

# Interview

**Interviewee:**

Ropo Ewenla

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**Balogun:** Okay, good morning sir.

**Ewenla:** Good morning.

**Balogun:** Can I meet you, can you give a brief introduction?

**Ewenla:** My name is Ropo Ewenla. I'm an actor and a media personnel.

**Balogun:** Yes, this project is entitled Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South – RETAGS. Being led by Professor Mark Fleishman, director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, in University of Cape Town South Africa.

**Balogun:** Let's start from this point. How do we conceptualise tragedy?

**Ewenla:** Well we've umm... being preoccupied with the Greco-Roman concept of tragedy. Largely because of political and colonial reasons. But along the line too there was the idea of the modern tragedy. Where let's say there was some kind of key foundation of Greco-Roman concept of tragedy. It's the heavy influence of Gods, supernatural things, fate, destiny and all the rest of it. But with the advent of the development with the growing civilization, people also began to reimagine, to re-think, to conceptualise what tragedy is. And that is when we went to the economic reasons, economic foundations.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** And there you can happily go and look at *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. It had nothing to do with Gods, spirits and all that, but it was *just* the situation brought upon him by the fact that... there was a crippling socio-economic situation that didn't make it possible to... And for me that's still very much relevant. Yeah, the forces we are dealing with now are more economic, more politically motivated and that creates situations in which human aspirations have tragic dimensions. Umm... so that for me summarises the historical trajectory of how tragedy has been viewed and conceptualised globally.

**Balogun:** Okay in this connection and in relation to present realities what situation will arise and you will say, this is a tragic situation?

**Ewenla:** Well... unfulfilled dreams.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** Unrealised aspirations.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** A Sisyphean manifestation that most people do go through today, you know the myth of Sisyphus?

**Balogun:** Yes.

**Ewenla:** Who had to push up, and then he comes down.

**Balogun:** And then he comes down.

**Ewenla:** Which is what everybody goes through. So we are all by and large, except for those-

**Balogun:** Few people who are above kind of (*laughs*).

**Ewenla:** Yes, who *seem* really, who seem to have made something happen. The universe will tell you "Olówó kan láàrín òtòshì méjò"<sup>1</sup>

**Balogun:** Wow (*chortles*).

**Ewenla:** I mean a rich an affluent or rich person in the mist of six poor people, creates a community of seven poor people (*laughs*).

**Balogun:** (*Laughs*)

**Ewenla:** So where really is the success? If it does not, if my success does not make me successful. If my success is personalised umm... am I now living a tragedy? Is it because we lack empathy, that we think that "Bámú-bámú layó, èmi ò mò p'èbi ñ p'omo enìkankan."<sup>2</sup> So once I'm well fed I don't care about- so it depends on your own sensibilities and how delicate they are, or how thick they are. You might be considered to be...to have made a success of your life and you think that you really not scratched the surface because there are people around you have done made it. So *you* would be the one to determine whether that success is worth celebrating or not. The rest of the people may think okay, you are great, you are wonderful. But you know there are people who have, apart from material success, who also may not have success in other spheres of their lives. Imagine a rich man whose children are vagabonds.

**Balogun:** (*Chuckles*)

**Ewenla:** I mean and a poor guy has children that are doing well, so who is the one who is more successful? Who is that person you are going to describe as leading a tragic life, or would have come to a tragic end? The man with money whose children have nothing but whom everybody think achieved and attained a pinnacle of everything that is, how do we call, a human success. Or the poor guy that nobody knows about whose struggling to live from hand to mouth but he's got great children?

**Balogun:** Yes I like the idea of you introducing Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* earlier. You know we're looking at those trappings of economic policies and so on and so forth. And then if you look at a play like *Death of a Salesman*, the economic and political malfeasance... what we have around, the kind of governance in existence in most African countries. So in a way we are pulling out of Greek tragedy into the tragedy of everyday life. Can we link this to any of the tragic plays that you have been involved in in the last couple of years. I've seen you so many times onstage, as a very powerful actor, one of the best in Nigeria in recent time. So can we relate it to what you have said about economic situation, the way it constitutes some form of tragic situation within the African continent to what you have done as an actor?

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<sup>1</sup> "One wealthy fellow surrounded by a thousand poor people"

<sup>2</sup> "I am fine and well-fed, no cares about other people"

**Ewenla:** Umm... in the core definition of what you can call tragedy... I cannot easily recall now, if I do I could chat you up. But where I have personally experienced more of these tragic situations are in the satire.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** The satire that I have acted in, in recent times. Satire dealing with very serious developmental human societal issues. And beyond the fact that, onstage as an actor, I know that this is, this may make people laugh but also a cause for reflection. I've also had to ask myself when I'm done acting on that stage noticing how everybody leaves the hall without a sense of obvious reflection.

**Balogun:** Yeah, let me... I think you are trying to, you are referring to play like *Yeepa, Solarin Mbo!*, which is also another adaptation of, I think Osofisan's adaptation of *The Inspector Calls*. Now that was meant to be a satyr but then there is something stinging about it to the extent that we may even begin to look at that play as some form of tragedy.

**Ewenla:** Yes.

**Balogun:** Now let's talk about, you know, that particular production, and try to see, look at that satire beyond, you know, ridiculing society by punching the society in the face and then eliciting that sense of tragedy from what is dramatised.

**Ewenla:** Yes, that's exactly what I thought. We do realise that for some individuals even when the perceived comical situations come on, as an actor you realise that the fun of the situation in which you are, it's obvious because you are not deliberately making it so. It's the audience who perceives it as funny. Because you cannot be caught in the anticipation of being ridiculed as a corrupt person and you feel like laughing about it so you must be genuinely disturbed. You are frantic, you are anxious, it is that sense of genuineness which makes it possible for you to commit unintended errors that the audience finds amusing. It is not *you*.

**Balogun:** And laughable.

**Ewenla:** And laughable.

**Balogun:** (*Laughs*)

**Ewenla:** So you are at a point of death, I mean as in "this must not happen." So the more you make it believable, and then the audience begins to say "oh look at this idiot", and then they begin to laugh. But then my fear is that the audience just does everything but laugh, without necessarily thinking and then the encounter between myself and my director, Niji Akanni, he says: "I've directed a comedy and people laughed, have I succeeded?"

**Balogun:** That's a very tough question about comedy... some people believe that comedy has a way of trivialising issues. But I don't think *Yeepa, Solarin Mbo!* does that, even when people laughed.

**Ewenla:** It's not slapstick, you know there are subgenres of comedy, including slapstick. Slapstick can be meaningless just to create fun. But when you have farce that is deliberately twisted to create meaning. Situations in which we find in *Yeepa, Solarin Mbo!* It was not, the intention of a playwright was not to invite you to the theatre to come and have a nice time. The intention-

**Balogun:** Even when you laugh?

**Ewenla:** Even when you laugh. But of course you are supposed to be that... even if you're laughing you are also pinching yourself and say "is this not true?" And then your laughter then becomes what the Yorubas call "*Òrò tó bá ti kója ekún èrín làá fin ñrín*"<sup>3</sup> Because you have realised that this is funny but this is true.

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<sup>3</sup> Matters which affect deeply often elicit painful laughter.

**Balogun:** So it's tragic in that sense.

**Ewenla:** So it's tragic in that sense. And when I say "Òrò tó bá ti kója ekún èrín làá fin ñrín" when a matter has gone beyond-

**Balogun:** Tears.

**Ewenla:** - tears, you just laugh it off. But matters deserving tears that you laugh off the way and manner in which you laugh is measured. It is a kind of laughter that... You know it's reflective. But even if you do find people throwing up their legs, throwing up there- they just refuse to see it.

**Balogun:** But you know you have a situation like that in Osofisan's *Women of Owu*. When Maye Okunade comes in to kill Iyunloye. But Iyunloye is able to manipulate the situation and still wins Maye Okunade's heart. The man who comes in and says this woman messed up my life and I've come here to slaughter her, eventually we have the same man even fighting everybody who says "no kill her, kill her, she's going to destroy you again". In that sense we look at something here that is a bit funny but in time will be tragic in terms of how much people can easily forget what they say is painful to them earlier on. Some moment of- So if you look at *Yeepa, Solarin Mbo!* That you are talking about, we have certain government official who has messed up his office and by extension messed up people. That's supposed to be a reflection of the Nigerian reality, people still laugh. How do we reconcile that laughter with the tragedy that is being performed right in their presence?

**Ewenla:** Well I think it's some kind of escapist mode that the modern human society has locked itself in

**Balogun:** What do you mean by escapist here?

**Ewenla:** The tendency to, to wish away-

**Balogun:** What is terrible.

**Ewenla:** What is terrible.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** And some kind of survival strategy that really doesn't help anybody. Umm... But also some people will tell you is that, people will spend a lot of time in stressful situations, they're not happy in their real life situation, once they come to the theatre- And I've also experienced that even in plays I have not been part of but I go to the theatre and I find really tragic situation onstage.

**Balogun:** Can we think of one or two?

**Ewenla:** I will, I will but it happens so often that it's always a given. We go to the theatre this evening and you find somebody... look I can tell you that... in *The Gods are Not to Blame*, when Odewale comes out with his eyes gorged-

**Balogun:** Out.

**Ewenla:** And he staggers and he gropes his way onto the stage. Somebody will giggle, somebody out there will laugh, maybe because he missed a step. At times, yes, I will recall I have had moments like that. Where I think as an actor I'm in that position and I hear somebody laugh and my entire acting structure crashes because for me, for me I have failed. When in moments I want you to be biting your fingers and holding onto the edge of your chairs, I mean barely able to hold back your tears and I hear in the audience... giggles.

**Balogun:** Some people laugh.

**Balogun:** Now you know you said earlier that Yorubas say "Òrò tó bá ti kója ekún èrín làá fin ñrín" when the situation becomes tragic beyond you just laugh it off. Now that's a kind of Yoruba philosophy about in some instances a reaction to a tragic situation, to tragedy. So could we say that tragedy is culturally specific?

**Ewenla:** No no no.

**Balogun:** In that context?

**Ewenla:** No. The context in which I can say, that's a guffaw. There's a chuckle, there's a giggle, I mean...

**Balogun:** Not a deep one that-

**Ewenla:** Yes.

**Balogun:** -Somebody actually...

**Ewenla:** Somebody does something to you that has annoyed you.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** No, you don't just go around...then you have a psychiatric case on your hand. If that kind of laughter is a boisterous one that, if it is about (*makes sound of a reflective mmm*), you know, a reflective smile...kind of laughter. It's not a HAHAHAHAHAHHAHA! HAHAHA, no. So when... a matter goes beyond crying, you laugh it off, the texture of that laughter is also measured. A man whose wife has just died in a ghastly accident and they are telling him to take it easy, I mean he's not crying and he smiles. If he begins to roll on the floor in laughter they should take him to "Yaba Left."<sup>4</sup>

**Balogun:** (*Laughs*)

**Ewenla:** 'Cause that is no longer an apt reaction. So I don't think that that cultural specificity or otherwise works in that way.

**Balogun:** Okay.

**Ewenla:** mmm?

**Balogun:** mmm (*affirmative*)

**Ewenla:** It will mean that you can use it to disguise your emotion but you get the import of the situation that you are dealing with.

**Balogun:** Can we relate this to... you were in *Kurunmi* another play by Ola Rotimi. You know I think he wrote that after *The Gods are Not to Blame*, or so to speak. Now this is also a very intense tragedy that dramatises a particular event in Nigeria. And you are one of the Generals in the context of the play that challenged him. And according to the story the war ended at a time Kurunmi's back was broken when his five sons were beheaded and were presented to him. In that circumstance if you look at Kurunmi and a couple of other Generals as our present day reality of political office holders...considering that, they are more interested in a certain deposition rather than ending the war and you know, making the people comfortable in the confines of their poor situation. How do we relate that to present day reality of you know political upheavals in Nigeria and Africa as a reflection of the tragic reality that is prevalent on the continent?

**Ewenla:** Hmm... you can't take the realities that our plays present onstage in performances away from the reality of our everyday life. The theatre is a mirror upon which society is reflected. Umm... playwrights don't just imagine it. That imagination is also rooted in some form of reality-

**Balogun:** Specific reality?

**Ewenla:** - specific reality. And there's always been the tragic flaw. The tragic hero will have a flaw, something that will undo him or her at the end of the day.

**Balogun:** Yes.

**Ewenla:** And whether you see them in plays or meet them on the street, those flaws are always there.

**Balogun:** They are always there.

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<sup>4</sup> Metaphor for mental care.

**Ewenla:** Whether they are leaders of countries, of societies, of small communities and families, those foibles are always there. I think, I mean to sum that up, the things we see in our plays are nothing but reflections of the larger society. But I'd like to dwell on something.

**Balogun:** Okay.

**Ewenla:** My experience as a producer now, not as an actor, of plays under the Ibadan Playhouse.

**Balogun:** The Ibadan Playhouse. Yes you have also said that you have produced-

**Ewenla:** Yes for like three years now, running now, three plays twice in a month, once in Lagos at the Lagos Country Club. And then at the University of Ibadan, Wole Soyinka Arts Theatre. And the feedback I get is that each time there is a play that borders on anything serious, might not be tragic, but the tragedies are the worse. The audience comes to me to complain.

**Balogun:** When they see a-

**Ewenla:** A serious play.

**Balogun:** Tragedy.

**Ewenla:** Or a serious play where people are umm engaged in tackling serious societal matters umm intellectually challenging, stimulating matters. My audience, in the University of Ibadan, it's a different thing if I am in Agbowo, Bodija...

**Balogun:** Which is in the city.

**Ewenla:** In the city. So my audience comes to me and says "don't bring that kind of play here. We didn't enjoy it... can't you remember the one where they were all laughing and slapping themselves? That's the kind of thing we want". (*Laughs*) What am I going to do? So at a time when suicide was poignant, I mean news of suicide was coming on everyday like two or three years ago, and Ife Salako also had a play in Lagos treating that issue. So I brought him all the way from Lagos to come and stage it here. Oh I didn't finish hearing it from my audience: "Don't you ever invite us to come pay to watch this!"

**Balogun:** So you think there's something disturbing about tragedy?

**Ewenla:** I think there is something disturbing about our society.

**Balogun:** About the society itself.

**Ewenla:** About society itself.

**Balogun:** Wow that's interesting.

**Ewenla:** Umm we live with tragedy every day. I am talking about the situation in which people are committing suicide.

**Balogun:** Yes.

**Ewenla:** Every day. So you now put society onstage. Umm not to glorify suicide but to teach people the signs to watch out for in who might end up committing suicide. And they are like "no we don't want to see it". So it's not tragedy as a genre.

**Balogun:** So how do we-

**Ewenla:** - and that's the problem-

**Balogun:** - people live through, they experience everyday life people committing suicide. They see the same thing onstage and they're disturbed by it but not so much disturbed by what they live with. How-

**Ewenla:** Because they say when they come to the theatre, they have come to relax, they have come to escape. That's why I also refer to some kind of escapist...

**Balogun:** Yes, yes.

**Ewenla:** So when they come to the theatre they have come to escape.

**Balogun:** From the reality?

**Ewenla:** From the reality. So they say don't show us that thing we are running away from. Give us something else. So we know that at least for this one hour 30 minutes our minds will be free. They are not saying that they are going back home to meet it, but they are saying that don't give us an overload. (*Laughs*)

**Balogun:** (*Laughs*)

**Ewenla:** So when they go to the cinemas, you can ask them the kind of films they watch- when they tell you that a film is a box office success. It's not a film about revolution. It's a film about wedding party (*laughs*). Where there is nothing. I mean apart from colours and spectacles there's absolutely nothing. So it's not a film about how we're going to change society, it's a film that glorifies ostentatious living. So when they say they want to go to the theatre they want to go and see how the rich live large. They don't want to see something that's going to remind them of their poverty or that may even challenge them to get out of that poverty. Let's go and laugh at the way rich people live.

**Balogun:** So there's a kind of a crossroads that we think tragedy itself as a genre or concept has come to, and what is realised on stage has come to in terms of how people want to relate to it. From this example, people- let me give you another one. You know three weeks, a month ago in South Africa the whole country was almost going to burst in flames, you have these xenophobic attacks going on somewhere, then we have issues, you know, a UCT student was raped and killed and a whole lot of things. A performance opened--- directed by Mark Fleishman, who is also leading this project--- *Antigone (not quiet/quite)*, and you see an ensemble of performers connecting to an ancient Greek play by Euripides then pulling out again connecting to the reality that is going on in terms of young girls being raped, women being battered, people battling with drugs and so on and so forth. So you find that the more the theatre tries to bring back that idea of tragedy there's a way it connects to the society, there's a way it comments on it. But from what you say now (*chortles*) there's a way that commentary also stings in terms of hitting home and people responding to it in kind. So in a ways, are we saying that tragedy actually reflects that fact that society itself is inescapably attached to what is tragic in its own formation?

**Ewenla:** Hmm maybe. Maybe yes umm and unfortunately or where circumstantially umm there are a lot more avenues to project this news in today's modern society. 30 years ago the xenophobic attack in South Africa, the news might have not got here by now.

**Balogun:** mmm.

**Ewenla:** Because there was not spontaneous means of transmitting those things. And even when things are not real they still go on social media, they still trend. There are people who deliberately post negatives on social media... So unfortunately the society is more charged.

**Balogun:** More responsive to-

**Ewenla:** Not necessarily, I mean charged, more on the edge because there are people who, people do all sorts of things. Umm... a text message or an MMS that shows some people being brutalised somewhere in Ghana, captioned as 'people being brutalised in South Africa' and not just people, but Nigerians, can trigger off reprisal attack here in Nigeria.

**Balogun:** In Nigeria.

**Ewenla:** And a picture of what's happening in Nigeria now posted to Zambia saying that Nigerians are killing Zambia, can trigger something like that also... all within less than one day. You know through Instagram, through Facebook- I mean all social media so the possibilities are huge. Now than before. So and that's why I say society is more charged towards-

**Balogun:** So there's a new dimension to tragedy that is added by-

**Ewenla:** Social media.

**Balogun:** - social media-

**Ewenla:** And the reality of our society and the way these things trend. So you umm... you find the kinds of things that people share more on social media also are light-hearted things. They say we are all stressed. You have a Whatsapp group you say let's keep to the focus of this group, they say no let's have fun. Because we are stressed in our private life. I just mentioned what happens in the University of Ibadan.

**Balogun:** (*Chuckles*)

**Ewenla:** In Lagos Country Club where you, the elites, and the ones who are.

**Balogun:** City

**Ewenla:** Yes. So there is a play going on and Arsenal is playing, not Manchester United, maybe Watford or Norwich. And because the man wants to watch football but his wife had decided to come to the Club with him. His wife does not know the difference between Norwich and (*chuckles*) and Stationary Stores Football Club.

**Balogun:** (*Laughs*)

**Ewenla:** (*Chuckles*) And the wife will commit some distraction. So he pays for a ticket for the wife to come and watch the play. As in to babysit. He thinks the theatre is a place to babysit the wife.

**Balogun:** Babysit mmm.

**Ewenla:** So he comes in and if the children come, he tells you I don't want these people to disturb me I'm going to watch football. So you have 10 people in a 200 hall capacity watching a play. And there are 3000 members drinking beer within the same compound, watching football. There's a general attitude, a negative attitude towards paying attention to serious things. Because some people in their sorts of livelihood is not tied to it, they won't do it. So in the Lagos Country Club Wole Soyinka comes to say "Oh I have not seen *Jero's Metamorphosis* in a long time, maybe I saw it last in the 70's. And then you're going to stage it, I might be there". And the guy shows up, and no member of the excos comes around to say "hello sir". We were begging them. Will you come and take a picture with the Wole Soyinka in a Lagos Country Club, mmm? Osofisan was 70, and we decided to use his birthday to drive a crowd and we baked a cake. Nobody-

**Balogun:** Showed up.

**Ewenla:** - showed up. So these are indications of how our society perceives, so I think the very serious things people do, regularly are things that are tied to their livelihood. If not, no. I think there's enough stress they don't want to.

**Balogun:** Interesting...interesting.

**Ewenla:** That's not about saying come and watch tragedy. That's not about come and... you just want to meet- But if it's a BBN, Big Brother Nigeria evictee that shows up, everyone wants to take selfie.

**Balogun:** (*Chuckles*)

**Ewenla:** (*Chuckles*)

**Balogun:** Wow, okay. Thank you so very much for your time.

**Ewenla:** whatever it is that we have left out, we can always chat.

**Balogun:** It's okay, thank you so very much.

*Balogun turns off the audio recorder*