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Theatre Management in a Developing Nation: An appraisal of National Theatre and MUSON Centre, Lagos

By Nwanaju, Uzoma T.
Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria

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I. Introduction

A national theatre embodies the performing treasures of the nation's inheritance for a glorious cause. The theatre brings the best not just to its people but also to the world and further deals with artistic and creative imaginations. It then beholds on Government to encourage the theatre as a body that preserves and promotes the cultural values of the nation rather than see it as a commercial industry. It is to this effect that the Scottish National Theatre idea comes as an art/culture commissioning body and not just one mount of architectural edifice. To preserve a culture then, it must be taken care of and mostly by funding. This may have been implied by Stewart Steven in his closing remark at the English Equity Theatre Conference, when he says that "if you want to destroy a people, the first thing you do is destroy its culture".

A functioning and producing theatre is something that provides a heart to the nature of a nation. This is in terms of identity, focus and sometimes-diverse opinions. It is to this effect that the Social Democratic Government of Sweden in the 1930s initiated the establishment of a nation-wide organization for a touring theatre. A theatre that packages the national identity. This theatre called Riksteatern is the third theatre financed by government funds in Sweden. Riksteatern produces about 1,500 performances of (national) drama, music and dance a year. In addition, it has a special department that produces children's theatre called Ungariks. During the 1960s, riksteatern became an important moulder of public opinion through its performance.

The National Theatre of Bulgaria Ivan Vazouis financed by Bulgaria's Ministry of Culture. Varying a spectrum of repertoire from classical drama to contemporary plays, the theatre stages about ten major productions yearly. With between 450 and 500 performances presented per season, the theatre company has made an extensive tour of Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America showcasing Bulgaria's identity. Recently with King Stag, it received most of the major awards at the Raduga Festival in St. Petersburg in Russia. In each of these cases cited, the country's image is marketed. This marketing in the opinion of this paper, is made possible due to a focused managerial body at play.

This paper therefore, tries to explore the theatre as an art institution saddled with the responsibility of marketing a culture using the National Art Theatre, Lagos and MUSON centre as focus points. Though the MUSON centre is a private art centre, its management is a pointer in the opinion of this paper. First, we look at some important terms.

Culture, as the totality of identity factors, natural endowments, not excluding people in whom and through whom a nation is presented, is harnessed, preserved and exported through distinct and defined institution(s). Developing country in the context of this paper denotes a country whose cultural institutions do not, to a reasonable extent, contribute to national development. It could be due to inability of the country to make the cultural institutions function or refusal of the institutions to optimally live up to designated tasks. Nigeria, as a country, is in this case classified as a developing country.

Theatre is chosen here because it is not justdrama, dance or music. It also embraces all arts that have to do with human experience. Soyinka (1997:13) re-echoes this fact when he posits that "theatre, despite its many masks, is the unending rendition of the human experience, in totality, and its excitement lies indeed in

Author α: Department of Theatre and Media Arts Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria. e-mail: nuzomat@yahoo.com

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its very unpredictability." Theatre is in a cultural sense,the "coming together of human beings who have agreed in a place, a time, a story and who take roles and wear costumes in order to act for one another tales from and of existence" (Tansi, 1997:46).Theatre management becomes then, not just a blending touch, but a tool to grease and make the theatre achieve the desired objectives.

II. Review

Culture is the aggregate of concepts and values which characterize a community. This makes people and culture quite inseparable. It then follows that a people without culture are in themselves not in full existence (Obasanjo, 1977:6). Theatre is one institution which ensures this unity towards a greater development of a nation. One wonders then the rationale behind the neglect of the theatre, which propagates cultural values of a nation. Looking at Government's interest on culture and arts in general, Ohenhen (2004.21) argues that "the decision of government to classify the culture ministry as a non-core ministry really culminated in the under-funding and under development of the ministry" and arts in general.

With the increased abandonment of the theatre, it has become paramount that an art administrator who can co-ordinate theatre organisation effectively is engaged. Akomolafe (1981:427) notes this when he observes that the "problem of administrative co-ordination within and among theatre demands great attention. It implies then that properly trained theatre administrative directors who will relief artistic directors of routine administrative duties" be engaged for an effective daily management of art institutions. To this effect, Langley (1980:10) emphasises that:

In short, it has become apparent to laymen and professionals- and urgently so to both incipient and established arts organizations themselves-that the business of organizing, funding, managing and sustaining almost any given artistic enterprise requires executive leadership of a special kind.

As a response to this "special kind" of leadership, it becomes imperative that:

The arts manager today must be a person of taste, sensitivity and erudition whose inclinations and education enable him to search out, recognize and develop the genius of artistic originality in whatever guise it may appear. Because the guise is likely to be unusual, if not startling, he must also posses a lion's share of courage to support and promote it. He must be a facilitator of fantasies, a mover and a shaker…. Administrative, financial and promotional know-how in the arts are wasted when not modified by such qualities (Reid 1983:22).

Very tangent to the point stated above as it regards problem of theatre management in a developing country is lack of defined goals and objectives. Often, theatre organizations from the beginning do not have clear objective(s) to aid effective management. It sounds logical that "when an idea for theatre can be clearly articulated and understood, when the primary motivation for activating the idea is also clear, then an appropriate type of theatre organization must be found in which the concept may be produced in manner consonant with the goals at hand" Langley (1980:10). In a personal interview, Osofisan, a former General manager of the National Theatre sees policy problem as an excruciating management handicap when he laments thus:

The first thing is that the government should make up its mind about what it wants to do with the place. Until that is done, you can't do much. If the government's philosophy is not really in favour of cultural expression, … then the decisions to be taken will be different. Talking in the abstract is okay but the concrete thing is: let's have a policy. Let's know what the policy is, whether the place is to showcase Nigerian culture, the best of Nigerian culture and all that, or it is meant to run as a commercial business. That is the thing.

Langley sees a solution to this problem in a harmonious blend in the goals/objectives of both the theatre and that of the administrative executives when he observes that "unless agreement about the philosophy and objectives behind a project is reached and especially well understood between the artistic and administrative elements, at least half the organization will labour under false or wrongly construed assumptions or under none at all" (1980:9). Langley sees good communication as key to a successful management and posits that in an organization, even though an idea may be a brain child of a particular person, it should "be discussed and subscribed to by others who will play leading roles in the project". When hiring a managing director, Langley also advises that this is the point when either side defines or harmonizes his objective(s). Langley (1980:23) opines that the manager

Should be cross-examined by both the institution and by himself as to whether his personality, experience and philosophy are in accord with the task at hand. Only if this is true will he be able to function as translator for goals and policies between the organization and the public and between factions within the organization itself.

The growth of the organization lies not on the manager alone, but on the entire staff. The administrative staff should be a reflection of the overall aims and policies of the theatre organisation. Supportive personnel including administrators, stagehands, ushers and doormen, are not hired simply to follow orders. They are, like the artists, hired to support the ideas, goals and objectives of a troupe. When optimal output is not

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achieved, Akinboye J.O. et al (2002:95) identify fourteen malaises which include management technique that may be at work.

III. Methodology

A study of this nature requires a method or combined research methods that would effectively mid-wife productive result. To this effect, personal interviews and visits were employed. The study was carefully carried out in a six-year span (2001-2006) within which this researcher got himself acquainted with the institutions (National Arts Theatre and MUSON centre) and other cultural centres around the country. These centres include but not limited to Mbari cultural centre, Owerri, Imo State; Ogun State Council for Arts and Culture, Kuto, Abeokuta; Cross River Council for Arts and Culture, Calabar and Oyo State Council for Arts and Culture, Mokola, Ibadan, built to complement the National Arts Theatre, Lagos during the FESTAC "77. During the period, performances (including command performances) and other functions hosted in and by these centres were witnessed. Personal interviews were held with principal management officers of the centres to elicit information on management and administrative challenges. The interviewees, as it concerns the primary case studies here, include: Prof. Femi Osofisan, then General Manager, National Arts Theatre, Lagos, Mrs NgoziNlekwuwa, Chief Public Relations officer, National Arts Theatre, Lagos, and Mr IwalesoAlabisepo, Assistant Manager, Operations, MUSON Centre, Lagos.

IV. History of the National Theatre of Nigeria

The National Theatre idea was initiated by the general Yakubu Gowon (Military Head of State, July 29, 1966 – July 29, 1975) administration. This idea was conceived for the provision of a suitable venue for the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977 tagged FESTAC '77. The first of this festival called the World Festival of Negro Arts had earlier been held in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. On the accountof political situation in the country, Nigeria could not host this festival in the first stipulated years of 1970 and 1975. Beyond the provision of a befitting venue for FESTAC '77, the vision of the National Theatre embraced the preservation, presentation and promotion of arts and culture in Nigeria.

The notable and concrete arrangements for the establishment of the National Arts Theatre Lagos, started in 1973. This year, the federal government of Nigeria appointed a twenty-nine member Theatre Consultative Committee to advise and give report on the concept and organisational structure of a theatre. A landmark proposal of the committee was the establishment of a National Theatre which will also be home of a National Troupe.

The National Theatre edifice, which its construction lasted about five years is modelled from the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna, Bulgaria. Techno-exportsroy, a Bulgarian construction company and the main contractors for the building of the complex signed the construction contract on 24 April 1973.The edifice covers an area of about 23,000 square metres of a recovered swampy land bought for N1.00 from the Ibru family.

The multipurpose National Theatre whichstands well over 31 metres in height has seven floors. It was commissioned by General OlusegunObasanjo (Military President of Nigeria, Feb. 14th, 1976 – Oct. 1st, 1979) on September 30th, 1976. This was about five months before FESTAC '77 (Jan. 15th, - Feb. 12th, 1977) started. The complex is to be a rallying point for artistes in Nigeria and international artistes wishing to share their experience with their Nigerian counterparts. Located at Iganmu, in the heart of Lagos, the National Theatre is an architectural masterpiece and a cultural landmark. It is very accessible from every corner of Lagos. It is also easily accessible by the major transportation systems in the city.

Since the commissioning of the complex, it has hosted a good number of national and international activities including musical concerts, conventions and workshops. The National Theatre complex provides diverse venues, facilities and innovations for all kinds of programmes and activities.

National Arts Theatre, Lagos, Entrance A. National Arts Theatre, Lagos, Entrance C.

V. Features of the National Theatre

The features of the National Theatre Lagos, can best be summarised in the words of Don Rubin (1977:231) thus:

The National Theatre's main Hall can seat some 6,000 in one of its configurations. This can be changed in eighteen minutes by rotating the stage on the vertical plane to reveal a wide bank of tiered seats that emerge from under the stage to join several balcony seats at the back of the stage in facing the other seats in the hall. Some of the seats are tiered from the floor to just under the balcony rail and these can also be rolled into a recess under the balcony. An alternative configuration though primarily provided for sports, has been praised… as flexible enough to accommodate more traditional performer-spectator relationships or even modern experiments based on the traditional forms. Films projection equipment and a screen, as well as an impressive sound system and controls, complete the Main Hall's facilities.

In addition to the features described above, the National Arts Theatre, to complement its aesthetic nature, is adorned with 7 floors and 25 lifts, 250 toilet rooms and 300 urinals, a 10-room public toilet building

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outside the main theatre building; 2 boreholes and an underground tank which provide the building's water requirements. It is argued that the volume of water consumed on a busy day at the theatre can serve a town of about 500,000 population. The edifice is also provided with basement car parks and ramps at the four entrances of A, B, C, and D which take about 500 cars.A meaningful tour of the complex takes more than eight hours. The National Theatre complex has the following facilities:

1. Main Hall (5,000 seats)
2. Conference/Banquet hall (2,000 seats)
3. 2 main exhibition halls (1839 sq metres each and 2,000 seats each)
4. 2 Cinema Halls (700 seats each)
5. The V.I.P. lounge (500 seats)
6. The Press Conference hall (300 seats)
7. 2 massive lobbies (500 seats each)
8. The roof Garden (round the theatre building)
9. Car parks.

The stage of this theatre is easily amenable to any directional concept. It is ideal for major musical concerts, drama, film, shows, etc. The hall also hosts indoor sporting activities like tennis, wrestling, boxing etc.

The National Theatre serves as home to the following important government organisation:

1. The Department of Culture
2. The National Troupe of Nigeria (NTN)
3. The Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC).
4. The National Gallery of Arts (NGA)
5. The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO)
6. A Post Office, for the Nigeria Postal Service (NIPOST)
7. A clinic, run by Federal Ministry of Health.

VI. Administrative/Management Framework

After its commissioning in 1976, an interim Administrative Management Board was inaugurated to oversee the affairs of the National Theatre in 1977. The Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Information was appointed as the chairman of the board while the head, Department of Culture was the secretary. The board also had as members, three representatives from the ministry of works. These are chief Resident Architect, who worked during the construction of the theatre, chief Engineer and a project Engineer. The heads of the departments of Antiquities, film division, and Museum are also members while the chief Accountant; ministry of information was the sole accounting officer of the board. This board managed the theatre until October 1979.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture took over the leadership of the management Board after the 1979 shift in Government. This was during the Alhaji Shehu Shagari led civilian government in Nigeria when the department of culture was merged to the ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture.

Despite the merge, the administration of the complex remained under the Department of Culture. The Accountant of the ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture becomes the Accountant to the management Board.

The successive military regimes appointed sole administrator to run the affairs of the theatre.

Today, the General Manager who reports directly to the Minister in-charge of the ministry of Culture and Tourismis responsible for the day-to-day operations of the theatre complex including staff welfare. An assistant General Manager and department managers assist the General Manager.

VII. The Management Structure is as Shown Below

a) Management: Theory/Practice

The national Arts Theatre seems to favour Behavioural Science Theory of Management in part. Weber (1947:115) had laid a bureaucratic concept of Management, which stipulates organizational management hierarchy. His procedures further encourage clearly – specified division of Labour, powers, obligations, etc. The National Theatre's bureaucratic system spreads from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The Minister of Culture and Tourism through the General Manager of the theatre oversees the affairs of the National Theatre. The General Manager takes directives from the Minister and the Permanent Secretary of the ministry. This bureaucratic management system has over time left the theatre mismanaged and under-utilized.

VIII. Achievements/Merits of the National Theatre

The achievements of the National Theatre can be discussed as follows:

Showcases the Nigeria Culture: The National Theatre serves as an agent for the presentation, preservation and promotion of Nigeria's culture. The building hosts cultural exhibitions and performances while the National Troupe packages and exports Nigeria's cultural heritage. The complex serves as the people's (Nigerians) hall where they can relax and served with cultural packages like films, drama and dance.

The National Theatre develops the young and future talents: Young talents who otherwise would have no opportunity have been developed by and in the

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National Theatre. This the theatre does by way of sponsorship (when it had fund) and provision of facilities at almost free cost.

The theatre complex provides an open park to the public: About the only such service centre in Lagos. By this, the theatre relieves people of environmental stress.

The theatre is a tourist's attraction: It provides recreational venues and tourism to Nigerians and foreigners alike.

It serves as an event venue: Even in its dilapidated state, the theatre is a great event venue in Nigeria. It offers affordable venues for programmes to individuals and organisations.

FESTAC '77: The National Arts Theatre successfully hosted the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977 (tagged FESTAC '77). The festival brought together all the black race and their cultures across the world. This was in form of exhibition, dance, drama et cetera. A black festival that lasted one month.

Remi Ademola Adedokun, answering an implied question on the achievements of the National Theatre of Nigeria, observes thus:

The National Theatre is a full-blooded adult now and what has it to show for it to certify its maturity? A lot has been achieved you would say. The inauguration of the National Troupe (a resident performance company) is a landmark achievement. A large number of staff that draw salaries to keep body and soul together is noteworthy. The Cultural exchange programs (unknown to Nigerian generality) and the organisation of the National Festival of the Arts that are echoed or relayed through the media are proofs of its success. (The COMET, Sat. April 13th, 2002, p.31.).

IX. Musical Society of Nigeria (muson): Origin

The Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) was formed in October 1983 and was granted a certificate of Incorporation, No 3392, on 22nd March 1985, under The Land (Perpetual Succession) Act, Cap. 98.

An insight to the origin of the Musical Society of Nigeria is illustrated in the words of Chief Rasheed Gbadamosi:

…one day, my phone rang and it was Louis Mbanefo saying, did I recall a conversation I had with him about a classical music appreciation society and that people were about to get together and form a society in pursuance of classical music, would I come? I said, "Well, you know that will be a grand idea, where will it hold?" And he said, "one Mr Akintola Williams'". (MUSON Newsletter March, 2003.1).

The foundation of MUSON centre came from the inspiration of Mr Akintola Williams OFR to form the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON). On May 26th, 1983, Mr Williams approached Sir Mervyn Brown, KCMG, who was then the British High Commissioner to Nigeria from 1979 to 1983. Mr Brown and Lady Brown with their proficiency in musical instruments organised musical Soirees and concerts at the High Commission's residence and other venues in Lagos. Through these Soirees, the Browns helped stimulate awareness and appreciation of classical music from their arrival to Nigeria in 1979.

Mr Akintola Williams' approach to Sir Mervyn was in the form of a request to assist in organising a group of artistes and friends to form a society for classical music performers and supports. The group Mr Williams proposed would include people who though appreciate good music, neither could play any musical instrument nor could sing.

The stage got set for the establishment of this proposed musical society in Lagos with Sir Mervyn's assurance to solicit the support of artistes and other interests in Europe. This included the Goethe Institute of Germany and the IntitutoItaliano Cultural of Italy. These two institutes had been prominent in the promotion of classical music appreciation in Nigeria.

A steering committee of the Musical Group met on the 25th of October, 1983. This meeting where the strategies for the society was mapped out gave birth to the Musical Society of Nigeria – MUSON.

Mr Akintola Williams enabled the steering committee to agree on the name of the society, its objectives, structure, secretariat, administration and plans. The membership of the steering committee was later enlarged to enable it draw up the constitution, register the Society, identify artistes, and work out a programme of performances.

The MUSON logo, designed by Mr Duncan McKellar and adopted in January 1984, depicts three African musical instruments. The logo is portrayed in a style traditionally Nigerian and in a circle or wheel always turning and eternal. The Centre complex was commissioned in February 1994. Its architectural elegance, serene ambience and the very high standard of its maintenance have continued to draw praise from around the world.

X. The Objectives of Muson

The centre is established with the following objectives:

1. To promote the understanding and enjoyment of classical music in Nigeria;
2. To promote the performance of serious music with emphasis on classical
3. Music;
4. To promote the education of children in the performance and theory of music;
5. To encourage the interacting of Nigeria and non-Nigerian musician;

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6. To provide facilities for the realisation of the above-mentioned objective;
7. To raise funds from persons and organisations for the realisation of the above
8. mentioned objectives,
9. To raise by way of loans, debentures or overdrafts from any banks, financial institutions or persons such amounts as the society may require from time to time for the purpose of carrying out its above mentioned

XI. Muson Centre's Site/Location

MUSON centre is located in Onikan, opposite the National Museum and very close to TafawaBelewa Square (TBS). It was a location that was popularly called love garden and later used as car park for Onikan stadium.

An application for a grant of the land was made to the Lagos State Government in May 1985. The approval was granted and a certificate of occupancy was issued on 22nd July, 1988 by Navy Captain Okhai Mike Akhigbe, the then Military Governor of Lagos State. The state Governor, in addition, granted the Society certain special concessions on ground rents, and on the fees for the processing of the building plans.

The Centre is suitably located on 1.666 hectares (2.881 acres) of land. This quiet leisure and cultural zone of central Lagos is easily accessible to patrons by all means of major transportation in the city. Though from the rail way station and airport, patrons may need to board a cab or bus to the centre.

XII. Features and Facilities

The Centre houses the MUSONSchool, which occupies three floors of the building adjacent to the Shell Nigeria Hall. A library and school administration located on the first floor while the second houses two equal-size Ensemble Rooms and eight individual Practical Rooms. There is also on Ensemble Room and nine individual Practice Rooms.

The MUSON Centre complex itself consists of the shell Nigeria Hall, the Agip Recital Hall, the School of Music and the Mobil Block, a four storey structure consisting of offices and two apartments for MUSON management and visiting artistes. There is also the La Scala Restaurant.

XIII. Administrative/Management Framework

The General Manager is at the head of affairs. An Assistant General and managers of committees are assisting him. These committees include Finance and Administration, Members and Membership Service Committee, Events and Programmes, Marketing, House and Operations and lastly, Technical and Maintenance. Above the General Manager are the 13-member Board of Governors and the 12-member Board of Trustees.

The General Manager and the Managers have free hands in taking decisions as they affect the welfare of the centre but may have to refer to the Boards decisions that must have their attention. The management holds a weekly management meeting to review the activities of the centre.

MUSON Centre building

XIV. The Management Structure of Muson

The management chart indicates an interactive framework.

XV. Management: Theory/Practice

The national Arts Theatre seems to favour Behavioural Science Theory of Management in part. Weber (1947:115) had laid a bureaucratic concept of Management, which stipulates organizational management hierarchy. His procedures further encourage clearly – specified division of Labour, powers, obligations, etc. The National Theatre's bureaucratic system spreads from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The Minister of Culture and Tourism through the General Manager of the theatre oversees the affairs of the National Theatre. The General Manager takes directives from the Minister and the Permanent Secretary of the ministry. This bureaucratic management system has over time left the theatre mismanaged and under-utilized.

The MUSON Centre seems to follow Frederick Taylor's guidelines of the classical theory (scientific) of management where the management is at harmony with the workers Weihrich and Koontz (2003:33). The management committees have encouraged cooperation of human beings in the Centre rather than chaotic individualism.

A sovereign General Manager who enjoys the support of this assisting managers heads the management of MUSON Centre. A thirteen (13) -man member board of Governors and a twelve (12) man-member board of Trustees headed by the General Manager himself further inspire him. The management of MUSON has migrated from volunteered membership committees to employed and paid professional managers.

The management of MUSON Centre is working for maximum output rather than restricted output in terms of its objective(s) and financial returns. To further achieve its objective(s), MUSON management seems not to hang on a particular theory of management. A mixture of management theories seems to be at play in MUSON Centre.

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XVI. Achievements of Muson Centre

MUSON Centre is successfully hosting lectures and seminars on classical music. This is in addition to providing a very conducive environment for MUSON and its school of music.

The MUSON edifice is a reference point, an eclectic venue for performances and exhibitions in Nigeria.

The MUSON Centre is a pointer that given a free hand to theatre managers in Nigeria, the contemporary theatre will be an attraction.

XVII. Conclusion

This study explored Cultural Institutions in a developing country like Nigeria laying emphasis on the management constraints. It was observed that apart from guiding policies and poor funding, bureaucracy is a problem that militate against an effective management of arts institutions.

As an appendix, some major interviews are included here for further insight.

XVIII. Interview With Prof. Femi O. Osofisan, Immediate Past General Manager of the National Theatre, Lagos. March 31st, 2005. by Nwanaju, Uzoma T.

Question : Sir, at your appointment as the General Manager/Chief Executive of the National Theatre Lagos, many people especially artists, welcomed the announcement with appreciation. You promoted the image of the National Theatre especially through public relations. How did publicity enhance your management of the national theatre?

Answer : Publicity is very important for any establishment, especially a public one like the National Theatre. And with the peculiar problems that I had, publicity was vital to help push our point of view. The running of the National Theatre in my view called for a very specific philosophy, and here I discovered that mine was unfortunately in direct conflict with that of the government, my employers. That is, my managerial views were different from the Presidency's, and in fact with most conventional views of running the place. The normal management approach is to think of how to make money, and increase profit, and so on. But for me that's not how I see a national theatre.

Question : The National Theatre is a high-tech edifice built among other reasons to promote Nigerian arts and culture. Would you say that the planning and size of the theatre is, ab initio, a factor against its effective management?

Answer : Yes, the physical structure of the Theatre was a problem, and you remember that some people, like Wole Soyinka for instance, did protest at the time about building such a structure here. It was ridiculous transferring a building like that, designed for a cold climate like Bulgaria, to Africa without any modifications whatsoever, except for the size. We made ours three times bigger, and so multiplied its defects by as many times! I mean, to have in Lagos a massive building like that, where no air can enter from outside, and where heat is deliberately trapped inside! The major problem came from the lamentable fact that the building had been left to dilapidate for years! .... That was the major problem, I mean, the question of finding money to repair the place. That was the crucial thing, for if you can't find the money to effect the necessary repairs, then you can't use the facility and if you can't use it, then you can't generate income.

Question : You were talking of philosophy…

Answer : Yes, for fundamentally that's all it boils down to, the question of philosophy, of the government's attitude towards the arts—on what, to be specific, it wants a National Theatre for. I mean, does the government want it to serve an artistic purpose, or not? As far as I am concerned, a National Theatre should have no other purpose than the preservation and the propagation of the wonderful products of our creative genius, of the very best of the nation's cultural treasures, particularly in the performing arts. It should also be the nursery for budding talents, as well as a home for the established masters.... It has to be heavily subsidized by the government, for it is the people's collective culture that we are talking about, not commerce! ... any nation that is serious about its survival, its future, knows that it must take seriously the question of its cultural patrimony. For it is not the roads we build, or the cars we ride, or even the number of yams we produce, nor the barrels of oil we export, that will survive us. It is the art we produce and leave behind. Ask History. Ask the older civilizations, why they are remembered, what makes us remember them. All the modern developed nations we strive to emulate understand this importance of art, and therefore devote substantial attention and resources to it. ...this is what I mean by the philosophy of the government. This understanding is basic to the way the place has been run till date, the way it has been left to dilapidate.

Question : Is that why throughout your stay at the National Theatre, despite its magnificent aesthetic features, the main auditorium (about 5000 seats) was not used?

Answer : It was in a terrible state. It could not be used. In fact, it had been closed down long before I got there, after two deaths were recorded there during a show. So for close to twelve years now it has been closed down, such a valuable asset. That's why I began by trying to confront this problem of finance headlong, but then, if you're searching for money and suddenly the philosophy of running the place changes, what happens? You have another problem on your hand. So

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you're dealing with multiple problems all the time, with changing principles, and it was conflict with government policy makers mostly, with people who understand finance and the Paris Club, but have no corresponding insight about the place of culture.

Question : It was gathered that your effort led to the current renovation of the National Theatre, how do you feel?

Answer : Oh of course I am very happy about that. It's a great comfort to know that one's effort—or, shall I say, especially the present minister's effort—has led to that. The last month of my stay in office—since I had made up my mind to go and not to seek any renewal of my appointment—saw both the minister and myself running all over the place, and at all hours of the day and night, attending all sorts of meetings, because we really wanted the repairs to start before I left. There were just so many obstacles to overcome! But if you have a minister who is determined to get things moving, who believes in what you are doing, and who, most importantly of all, has the right political clout in the party and the government, that's when you can perform. And of course there was the money that we had got in our budget two years earlier, which had been lying dormant there at the Central Bank, and which the previous minister had felt impotent to commit because of orders from the BPE (Bureau for Public Enterprise). The money was not enough of course to finish the work, but it was more than enough to allow the repairs to take off.

Question : Apart from finance, what other problems handicapped your effective management of the National Theatre?

Answer : There were the usual administrative huddles. You know we're running under a ministry, with all the civil service protocol and mentality. Which means, for instance, that unless the minister is willing to back you, and give approval, then you're handicapped. Or at the lower levels, your file could experience mysterious disappearances if you don't play the game. That was very frustrating a number of times. For instance many people felt that I should have effected an immediate change of the top personnel when I got there, and I myself felt I needed fresh and energetic hands in a number of cases. But that could not be done unilaterally, and all the ministers, and including the Board when we eventually got one, urged extreme caution in such things. And then there was the lack of continuity at the top. When I was there, can you believe that we had three changes of ministers in those three years! .... Not only that, even the Permanent Secretary for our culture ministry was changed five times! So your Perm-Sec is changed, your minister is changed, and you are constantly beginning things all over! Each minister has to be persuaded to come down from Abuja to undertake a physical tour of the edifice, to study the relevant papers and meet the various consultants and lawyers, and to agree to make you a priority among his numerous parastatals. In addition to this, there were of course the regular problems that all chief executives always have to face. I mean, those of getting your budget approved for instance by the legislative assemblies, and then secondly, getting out the approved money from the finance ministry. What I learnt through these tortuous and torturing processes, you will soon read about in my works. I have a play now in the making, for instance, which I hope to complete very soon, and which is almost like the Osuji case, but is based on personal reminiscences. But I don't want to say too much about that yet.

Question : We are waiting eagerly for that! But were there other problems you faced?

Answer : Yes! The major one, the real wahala for me really was the government's abrupt change of policy. A few weeks into my tenure, as you remember, the government suddenly decided that the solution to the problems of the National Theatre was to privatise the place. Now, this is something I have never believed in, nor can ever believe in, and so we had to begin a battle on it. I was not going to allow such an abomination, even though many people at first could not understand my position. Happily however, as soon as I explained to them, such people saw reason with me. I mean, if you privatise a place like the National Theatre, what would be the consequences? That's what I tried to make the government and its supporters to see. It's quite obvious. The only successful private theatre I know of today in Nigeria is the MUSON Centre. The MUSON Centre is a very good example of a private theatre centre that runs on its own resources. So the question is—do we want the national theatre to be like the MUSON Centre? That is the big question. Because the only way the MUSON Centre has been able to make it is by catering exclusively for the elite....

Therefore, if you make the National Theatre like the MUSON, then a substantial proportion of the population will no longer have access to formal cultural life. Certainly the film makers and actors of the now thriving "Nollywood" will have to find another venue for their business. For if you come to the National Arts Theatre at the weekend, you will always see a large crowd of people, who come because our charges are cheap, as I believe they ought to be in such a national cultural institution. ... In any healthy nation, I insist, the right to watch a play, or attend a concert or an exhibition should be the same as the right to have access to good health, or good education, or medical care. A National Theatre should be like a public school, accessible at low costs, and heavily subsidized.

But that's not all. There is still another service we also render at the National Theatre, and which will definitely cease as soon as we are privatized. It is a service which I personally consider vital..... Apart from the beaches—and they are few and far away from where the people live—where can ordinary people go

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nowadays to take a leisurely walk, or escape from the crowd? The only open place we have left in Lagos now is the National Theatre. You see! .... Many may not see the value of this. But it's a vital service, a therapeutic imperative, which you cannot quantify.

Question : But who pays the bill then?

Answer : The government of course! Just like in most countries of the world. It is the government that must pay the bill, and even build more cultural centers, instead of just this one. If I, as a General Manager of the National Theatre, go to Calabar and see a play and think that it is brilliant and concerns the country, and I want people to see the play, I should have the right to commission that play to come to the National Theatre and perform. And I should even throw the gate....

Question : Did the media help?

Answer : The media were simply superb! Very helpful and understanding, I am happy to say. They came in on our side to stop the government from selling the place. That was however when the government came up with another unacceptable idea. They said okay, instead of privatizing it, they will give it to some private person or organization to manage. So I suggested that the place must be repaired first. The estimated cost for that was about N700m. But N700m is too much for a private individual to put into a place and still give priority to the arts. With that kind of money invested—and this is even before you start operating, or even paying your staff—there's no way you will be thinking of culture!

Question : You said N700m! Why would the repairs cost that much? Why not just sell it off then?

Answer : It's a catalogue of problems, my brother! Everywhere in the entire building has one problem or the other, but as it's been built, and at such an enormous cost too, we cannot abandon it. The original plan in Bulgaria, as I told you, was to make the building airtight in order to preserve heat, because you know how cold that place is? Now how can this fit in Lagos, a tropical place? The solution to make it work is to keep it constantly air-conditioned. So of course they brought in a central cooling system at the beginning, giant air-conditioners that operated through a water-cooling system. Now however, water has not entered that building for the past twenty-two years or more! The first air conditioner packed up and they started cannibalizing the other one till it too packed up. By the time I got there, the entire air conditioning system had broken down for years. Then, as you know, NEPA cannot be trusted and we have to have generators. But the ones I met there had also packed up. Their capacities were small anyway, one about 700KVA, and the other about 300KVA, so that although before I left we managed to reactivate them, none of them can service the entire building. Thus when the weather is hot we are in trouble, and when it rains, we are equally in trouble. The heat inside is so intense some days that our patrons go through excruciating experiences which make me, as the chief person in charge, cover my face in shame. There was a time we had a wedding reception there for example, and the bride slumped and fainted from the heat! Imagine, on a day supposed to be her happiest in life! And then the leakage when it rains! You would think there was no cover at all when you see how the rain pours in. The three roofs were apparently made of non-tropical material, and started leaking barely seven months after the theatre's commissioning! That is, since 1978, and they have never been repaired! We brought in several government officials to see for themselves. All the pipes meant to drain water from the roofs are rusted. All the toilets had broken down. The water closets were built with materials that cannot stand acid, so you can imagine the damage urine has done to them over these years! Plus the fact that the flushing system is the continuous type, in a building that public water has not entered for over a decade! Oh you need to see how many gallons of water we need to purchase daily to maintain the place. Even that didn't help much: in a few minutes after flushing, the place would be smelling again!

Question : Couldn't you have tried to find other sources of funding for these repairs? The private sector for instance?

Answer : But we did! Remember, the first minister was an astute businessman, Alabo Graham-Douglas. He tried to use his business expertise, to raise funds through the banks, to undertake the work of rehabilitation. But the government stopped us. They said we could not go and get private money like that for a public building, particularly given the changeability of interest rates at the bank. So when everything was set, the government said no that we should not proceed like that to source private funds. Then the BPE said we should privatize and all our plans went kaput. Can you believe it, that while I was fighting for money here and there for the repairs, from the legislature, and from private finance houses, there was another organ of government saying that we should not do any repairs and would go to jail if we continued! And then the minister was replaced, and his successor was either not prepared or not strong enough to fight them. So for me, I thought that was it, that the only way out for me was to leave, since I couldn't achieve anything.

Question : That was when you resigned?

Answer : Tried to! It's incredible, but do you know that I actually resigned and tried to leave four times in those four years! All because of this frustration. ... But you know how it is with public office in this country. Various people from different places intervened to stop me each time. Not always the same people of course. So the last time, I just said I would wait on till the legitimate end of my tenure, and then leave.

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Question: It must have been very frustrating…

Answer : Extremely frustrating! Think that, by the end of 2001, we finally got N400m, but the BPE said we must not use it! And we had to put the money into the Central Bank, where it just remained dormant. You can't make interest on it, you can't settle debts, nothing! Such a large amount of money, just lying idle there, for months! It's criminal! Meanwhile all kinds of rumours were going round about the money, that we had embezzled it, and so on. ... All we could get from the minister, finally, was her approval, towards the end of 2002, to repair the generators, some of the toilets, and coolers. The money left after that, about N375m, that's what the present minister is using for the roofing repairs now. If we had embezzled it, wouldn't we be in jail now?

Question: Unlike the National Theatres of Great Britain and Canada, the National Theatre of Nigeria is not operating in full capacity. What would be responsible for this?

Answer : Just all that I've been saying. How do these theatres abroad get money? It is not as if they get it directly from the government. No, the arrangement is that they get a huge proportion of it from such bodies as the National Lottery, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Arts Council, such bodies. This is what we are fighting for, to be established here. Indeed it is already in our Constitution, that a National Endowment Fund for the Arts be established. And with some of my fellow chief executives in the ministry, I can tell you that we spent a lot of time trying to convince the minister to get these going, to set up appropriate committees to get things off the ground, but we never got there. And I also tried to get the National Theatre in Abuja built, but that was totally unsuccessful. We already have the land and the design there, but we couldn't get any action started on it. And now some of the land has been given away to other organizations!

Question : So how will you sum up your experience at the National Theatre?

Answer: I would call it both challenging and frustrating. I confess that if I had known half of what I came to know about the theatre, I would not have taken the job at all in the first place. If I had known what the true situation was at the theatre, or how government business runs, I would never have accepted the appointment. After all, I didn't lobby for it and I didn't know what was waiting for me there. But of course we always have challenges in life. So I accepted the sorry situation as a big challenge, and I fought the battle to the best of my ability. I tell you, I put in all my wit, all my energy, all my intelligence and failed. And so I decided to quit. Let another person come and try; there was no point at all asking for the renewal of my appointment. But on the other hand, the experience was good and useful, because it allowed me to see how things are run in our country. It was frustrating, yes, but also very instructive and illuminating.

Question : What will you now say are the possible solutions to the problems of the National Theatre?

Answer : The first thing is that the government should make up its mind about what it wants to do with the place. Until that is done, you can't do much. If the government's philosophy is not really in favour of cultural expression, but just that the place should be commercially managed, and make money, then the solution will be obvious. But if they want it run like such places are done in other countries, like in South Africa for instance, or Senegal, not to talk of Britain or Germany, and they want to support it, then the decisions to be taken will be different. Talking in the abstract is okay but the concrete thing is: let's have a policy. Let's know what the policy is, whether the place is to showcase Nigerian culture, the best of Nigerian culture and all that, or it is meant to run as a commercial business. That is the thing .... If I had the budget to do all these things, to rebuild that hall and repair the damage, we would surpass what the French people, foreigners, were doing for our culture.

Question : How precisely?

Answer : I told you that National Theatre should be a place both to showcase our masterpieces and also develop the future talents. We should also use the place to bring together our disparate peoples. I had this programme in mind, for instance, to invite one state per month to the National Theatre to display its culture. We even drew up lists of each state's wealthy sons in Lagos, who would be invited to sponsor such shows and the publicity. I am sure that kind of thing would have galvanized the tourist industry and made money for us. But it could not take off, because we had to repair the facility first. Similarly I planned to run workshops in drama, music, painting, weaving and film-making for young talents, those who are still struggling, who have got no name at all yet; and also a Theatre-for-development proposal for Area Boys, to help rehabilitate them. For this I had talked to some of my ex-students in Ibadan, those of them who had participated in our UNICEF-sponsored TFD projects in the rural areas. They were all keen to come. But all these turned to mere pipe dreams, there was just no money for anything, and the effort of running after it was all-consuming. Sometimes we did not even have enough to pay all salaries and allowances. And you know what workers do when they do not receive their allowances in full! So, instead of carrying out these programmes, I will be in Abuja negotiating, begging, running from pillar to post trying to source for money. It didn't allow me any time to carry out any of those programmes I had in mind. For if you don't have money, all your plans will just be dreams in the air.

It's so painful now, in retrospect. Our government would not give us the money we needed, and yet would not allow us to raise it from banks! And

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other private concerns and international organizations who could have probably given us help turned away when they heard that the place was going to be privatized. Why should they spend their money for the theatre, if someone else was going to buy it? So a number of things need to be done: first, persuade the government to take the National Theatre from the privatization list; second, persuade the government to repair at least the most severe of the damages in the building; third, put in a new management that will have a good degree of autonomy, for instance regarding the exploitation of the external grounds; and finally, persuade the government to finally bring to realization the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Question : Thanks, sir, for giving me so much of your time.

Answer : Thanks, for giving me the opportunity to answer the questions.

XIX. Interview with Iwaleso Alabisepo, Assistant Manager, operations, Muson Centre, Lagos.

Question : The MUSON was founded in 1983 to promote classical music, how has the experience been?

Answer : The Experience has been good so far. We have been able to promote classical music beyond the normal old ways, not the "elites" only now listen to classical music. I will tell you that we have been able to influence the younger generations, the young and upcoming ones in having the love of classical music as well we have been able to improve in the standard and appreciation of music generally as it relates to listening to music, playing the music itself and the theory of music. The centre of activities is in organising classical music shows and at the same time promoting music education through the MUSON School of Music. Normal examinations are organised by the school which go beyond the shore of Nigeria. So you can say that the experience has paid off.

Question: MUSON has enjoyed goodwill from individuals and corporate bodies, what has been behind this?

Answer: Well, I will start by saying that MUSON Centre came about as a result of several people who share the same interest in classical music coming together to satisfy that interest.... They are people who had established themselves within the industry and their own areas of profession. Those who are in banking, Accounts, name them, they are those who had established themselves in all special spheres of life and so is no wonder that they could easily enjoy other people's good will. We will also say that the initial land is through government effort. So government has in a way supported the MUSON CENTRE.

Question : Will you have idea why they would not want to get attached to an existing theatre like the national theatre?

Answer : Now let me tell you this. In those days, we have first, several film houses in the country before the existence of the Cultural Centres, at the same time; you look that over the years most of them have been taken over by churches or other things. Apart from that, you realise that those that existed were in such a gullible state. Now, beyond these, people still patronise them, but they are not safe. They are dilapidated. If you go there, you don't feel at home, now how many of these people I have mentioned will be at home to sit down in National Theatre at 9:00pm and will feel safe and secured. And you enjoy that you have this vision or an idea about how things ought to be, the National Theatre or the cultural centres will probably not satisfy this. So the idea came then that we want to enjoy music together why don't we have a place that beyond the fact that we can all go together to listen to classical music, we could as well set a modern standard on how the place could be run.

Question : People think that MUSON Centre specialises entirely on the classical music. I also take it to be like that. Now, could MUSON Centre survive for long without embracing other forms of arts?

Answer : ... MUSON apart from the management also has members who willingly picked up the membership forms and pay annual dues and those are the people we said have come together to satisfy their interest in classical music. Now the MUSON Centre, is built to satisfy the interest in classical music for its members, but to sustain the Centre in terms of management, they began to let out the halls for rentals so that other people can come and make use of the place.... It means therefore, that if we stop satisfying that interest, i.e. having classical music concert, shows, we will still go on, in the sense that people will still make use of the hall. Now answering your question, it will survive. MUSON organises MUSON festival where people will have the advantage of listening to classical music, drama, poetry and all other genres of arts including exhibitions. Beyond the fact that the place was set up for classical music, we have somehow been able to expand the scope with the annual festival. Here, people who may not 'fancy' classical music may have the chance to witness other genre of performances. We also have the night of indigenous music. Here we also play Apala music, high life, afro beat, juju music etc .... So in essence, I don't see MUSON Centre or MUSON not being able to sustain what they have set to achieve.

Question : One of the problems in the National Theatre is bureaucracy. The General Manager had to consult the minister/ministry before taking decisions. Most often ministers are changed before decisions are made. Does such thing exist in MUSON Centre?

Answer : How?

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Question : What I mean is this, does the manager of MUSON need to take permission from any higher body before taking a management decision?

Answer : No. I tell you that in every establishment you have hierarchy. Here you have protocols we have to follow. But in spite of that you have either limitations or certain level of decisions you can take or ones you cannot take. The management here has been given free hands over the years to be running the place, as it ought to be. The General Manager is supported by Managers and set of Committees. Anything that is beyond the General Manager, he could consult the Board of Governors/the Board of Trustees. The General Manager has the support of the Board. There is no "protocols" where decisions have to pass hands; I assure you that there is nothing like that. The managers go to the General Manager when they have any problem that requires his attention. We have weekly management meeting to review activities. So you see we have free management system but that does not mean that things that require the decision of the Board of Trustees or Board of Governors are not referred to them.

Question : To back it up, you are saying that the management of this place is in the order of Board of Trustees, the General Manager and the Managers?

Answer : Yes, no. We have Board of Trustees at the highest level, followed by the Board of Governors, then the General Manager. The General Manager is assisted by a set of committee members who also take decisions on behalf of managers. So down from the general manager, we have the managers and all other subordinates. But also you know we have as aside committee members. The managers and the committees' members work hand in hand to take decisions as it affects the running of this place.

Question : Some of the parts of the equipment in the National Theatre are not readily available in the market. I don't know if you experience such here?

Answer : Yes and no. Yes, may be because part of the materials used here were imported then. We might not find some of them readily available in the market. If need be, such things could be brought in. Again, I said no because constantly, we update some of our equipment. One of the backbones of this place is constant maintenance of the place so that nothing breaks down.

Question : May be that's why it is private?

Answer : Well, yes it is private but if we can extend this to all other public utilities so to say, if we can see every other thing that is public as private, in the sense that all public things are private from beginning. If you as an individual and as a private man, contributes to that and everybody, including this government also contributes, it will be better. Just like this place, if we see the National Theatre as 'private' and we choose certain people to manage it for us holding them responsible as in effective management of the place, doing away with certain protocol, asking them to break - even and make profit, I tell you the place will be good. It is only that people run it as government parastatal so they mismanage it.

Question : How do you think government can assist a contemporary theatre like MUSON Centre?

Answer : Government can assist in terms of policy. Government can give good patronage. Encourage the culture through the theatre. Government should come in and support with fund because these theatres are helping and promoting Government agenda.

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