

Interview

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Balogun: Okay, good afternoon sir.

Prof Adeoti: Good afternoon.

Balogun: So can we meet you?

Prof Adeoti: Well my name is Gbemisola Adeoti. I'm a professor of Literature-in-English in the English Department of Obafemi Awolowo University. My areas of interest will include: dramatic literature, literary history, poetry, traditions, popular culture... and literary history, yes.

Balogun: Okay, we are going to be having this conversation in the capacity that you've highlighted, but I want to add another one because I recall that there was a time that you were in a performance of my own play that won the NANTAP¹ Award about 16 or so years ago-

Prof Adeoti: Yes in 2003, yes.

Balogun: So I also wanted you to speak in that light, as an actor-

Prof Adeoti: Yeah.

Balogun: - onstage, director and so on and so forth.

Prof Adeoti: Yes, yes.

Balogun: Now this project is about- is titled Reimagination of Tragedy in Africa and the Global South – RETAGS. It's a research project being led by professor Mark Fleishman, the director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town in South Africa. And it is sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Prof Adeoti: Okay.

Balogun: Now the concept that we're looking at is how tragedy has been reimagined since 1960 or thereabout, up until now. Especially Greek tragedy and in relation to specific contemporary realities into which those adaptations have been set. And in the broader area of how the work actually speak to the environment, where it is set. And perhaps elsewhere...in Africa-

Prof Adeoti: And outside.

Balogun: - and in the global south.

¹ National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners.

Balogun: So Sir let's take it from this point so that we can have a kind of a- draw a kind of a line for it. How do we see tragedy and then what is tragic. We can look at those two concepts.

Prof Adeoti: Well... tragedy from its classical viewpoint is that kind of play that tries to... assert the dignity of man, even in the face of adversity. And it tries to humble man, let man remember that at the end of the day he's essentially a human being. And that this world does not end in itself, that there's an attachment between the current world and that world out there that we don't actually see but that world has some influence over human affairs. And when we have that understanding there's a limit to which we can misbehave...we can be immoral, or we can elevate ourselves to the level of the Gods and then look down on every other human being. So for me tragedy tries to really humanise human beings at the end of the day. Because there is that constant reminder of the intersection between the world of the living and then the world out there, that may be referred to as the world of the supernatural, Gods, divinities, you know ancestors and so on and so forth. So that's from the classical viewpoint, which is still sustained up 'til now. The only difference is that the influence of the supernatural is reduced so that what we have is man confronting his own... errors, excesses and- but still in the same direction, he's still reminded that he's a human being within this world. And there's a limit to which he has to go especially when he's confronted with the social, the society, the individual vs the society. There's a limit to which he can go. And tragedy in that sense tries to remind man of that fact constantly.

Balogun: mmm. So what is now the tragic? How do we say something is tragic? By the way something happens and we "this is tragic".

Prof Adeoti: Tragic, well, the tragedy will come from a sense of being unfortunate or a difference between expectation and outcome. Especially in the manner that now calls for some sadness, you know, anxiety, disappointment, death... of course, death will have to be there. I mean losing of lives, which ordinarily, you know, people would have loved to be around

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Adeoti: So, I mean, it can mean reversal of fortune, okay. And reversal of fortune does not mean that the person must essentially be a great person, a king, a warlord and all that. It could be ordinary human being but that ordinary human being is not having it rosy in the way and manner that is expected and the thing continues until the cessation of that person's existence.

Balogun: Thank you very much. Now let's bring it into the theatrical world. It's very good you mentioned the classical definition of tragedy also. Now we're looking at reimagination of classical tragedies. We have so many of them, most important-

Prof Adeoti: mmm adaptations.

Balogun: - Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni*, that's *Antigone*-

Prof Adeoti: *Women of Owu*.

Balogun: - *Women of Owu*, *The Trojan Women*. And then he has other ones apart from the Greek, we also have adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedies: Yerima's *Otaelo*, an adaptation of *Othello*-

Prof Adeoti: *Hamlet*.

Balogun: - *Wesoo Hamlet* by Osofisan and so on. Now we look at it, first we begin to look at, from your own experience as a teacher you've taught some of these texts, you have analysed them, you've seen them in performance.

Prof Adeoti: And also acted.

Balogun: And acted in some of them. In a way, how do we account for the stimulation for this adaptation? In terms of what we have seen in those texts. How do we account for what inspired them?

Prof Adeoti: Well from my own research, because I published a monograph on *Aesthetics of Adaptation in Contemporary Nigerian Drama*.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Adeoti: Where I look at some of these things. From *my* research I discovered that, these playwrights took on those classical models with a view to addressing contemporary political situations in their country.

Balogun: In their own country?

Prof Adeoti: In their own country. Of course you can extend it to Africa. Because... just like the Greek heroes who at a point, they realise their ambition and then they turn down to look at other mortals and they come to harm. You have a situation when we got independence, those who took over, they just inherited the political structure that the colonialists left behind. So the situation of the oppressor and the oppressed still continued. In fact it became worst by the mid 60's when we're having military coups. And those that were emerging were military dictators. So with that kind of a situation, I mean there's so much mis-governance the economy was not doing well, in fact some countries they are to go to war. There was crises of development and crises of governance in many parts of Africa. So some of these playwrights then reached out to those models to create situations that will give them an ample opportunity to re-examine their own society, make political statement but using those Greek models or borrowing from those Greek texts. If you look at *The Bacchae of Euripides* by Soyinka you know that dictatorship, political dictatorship was the concern of Soyinka at that period. It was done in the 70's and by that time we were already saddled with Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire... even our own Gowon was already there. The man had such opportunities- I mean such models to borrow from. But apart from that the playwrights also, just as they were indebted to classical European playwriting in the course of their education, they were also borrowing from their indigenous cultures. And so part of it is to, sometimes bring up the traditional elements of African performances from their own culture to create plays that will entertain. And if you agree with me, tragedy has as part of its critical element, music, spectacle, which are defining elements of our own performances too. So performing those tragedies also enabled them to explore the traditional resources, the traditional theatrical resources of their own people. Because they will bring in dirge, songs, acrobatic displays and so on and so forth. And so watching them, yes you feel sad, but then you still feel entertained.

Balogun: So let's look at some of these elements that you have been able to tease out about African theatre which the adaptors also make use of. And let's link them, I mean in relation to maybe one or two of the performances of these tragic plays that you have seen. Maybe if anyone comes to mind-

Prof Adeoti: Okay.

Balogun: - we can talk about that. Maybe Osofisan's *Women of Owu* for instance. Can you -

Prof Adeoti: Let's talk about *Death and King's Horseman* which-

Balogun: Okay...

Prof Adeoti: - is more recently.

Balogun: Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman*?

Prof Adeoti: Yes.

Balogun: Okay, of course while that is not an adaptation of a Greek tragedy but-

Prof Adeoti: Oh, okay.

Balogun: -but then... no no no, we can talk about it. Soyinka also adapted history. Because if you look at it, Soyinka took the materials from specific historical events and twisted it and then tried to bring all of these out. And that play is even really important because if you look at it, it's more like a kind of a defining play for generations of writers that came after him like: Ola Rotimi and Osofisan. So let's look at all of those first...then we can relate them to specific examples of Greek tragedies.

Prof Adeoti: Yeah... well I mean, from the director's or the playwright's notes...

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Adeoti: Yeah, Soyinka said categorically that what he's out to do in that play is to celebrate the concept of transition among the Yoruba people. And that it's not just about the West vs the rest of us, or the colonialist vs the colonised, no. He's out to celebrate the concept of transition among the Yoruba people. And the war transition, yes people will sorrow because there's a departure but at the same time, it is an introduction to another level of existence. So that in the Yoruba world there's no break in existence.

Balogun: No vacuum.

Prof Adeoti: You just move from one realm of existence to another. And the Yoruba celebrate that transition, or that moment of transition with music, with poetry, with rite or what you call ritual. And these are, you know, all the elements that the Greeks too, they try to emphasize in their own tragedy. For instance from the beginning of the play you are launched into riddles, poetry, metaphor in the exchange between the Elesin Oba and the Olohun-Iyo, where he's trying to prepare us for the role that Elesin needs to take at the end of the day. Which is to go with the Alaaḡin. So Elesin is bracing himself up with the "Not-I-Bird" riddle to say that, when the time comes for him to take the heroic plunge to the other realm, he's not going to be like the people who shirk their responsibilities when confronted with danger. So using different symbols, riddles and all that, it prepares us for that. But he's led with drums, dance and so on into the market square. Then... yes there's celebration of marriage but the more important one is that part, I think that takes place in scene three, where there's an exchange between Elesin Alaaḡin and Olohun-Iyo.. "Elesin can you hear my voice"... "faintly, faintly..." The thing goes on for about 10 – 15 minutes, where Olohun-Iyo simulates the voice of the Alaaḡin calling on the Horseman, that if he's not going to come or there's something disturbing him he should make other preparations for the horse to come and so on and so forth. And shortly after that, I mean it's at that moment that the colonial messengers, when they pounce on him-

Balogun: And arrest him.

Prof Adeoti: - and arrest him. But that is the moment of tragedy because...

Balogun: The rite was stopped.

Prof Adeoti: Exactly. And so every other thing that happens thereafter is just anti-climax. I mean the man now loses his freedom, he loses his self-esteem, his social rating and at the end of the day he loses his son. And so he has to go along with that.

Balogun: So how did you see this in performance, in the specific performance that you saw, with these...how was it realised?

Prof Adeoti: All realised in the sense that one, the actors chosen were quite fantastic. I mean I still remember Kola Oyewo playing Elesin and Tunji Ojeyemi is a chanter, a dancer playing Olohun-Iyo. And then the rich costumes of *sányán, àlááḡi*... all those kind of old Yoruba traditional attires they put on. And the drummers, they were also masters of it. Then they introduce flute that creates this sombre, reflective atmosphere during that period.

Balogun: Now let's talk about the performance of either *Women of Owu* or *Antigone* that you saw-

Prof Adeoti: Yes.

Balogun: Maybe in Ile Ife here or something. What was really that thing that you cannot forget about the performance, in terms of the staging?

Prof Adeoti: Ah well, I think it also relates to the attempt to situate the play squarely within Yoruba tradition, Yoruba culture and then Yoruba performance culture. Music... dance, in fact there are so many of them. So many dances, so many songs, you know brought to bear there. I think that one was quite fascinating.

Balogun: Now if you say that- are we saying, taking it from what you said earlier about the Greek and the Yoruba – are we saying that tragedy is culture specific?

Prof Adeoti: Uh well... I think it is the play. It is each play that will be culture specific. But the overriding idea of tragedy is universal, yes it's universal, the idea of tragedy. But the universality does not mean that it is the classical one that is the norm, you know. It is in that regard that you can say well, there will be some culture specificity. If we say, the idea of tragedy is you know, a betrayal of expectation or misfortune, the sense of misfortune and all that. There is no society that does not erect a sense of achievement an idea of greatness and then falling below that expectation. So to that extent it will be universal. But what constitutes greatness, what do you define as achievement or realisation in one society may be different from another society. And it is in that regard that relativism will come in from there.

Balogun: Let's say about 20 or so years ago, this place we are in- I'm not talking about the University environment... I'm talking about the old state, the community, Ife. Was in a very serious battle with its neighbour-

Prof Adeoti: Modakeke, yes.

Balogun: Modakeke. I think the war raged on for many years.

Prof Adeoti: Yeah.

Balogun: Osofisan also wrote *Women of Owu* set in Euripides' *Trojan Women* in the context of the Owu war. Of the Allied forces...the Ijebu and co. And in some point in time Osofisan was also here, yeah. Is it possible for us to begin to look at the Ife- Modakeke war as exemplary of the kind of world Osofisan was trying to portray...Osofisan didn't see the *Women of Owu*- I mean the Owu war. He read about it but he witnessed Ife- Modakeke war. Should we kind of see some kind of similarities in that sense of tragedy?

Prof Adeoti: Well I think, I think it goes beyond Ife- Modakeke war. I mean it may salvage some inspiration but, yeah, you know. All around there are so many, you know, crises. Before Ife- Modakeke, you have Offa--Erinle crises that have been on for-

Balogun: Ages.

Prof Adeoti: - decades.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Adeoti: For generations it's there, okay. Umm... in... still within the same country you have the Umuleri--Aguleri people, you have the Jukun and the Tivs.

Balogun: In the north?

Prof Adeoti: In the north.

Balogun: We have in the east-

Prof Adeoti: They are just neighbours Umuleri--Aguleri in the east. I don't think it's just Ife- Modakeke war. It's within the context of brothers, neighbours, you know, visiting inhumanity against each other. Which is what you find in the *Trojan Women* and which happened in the Owu war, the Kiriji war, the Jalumi war, the Adubi war and so on and so forth in Yoruba land.

Balogun: So what it means is that a play like *Women of Owu* will continue to be relevant because, wars, skirmishes, violence, has kind of become a kind of a contemporary reality-

Prof Adeoti: Yes, in fact that is why the plays will continue to be relevant. I mean the classical plays. In fact take any play written from the classical era to date. There is no way you won't find relevance outside the context of the time or outside the context of the culture that produced it. Because tragedy affirms one humanity, that's the point I made about universality and the drama. So if we are talking about humanity, there are so many things that bind us together regardless of what time we exist and in which space we inhabit. To that extent the tragedies will continue to be relevant because we're essentially human beings. The frailties that you find displayed in classical plays, you still find people displaying them. Greed, pride, anger, needless superiority complex-

Balogun: Lust-

Prof Adeoti: - lust, they're all human frailties and they are not restricted to the White alone because these plays were about Europeans. You will also find them among the Blacks. You find them among the Asians. So to that extent tragedy will- this particular play will still continue to be relevant. So long as we don't see ourselves as our brother's keepers, we see ourselves as adversaries.

Balogun: So considering the fact that most adaptors usually choose to work on tragedies, does that suggest that... does that suggest that tragedy sells more in the theatre than comedy?

Prof Adeoti: Well I wouldn't subscribe to that. Because I mean, they also adapt comedies too. I don't know. I can't account for that, that maybe tragedy sells more... I'm not sure. But perhaps because the issues are so serious, the issue that they are dealing with, they are serious issues. Maybe that's why they choose the relevant dramatic mode to use, which is tragedy. But at the same time at least I've witnessed a couple of adaptations of comedies like: *Love's Unlike Lading* by-

Balogun: Osofisan.

Prof Adeoti: - Osofisan. It's an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare. I know that Adelugba adapted *Scapin the Scoundrel*² by Molière, which he called *Suberu the Scoundrel*. And some different adaptation of *Lysistrata* I've watched them. So-

Balogun: Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* is one of the most of the popular of these-

Prof Adeoti: Yeah one of the earliest-

Balogun: - tragedies, one of the earliest. I doubt if any Nigerian actor had not worked on it, in one way or the other because it's more like a... But if you look at the play; after many years Rotimi in an interview said the play addresses the Nigerian Civil War. Do you also subscribe to that, in terms of the dramaturgy?

Prof Adeoti: A well, since he was the playwright... I mean he may have his reason to have said that-

Balogun: But as a teacher you have taught-

Prof Adeoti: - within the context... Yes I've taught it but I've always looked beyond the Civil War.

Balogun: Okay into what?

Prof Adeoti: The play itself even when you don't have any background knowledge about, you know, what motivated the playwright, you see a fantastic play for the theatre. The way it is produced, you know, realised with all the elements of, you know, indigenous performances, chants, songs, invocations, and so on and so forth. Even characterisation and the representation of human frailty, anger and so on and so forth. So the plays, I mean, relevant in that respect. But beyond Civil War, identity has always been a source of problem for man; who are we, where are we from, and where I

² Molière's play is correctly titled *The Scoundrel Scapin*, while Adelugba's play is entitled *That Scoundrel Suberu*.

come from? I'm different from these other people and there is a tendency to always want to define self against the other in terms of a superiority.

Balogun: You see just recently where this project is taking place in South Africa, there was another round of xenophobic attack you know. This is part of, irrespective of the name we give to it, whether we call it racism-

Prof Adeoti: Xenophobia.

Balogun: - call it xenophobia, I think it's always the same question of-

Prof Adeoti: Identity.

Balogun: - trying to define oneself in relation to the other.

Prof Adeoti: To the other, yes.

Balogun: So you think Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* actually really dramatises that very well. I mean-

Prof Adeoti: Yes

Balogun: - is there danger in it?

Prof Adeoti: Yes there is a danger in it. In fact there's this salient line by Odehale himself, when-

Balogun: That's the Oedipus character?

Prof Adeoti: The Oedipus character. When Aderopo is trying to blame the Gods, and he says no do not blame the Gods he also has his share of the blame especially his own anger. And then he alludes to his confrontation-

Balogun: With his father?

Prof Adeoti: - with the man that happened to be his father. That the man insulted his tribe, you know, calling him a man from the Bush Tribe of Ijokun, and then he had to show the man that he's not inferior in anyway. So identity is a very critical issue and it has generated so much tragedy, so much misfortune. Is it the White vs the Asians, the White against the Blacks, even among the Blacks...

Balogun: South Africans and other nationalities.

Prof Adeoti: - and the rest of other nationals, you know. So that is a universal element and Ola Rotimi explores it. So the Civil War is just a feint echo.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Adeoti: Yeah, it's just a feint echo. Even if you don't have the opportunity of reading Ola Rotimi's interview for clarification.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Adeoti: It wouldn't have affected anything in your interpretation of the-

Balogun: The play.

Prof Adeoti: - play of the *Gods are Not to Blame*.

Balogun: Now when we look at it both Osofisan and Ola Rotimi and then Soyinka in his *Bacchae* of *Euripides*, you have this element. The Yoruba element of the presence, the huge presence of the Gods. In Soyinka's *Bacchae* for instance you have this- of course Soyinka's interaction with Ogun. Rotimi also there's that atmosphere of Ogun, even in *The Gods are Not to Blame* that we talk about. Although Osofisan never mentioned that but Ogun is identified with war, carnage; that begins the *Women of Owu*. So are we saying that in spite of developments, civilisation and contact with the so called outside world and then the way we've imbibed foreign religions: Christianity and Islam. These plays are they suggesting that Africans are still very much tied to the past of their race in terms of the belief in those...

Prof Adeoti: Ah well I think whether we like it or not, you know uh... the Gods are part of our existence. Then and now. And if the Greeks, I mean, because the motivation, the model of those

plays they come from the Greeks and you see the role of Dionysus, Apollo, Zeus and Pentheus... I mean in those original texts. So... (*Gbemisola takes a phone call*).

Balogun turns off the audio recorder

Balogun: Yes we were looking the Nigerian appropriation-

Prof Adeoti: Yeah, of the Gods. Essentially as I said the Africans still believe in the connection between this world and the world out there. Though they can't see the content but it's still real, okay. There is no human being who exists alone he also has a tie with the outside world. So that is there. And I don't think, no matter how much the scientific invention or how much you preach or teach people to hate their past, they will still be there, okay. Even when you teach them to hate their past what you are giving in place is another supernaturalism: Muhammed, Jesus. I mean if you want to use the word, they were human beings who became Gods. Just like these other Gods were human beings who later became uh...

Balogun: Deified.

Prof Adeoti: - deified one way or the other. So regardless of that Imperialism, that European or Arabian Imperialism people will still remember who they are, where they are from. And I think that informs the use of those Gods. But beyond that there are many things about those Gods that are inspiring to the writer. They are like muses to the writer especially when you read their myth while they were alive. Ogun was creative, was courageous in spite of, you know, the fact that he also has negative and destructive elements. And that is what the world is, "*tibi tire*"³ So if everything is good and proceeding on the same plane it won't be nice. And if everything is going on the plane of the tragic, it won't be nice. So you need a balance of the two. And the Yoruba Pantheon represent, you know, a nice blend of those two possibilities. So they will continue to be relevant, not only to the writer but also even to the audience who appreciate them.

Balogun: But if you look at these plays that we talk about: *Bacchae of Euripides*-

Prof Adeoti: *Women of Owu*.

Balogun: - *Women of Owu*, *Tegonni*, *The Gods are Not to Blame* there is the dramatisation of the people's propensity for violence, for brutality. Does that say something about the world that we live in? In a way if you look at it.

Prof Adeoti: Ah well because don't forget that they were modelled after some Greek plays. So to that extent you can also say the Europeans were violent and they continue to be violent if you look at their history. You remember 100 Years' War between the English and the French. Even in English Royalty, the 30 year War of the Roses, it's been there. The story of Julius Caesar you know. I mean it's about war. What of the French Revolution, Napoleon. What of the World War, the Second World War. It's about war and it's among the Europeans, who are killing themselves. So if you're talking about violence they're predisposed to it just like any other race. So Blacks don't have monopoly of violence and I don't think they came to kill us out of violence. They also had history of dog-biting-dog. So to that extent I will agree with you that there was disposition to violence but it's not because it represents the Blacks as being violent. They are coming from a background, because those writers adapted from a particular work which also ministered or addressed the human problem at a particular point in history.

³ God and evil are inseparable companion

Balogun: But from your- you have taught the play, you've acted in some, you've seen the performance and let's look at performances in a specific sense. Do you think the audience responded more to the tragedy than the way comedy was staged? Did you think the audience responded *more* to tragic plays?

Prof Adeoti: Ah well since you can only do that if you administer questionnaire. But... so umm-

Balogun: Based on the audience-

Prof Adeoti: Okay.

Balogun: - the one that you saw and interacted with, with the performance that you saw. Can you-

Prof Adeoti: No, I'm not going to compare because each play elicited its own emotion. And people, you know came... In comedy they will laugh, okay. In tragedy, especially the tragic moments, you will see people crying, okay. I've watched *Kurunmi* and even *Women of Owu* you know, people at a particular point in time, you know, they will shed tears. Although in between there will be some comic relief when people will laugh. But if you want to take a tragedy, comedy, it will be difficult to compare because each play has its own emotion.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Adeoti: That it elicits.

Balogun: Yeah some people believe that even those elements of comedy that we infuse in tragedy do not really necessarily have a place. You think comedy has a way of trivialising the issue-

Prof Adeoti: Oh it's not trivialising it's to bring down the accumulated, negative feelings, anxiety that tragedy has a tendency to generate from the beginning. So you definitely need a moment to draw, you know, the thing down a bit. Even though it will proceed. But how is it going to be played that it will not distract will depend on each playwright.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Adeoti: Okay, will depend on each playwright. If you take Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* for instance, that play is historical. There's the character of the Uzazakpo, the messenger in the play. That man is funny. I mean he's a clown, but that clowning, the way it's done does not distract from the serious element of the tragedy. Rather, you know when everything seems to be going wrong and wrong, you know, it brings down the tempo.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Adeoti: So for me it's still necessary, it's necessary.

Balogun: Prof. thank you so very much for granting this interview. I really appreciate it.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder