand, the manual 120 channel Strand Threeset board at the University of Lagos and the 24-channel manual board in the Agip Hall of the Muson Center have continued to function.

## Public Power Supply

Officially referred to as the National Electricity Power Authority (NEPA), this institution is more commonly referred to as Never Expect Power Always. This institution is certainly the most derided of all public corporations. NEPA remains a sick baby resistant to all medications. For stage lighting to be creatively used, there has to be an adequate supply of electricity. In the Lagos and Nigerian context, NEPA is readily the cheapest source of public power supply. For most performances, dependence on this power source can be hazardous to productions as the possibility exists that in a two-hour performance, one is likely to encounter an un-programmed blackout, or a sudden drop in the voltage that suddenly changes the mood of the presentation. For large organizations that are involved in the performing arts, stand-by generators have become standard equipment. In the years of the NIB (now Citibank) annual drama productions, high capacity generators were hired to run their command performances.<sup>16</sup> The Muson Center in Lagos also runs their important events on stand-by generators, a situation which also occurred at the University of Lagos in the recent past. On the 3rd of April, 2000, this writer witnessed a performance at the University of Ilorin of Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender*, directed by Ayo Akinwale. An unexpected feature of this performance was the noisy generator that was placed close to the stage for power. Not only were the voices of the actors drowned, but also the fluctuations of the generator surges, which occurred at random, succeeded in creating moods not rehearsed.

## Conclusion

It is observed that certain types of productions, especially musicals and dance productions, are becoming more dependent on lighting and less on scenery. Is this a desirable trend? Perhaps some historical antecedents will advance our understanding. Henry Irving and Max Reinhart have held important positions in the use of light as a design element. Irving states that "stage lighting and groupings are of more consequence than scenery," while Reinhart also asserts that "lighting must replace the decorations"<sup>17</sup>. For some theater practitioners, being dependent on lighting rather than scenery saves the cost of construction of set pieces. For others, it saves the time involved in the construction process. What is however obvious is that with the new technology in lighting instruments and control equipment, the role of lighting in the design process for the performing arts will continue to be enhanced. Stage lighting can assist in the proper packaging of theatrical presentations to make productions more artistically interesting while sustaining dramatic import and essence. It is therefore necessary, if theater in Lagos and indeed Nigeria is to become viable, for appropriate emphasis to be placed on the aspects of design and technology in our productions. This is the direction that contemporary Nigerian theater should inexorably move. GR

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### NOTE

1) Theater has been used in this paper to mean all forms of theatrical activities: legitimate theater, dance productions and musicals etc.

- 2) Francis Reid. *The Stage Lighting Handbook*. London. A & C Black: (Publishers) Limited, 1992, p.3.
- 3) Reid, Francis. *The Stage Lighting Handbook*. London. A & C Black: (Publishers) Limited, 1992, p.7.
- 4) Lynn Leonard. "The Growth of Entertainment of Non-African Origin in Lagos From 1866-1920 with Special Emphasis on Concert, Drama, and the Cinema." Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. University of Ibadan, 1967, p.155.
- 5) Pilbrow, Richard. *Stage Lighting Design: the art, the craft, the life*. New York: Design Press, 1997, p.xxv.
- 6) See the following: Michael J. C, Echeruo. *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Limited, 1977, p. 79; and Peter Abayomi, Fasina. "The Designer and Nigerian Theatre Today." Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1983, p. 24.
- 7) Esohe Veronica, Omoregie. "Costume Design for the Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: An Analysis of Six Selected Plays." Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Ibadan, 1989, p.143.
- 8) Femi Osofisan. "Reflections on Theatre Practice in Contemporary Nigeria," *African Affairs*, January Edition, 1998, p. 89.
- 9) Biodun, Jeyifo. *The Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*, Lagos. Nigeria Magazine Publication, 1984, p.110.
- 10) Prominent among the staff in the centre at one time or the other were Bode Osanyin, Duro Oni, Uwa Hunwick and, for a short period, Bayo Oduneye. There were also Akin Euba, Laz Ekwueme, Eburn Clark, dele jegede, Joy Nwosu and Afolabi Alaja-Browne.
- 11) The Centre metamorphosed into the Department of Creative Arts in 1997, and former members of the Performing Arts Troupe began to serve as Teaching Assistants in the new department.
- 12) Biodun, Jeyifo. *The Yoruba Travelling Theater of Nigeria*, Lagos. Nigeria Magazine Publication, 1984, p. 110
- 13) Information obtained from the PEC Repertory Theatre Handbook for the September 1987 - June 1988 season.
- 14) Private discussions with Olu Adeniregun while researching this paper in June, 2000. Mr. Adeniregun is also a lighting and sound Technician who has been involved with a lot of these musical concerts.
- 15) Langbodo is Wale Ogunyemi's stage adaptation of Wale Soyinka's *Forest of A Thousand Demons*, from D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*.
- 16) For a period, Citibank ran an annual dramatic presentation from 1990-1996. The performances were of a high quality and featured the works of major playwrights in Nigeria such as Wale Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi.
- 17) See Pilbrow (1991:174).

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