

Interview

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Balogun: Okay, so good evening sir.

Prof Yerima: Good evening.

Balogun: I would like you to introduce yourself.

Prof Yerima: My name is Ahmed Yerima. I'm a Nigerian playwright and teacher at the Redeemer's University. I'm an actor. I used to run the National Theatre, National Troupe as Artistic Director and Director General. And also the Abuja Carnival, I do that. But right now I just teach theatre and write my plays quietly.

Balogun: Thank you so very much.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So, this interview is about a project entitled "Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South" (RETAGS). Funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the research is being led by Professor Mark Fleishman, the director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa.

Balogun: I know you have a very strong relationship with Soyinka and to a very large extent Femi Osofisan. As a matter of fact you were Soyinka's student. At a time when you were the Artistic Director of the National Troupe you worked on so many of these plays, most especially adaptations of Greek Tragedies, the one written by Soyinka and the one by Ola Rotimi, and I want to imagine you also worked on one of the adaptations by Femi Osofisan. Okay let's start from this question, always this question about, what is tragedy and what is *tragic*? Perhaps we could try and do a kind of dichotomy between those two concepts: tragedy and then what is tragic?

Prof Yerima: Well Tragedy, when you ask a scholar about what tragedy is all about, one goes immediately into Aristotle. And begins to look at a story that ends up sad, that ends up sad that you find that what you are looking at means you are looking at issues that would take a play and tell you

a story in which the character has a flaw, is in conflict with the Gods and that concept. But when you are an African and you look at tragedy from a point of view of what is tragedy, because tragedy is shared, tragic moments and tragic incidents are shared it becomes very fluid, in the sense that it allows people to begin to say "oh this has happened". It's also like Aristotle, it is sad, but it's communally shared, I mean that's the aftermath of tragedy. And so, because again we are part of the formative process of the humans within society it becomes easier for us to say, we also have to share in the blame that led to the fall of that tragic hero. Now, *tragic*, moment for us is that point of realisation that what has happened is sad. When we receive the moment, or the incidents that led to the tragic end or the tragedy, meaning you know, that is where we say "okay this is sad, and this is tragic". So that's the basic differences between tragedy and the tragic.

Balogun: Okay, so Prof. moving beyond the Aristotelian concept and what have you, in the world of theatre.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now, let's come to human specific contemporary reality. How are we going to define tragedy in these circumstances?

Prof Yerima: I'm very fluid on that. One, because in Africa especially in Nigeria, especially me, I do not think that tragic action happens to someone because of a particular incident. I believe that a lot of things happened that led to the tragic moment or to the tragic fall. I'm trying not to use the Aristotelian words (*laughs*) but it's difficult because we have tailored ourselves to try and explain the African circumstance in that sense. And that one thing, we believe that one thing does not kill a man. That a man, because a man is in conflict with a God does not automatically lead to his end. You understand. There must be all the reasons, why, what happened, who, which God is this, what's the power, at what point did you offend the God, why didn't this or that god of the family save? So the man is constantly within the toss up of existence and when we're talking of the humanity and what saves the man is his humanity, the 'manness' the person in him is what eventually saves him from the *grasp* of the tragic arm. And that's why I think someone like Soyinka who begins to talk of the "carrier," that to overt further incidences happening then someone must give himself up as a carrier, and then say that "I want to save the world", you know, the "Captain America", of the society at that particular time. And so that's what happens from my own point of view especially when it comes to the human angle, you know. Because a lot of things we do not just accept, we don't accept the downfall of someone from one single point of view. And so we try to explain that.

Balogun: So Prof. you are saying that tragedy is a cumulative effect of so many-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - circumstances.

Prof Yerima: So many circumstances.

Balogun: Should we take it that this will be, is often the point of departure for writers who actually write some of these tragedies, tragic plays?

Prof Yerima: Yes. I think that's even the point of, the difficult point, aspect of writing a play. Because the play has a limited number of time, it has a limited number of characters.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: And so when you want to explain the reason for the fall of one character, in so many words, you find that you will need two (*chuckles*) plays to explain that. But because it's cumulative and you cannot kind of congeal the process. It has to be explained, because the audience who are going to assimilate it are coming from the culture which you are trying to talk about. So the playwright or the writer finds that he, himself must first begin to understand the genre in which he is

writing for or writing about. And also the limitations of his culture, and the expectations of the audience who are going to assimilate the process. You understand. And I think that's the most difficult aspect of writing a tragic play.

Balogun: So the tragic plays are actually a reflection of the writer's society?

Prof Yerima: It must be! It must be if you want the message to sink. And the African, especially the Nigerian audience is only afraid of one thing – death. (*Laughs*) You understand.

Balogun: So what role does music play in this, when we put such a play onstage?

Prof Yerima: What music does is that it appeals to your feelings to your emotions. It settles you down, it becomes almost like a deceitful process of drawing you closer to the tragic essence, you understand. So you find yourself accepting it because again we have what is called the persuasive music, which is the evocative music. And like if you at Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, where they are singing the song and his saying "Elesin oo can you hear me?" and he says "faintly, faintly, faintly." And he begins to transit from that world. And I never thought that such music existed until when I went to Oyo before I started directing the play. And I said I want to know what kind of music *takes* you from that level.

Balogun: Oyo is the palace where ...

Prof Yerima: The palace-

Balogun: - where Soyinka got the-

Prof Yerima: - the story.

Balogun: ... the story.

Prof Yerima: Yes. You understand. And so, because I wanted to first touch base with the original site of the story. I wanted to locate it. So within my consciousness, so it would be easier for me to interpret that location to the actors that I'm going to work with.

Balogun: Okay. Prof. it is on that note that I want us to now take the next set of questions into your interpretation of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: It's an adaptation of-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - Euripides's *Bacchae*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now, you said something about trying to move very close to the real source...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ...of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Is that, the choice that you made, while you were directing Soyinka's *Bacchae* ...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... was it similar to something you did for *Death and the King's Horseman*?

Prof Yerima: Soyinka's *Bacchae* the only thing Soyinka gives you, the clue he gives you, is Ogun.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And that's what he uses as a refraction or a reflection of Dionysius. And so it is you and then palm wine the instrument of Ogun which intoxicates him, which takes him into the other level. And then you now look at what he cleverly did, trying to turn the Greeks into Yorubas. And then you see the mother, you see the issue of revenge, of vengeance, of pain, of pity. And so it becomes easier for you to colour the characters and lift them from the original *Bacchae* of Euripides and then begin to colour them in Soyinka's words, in Soyinka's motifs, in Soyinka's images and imageries.

Balogun: Okay, we know we have several Yoruba localities...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... tribes.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Was there any specific one to which you set that play?

Prof Yerima: Well I have caught (*chuckles*) – I don't want to say caught Soyinka out. I caught him out (*chuckles*) when I directed his *The Strong Breed*.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And I wanted to locate it, because if you do not locate Soyinka's play... he wanted to write a play for the world. And all of his plays are for the world. And what he does is to play down the location, so that you can do it in Zimbabwe, you can do it in Tanzania, you can do it in Ghana and still have an African play.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: But for *me*, who likes to think of location because I want to be able to *add* to it to understand where this play is coming from. And I don't want to deconstruct it. I want to first place it within the location of its culture before I can begin to... umm... think of adding on to what Soyinka said. And so what I did was I always take his plays to Ijebu.

Balogun: Ijebu meaning...

Prof Yerima: Ijebu Ode.

Balogun: ... his ...

Prof Yerima: ... his ...

Balogun: ... his birth place?

Prof Yerima: ... his birth place. Well Isara is basically his birth place... but Ijebu flows from there into Ijebu Ode, Ijebu, Ijebu, Ijebu ... There are so many Ijebus. But basically what I do is to look at the commonalities like of the Ijebu people, and what I did with *The Strong Breed*, was just one name Jaguna. And for me, that allowed me to locate the play. And so when I was going to locate because I had to add dances. And the dance from one little tribe of Ijebu to the next tribe of Ijebu, which is just a kilometre, or half kilometre away – (*chuckles*) – they are different. And even the dialect is like twisted and different. And so you have to find a spot where you say this is where I want to go and this is how I want to do it and this is how I want to reach this story. And it was easier for me to do that. The basic elements of Ogun as a deity of strength, a deity of masculinity, a deity- all the attributes which are given to Dionysus, was easy for me to draw because Soyinka had more than explained all that in his writings the *Fourth Stage* the... you know, and all. So I was able to understand that.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So you talk about all of these staging choices, you talk about dance you talk about choreography, you talk about language ...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... let's-

Prof Yerima: And music.

Balogun: - and music-

Prof Yerima: And gestures.

Balogun: Let's identify all of these elements in your directorial approach.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Let's take the one after the other. So the moment you ...

Prof Yerima: Locate.

Balogun: ... locate ...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... the play in Ijebu ...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... and you also identify Ogun.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So, are you saying those two features-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - allowed you-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - the-

Prof Yerima: Because Ogun has his sets of songs.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: Ogun has his sets of dances. It would be sacrilegious for you to take a *bàtá* dance of Sango and give it to Ogun. Because he is a known God, he's a known deity in the sense that he comes with all his attributes. His mannerisms, his language, his behaviour, his personae, his... his... his temper, his anger, his everything. And so he's defined. And so when you want to display or you want to direct a play like *The Bacchae of Euripides*, Soyinka's *The Bacchae*, you then begin to look at the issues of sensibilities and that allows to be able to twist out your own interpretation. And with it into Soyinka's story and then play it out in front of the audience who *know* the story. They may not know *The Bacchae* by Euripides, but they know Ogun and what Soyinka is trying to make him do in the story.

Balogun: Now Soyinka, exactly what is Soyinka trying to make Ogun do in that play and let's try and link it to one or two of the staging choices you made in terms of the temperament and then in terms of the ambience that you were able to create for your own interpretation.

Prof Yerima: I think the first thing was one, I took Ogun and I said okay this is how I understand Ogun to be.

Balogun: So Ogun was Dionysus?

Prof Yerima: Ogun was Dionysus.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: And this is what Soyinka is trying to make him do.

Balogun: And exactly what is that?

Prof Yerima: He was trying to show us Ogun as a God, he wanted us to see the temperament of Ogun, he wanted to see Ogun as a *punishing* God. A God, who is a jealous God. Being a Christian it was easier for me also to understand the emphasis with which Soyinka wanted to place on. And so when the... it made it easier for me to be able to do that. I remember finishing the directing, the last day of directing and I said "that's it, we're finished directing, now we do run-throughs." And they said: "is that all? It's so simple." (*Laughs*) You get the point. Because once you've got the pillars of understanding what Soyinka was trying to do and placing Ogun within it and first you must read the original anyway. So that you know where Soyinka is coming from. And then you now begin to understand where Soyinka wants to go. And what Soyinka wanted to show the Nigerian people was that the attributes and the sensibilities of the temper of Ogun exist in Dionysus and so there is this

similarity and then you can understand his tragic thrust in the play. And that is what I did but that is what I did.

Balogun: So Prof. which year was this that we're talking about?

Prof Yerima: We are talking of, I think, 2005.

Balogun: 2005?

Prof Yerima: Yes, 2005.

Balogun: Yes 2005.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: I think we were... I think that... the third Republic...

Prof Yerima: For Nigeria?

Balogun: ... for Nigeria-

Prof Yerima: Yeah.

Balogun: The third Republic. Was there any correlation between the choice of that play by the National Troupe under your direction and the Nigerian socio-political landscape? Is there any correlation between the choice of that play at that point in time?

Prof Yerima: There was, but what I did when I took over the National Troupe and the National Theatre was I... I had what I called 'the epics'.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: I had split the kind of productions I wanted. I wanted the experimental plays and then I had the traditional plays and then I had the epics. Plays that haunted me when I was in school, and plays that were written by the first generation writers and I thought I should be able to take them into the new interpretations of mine.

Balogun: Like reimagining them?

Prof Yerima: Yes, reimagining them. Redefining them and expanding their meanings beyond the closures of time. And so that was the first thing I wanted to do. And that's what placed plays like *Death and the King's Horseman*, the *Song of a Goat* by J. P. Clark, *Wedlock of the Gods* by 'Zulú Şofola, *The Gods are not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi... All those classics in fact that's what I call them, not epic – the classics. You understand. I wanted them to be done because the basic thing was that the National Troupe wanted to celebrate the cultural heritage of Nigeria. So I wanted to take the new plays, the old plays and the middle plays, you understand. And the plays like of Osofisan who were coming after those classics and were beginning to find their way into the classic mode.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: You understand. But there was no way you could do that and not because the audience that were going to sit to watch, some of them have only heard of Soyinka, they've not read him. And they wanted to know about him and so we had to *pull* a little bit of that into their consciousness. And that is where the point where you raised about did you think of the third Republic... Yes it came out in the production. I remember in *Song of Goat* which was about... mmm... impotence and the riverine area. I had to bring in a dance, just a dance sequence of the pollution of oil and the river to take the play from 1958 when it was written, to 2005 when we did it. Because at that time we had started polluting our river, oil flaring had started taking place, the whole issue of the Niger Delta as a major socio-political problem was beginning to occur. And so, I had to do that also for this. But when we are looking at terms of Dionysus, was we're looking at human beings, their attitudes and the over-bearing power of leadership of the leaders. Which Soyinka used as a recurrent theme in most of his works. So that is what we were looking at. We were looking at that and that's how I extended and expanded the theme of the play.

Balogun: Okay, thank you sir. So this project of reimagining the classics, right?

Prof Yerima: Yeah, yeah.

Balogun: You describe Soyinka's *Bacchae* and the rest of the other ones...

Prof Yerima: mmm (*in agreement*).

Balogun: In casting the play...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... did you have this idea in mind in terms of, because I remember when I saw the performance it had a kind of a cross over...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... between the old actors that we have known-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun:- and the new ones.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Was that part of...

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ... your process of reimagining a classic?

Prof Yerima: Yes. Because I wanted the old actors to like hand over.

Balogun: To the new actors?

Prof Yerima: To the new actors.

Balogun: Through that process of collaboration -

Prof Yerima: Through that process of collaboration. And I liked the understanding of the old actors. In saying this is the entrapment of what Soyinka has always tried to say.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And the new actors saying "I think he's also trying to say this ..." I can understand this character if I look at it from my point of view. And those moments were I wish we had recorded them. I would have just (*chuckles*) sent you the tapes you know. Because then we used to have these discussions, the old actors felt "oh my God we going to do *Bacchae*", which was even difficult to do in England according to what they read and I said: "yeah but we own the story." And they said: "no we don't own the story, the story is a Greek story." And I said: "Soyinka has made this ours. Our son has written it and so let's find ourselves in the story." It was easier for the younger actors to do that.

Balogun: Why do you think so sir?

Prof Yerima: What they did was to eliminate what they don't know and try and *fuse* it with what they know. That helped me as a director. That look this is a tragic play it's coming from another culture and here is a playwright who has worked very hard to try and make it ours. And yet the older actors haven't seen these films and Olivier, you know, and John Gielgud and taking place... Laurence Olivier. Actors, all those Greek things. And then they had it entrapped. I remember what we used to do, or I would say de-voice, de-voice that voice you are using. Cause you will go (*enacts verbose British actors*): "Oh I am Dionysus, OH!!" And I'll say "no, why can't Dionysus speak like you?" They say: "Sir, it's Dionysus" and I say "no you are Ogun." (*Laughs*) You get the point. And for me, who does not know Dionysus, I know Ogun, even though I didn't see Ogun talk, but I have so many fragments of pieces of Ogun littered around over my consciousness that it's easier to piece that together, to form an Ogun image than for what you are trying to be.

Balogun: So that process of reimagination required a whole process of decolonising the minds-

Prof Yerima: Minds-

Balogun: - of the actors.

Prof Yerima: that is the word. We had to decolonise the mind. And I said okay let's find Ogun, and so who is Ogun? And then we started doing it, and because my lead actor was Albert Akaeze who was Igbo so he had to understand what Dionysus was all about. And I think the old man was played by Makinde Adeniran who had his own voice, who had an understanding of what it's all about. And I've got the women... we were looking at the relationship between the King's wife, Olori and the daughters and the old man and how they could have offended – and we were looking – and I think that must have been the difficult point for Soyinka. At the point where he tried to bring Ogun to punish them. Where they get drunk and talk of gorging and... you understand. And I was looking and I was saying, would this happen in Yoruba society? And so what he did was, get a song and dance and dance into an orgy in which we could now, do that within the culture of the people, you understand.

Balogun: Yes. Then, now, another thing I noticed in the production was that, apart from the fact that we had the old Nigerian veterans. There was also that very clear dichotomy, we have those people who are experienced with and people who are actually coming on the stage for the first time.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Was that also part of the whole process?

Prof Yerima: That was part of the whole process of training. First it was part of the training for what the National Troupe was set up for. To expose the young actors and allow the old actors to train them indirectly. Was like a masterclass with the process of passing experience. While at the same time I wanted, I wanted them to be “stupid” onstage.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: So that it showed the level of the impact of the presence, the spiritual presence of Dionysus or Ogun on the characters onstage.

Balogun: Okay, so the level of knowledge, the level of experience-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - actually became a strong point of theatricality?

Prof Yerima: Theatricality, yes.

Balogun: Okay, now, that performance, while it was clear that you tried to locate it-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - to use your language now-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: -in a Nigerian context.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: But I still notice that the set design -

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - was like an old, almost withering Greek wall. Why did you need to do that?

Prof Yerima: I also didn't want to lose the location of where we were coming from.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And I wanted whatever magic the play showed, for it to happen in a dream-like form. So that if you doubted the whole essence of this cannot be a Nigerian play, I'll say look at it again (*chuckles*). Do you understand?

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: I'm not playing it naturalistic.

Balogun: Oh.

Prof Yerima: I'm not playing it, I'm playing it from a pseudo-spiritual process in which you will now begin to add your imagination to it and also redefine it within your consciousness. That is what I was doing. I wanted... there was a smoke screen, I blew smoke on, I wanted you to see the magic. And I wanted to see how far we have travelled from the Greek to Nigeria, Nigeria to the Yoruba land and this is a story we brought from there but where we find representations, similarities, people who also symbolise those characters again. I wanted that trip to be symbolised in the production.

Balogun: Okay so let's talk about the music then, in terms of how much was your input to the work that the composer actually had to do in terms of, you know, making the music.

Prof Yerima: Yes, like I said, there was already a repertory of Ogun music.

Balogun: Oh, okay.

Prof Yerima: Yes. And I used a lot of the chants, the evocations, the chants. And Soyinka had given us quite a lot of poetry which could be worked into music and so we did that, we used that. But what we also did was we allowed musical instruments at a particular point, without songs, to begin to dictate what kind of tempo they wanted the audience to have.

Balogun: And the pace.

Prof Yerima: And the pace. Yes. And so that is what music did for me. It was to add to the magic because if we had to sit down and say those lines, the audience would sleep off on us. The African audience want to be awakened. They want to be part of a tempo, they want to feel the drums, they want to feel the songs. And ironically most of them understood what the songs were saying. So they were not carried away by the magic of the songs but the rhythm and tempo of the songs. And so that is what we were working on.

Balogun: Then in terms of the costume-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: I noticed, yeah, Dionysus-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - wore a flowing *agbádá*-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: And we had the women, I think the Bacchantes?

Prof Yerima: Yes. The Bacchantes.

Balogun: You have them, some of them in traditional Yoruba, but some aspects a little bit of the costume was also suggestive of a little bit of the Greek-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: ...

Prof Yerima: Yes, yes... that was a confusion going on in my mind.

Balogun: Oh, okay.

Prof Yerima: It was the confusion going on in my mind. It was also the fusion going on in my mind.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: I constantly wanted either the Greeks or the Yorubas or the Nigerians to recognise themselves in it. And I didn't want us to lose the originality.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And Soyinka also took the pains to name it Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: The two names were there. He didn't say Soyinka's Ogunian... or something. The anger of Ogun, you understand, the wrath of Ogun which he could still have gotten away with.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: But he wanted you to know that he has tried to keep as much as possible, what... this is just my version of Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

Balogun: So it's the fusion, the costumes allowed you to-

Prof Yerima: To retain that fusion, you understand. The costume allowed me to do that. And that's why the smokey screen, constantly I would look at where I could I experiment with both cultures.

Balogun: Yes. There was a point when you had the smoke coming in.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: What I felt-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - in the theatre that-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: -that day was, like either it appeared that the performance was taking place in a shrine.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So, was that, the shrine-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: -more like the smithy?

Prof Yerima: The shrine of the mind.

Balogun: Yeah, the smithy... like... Blacksmith furnace identified with Ogun?

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: But another thing is this.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: In the course of the performance, you also try to bring in something that has to do with... we had the walls of the set, we have the walls-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - but it appeared that the actors were trying to run away from the wall.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: In a way, in terms of, I don't know what. Maybe you can shed light on that. I don't know, because it appeared more like a kind of a barricade.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: That they trying to go back-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - but the wall is preventing them from going back to their past.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: I don't know if that was meant to be part of the...

Prof Yerima: Yes. In fact... Soyinka... there's an original story about Ogun. I think Soyinka alluded to it in one of his poems on Ogun.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: Where he says he was coming from the wall. And he suddenly turned on his soldiers and...

Balogun: slaughtered them.

Prof Yerima: ... and slaughtered them. And it was when he looked round and saw maybe the marks on their faces and he said "oh my God, what have I done? I'm killing my own people." You understand. And I had that in my mind.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: I had that in my mind that Ogun could be hailed, could be loved, in fact there's a poem I always like to remember which says: "Ogun do not be my friend, do not be my enemy. We saw Ogun playing with a baby and we said: Oh Ogun is happy today, he is playing with his son. And all of a sudden we saw a private part of the son bleeding. Ogun don't be my enemy, don't be my friend." And I wanted to constantly keep that in my mind in that he is not too friendly neither is he an enemy.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And so the walls you will find, they actually work with – what we did was, make them like ships and so they could float and each time they ran to them the thing would move and each time... All that was a way of still trying to keep that poem in my head. You know. I had so many things going on at the same time. But I wanted the picture of... of... of... a dream scene.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You understand. Something fluid, something constantly on the move. And I think that's what, you know, even his temper is constantly on the move. It flashes, it comes, it moves, it comes... you know.

Balogun: Now you talk about this dream-like, trance-like-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Some people believe that tragedies usually thrive on Realism.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: But now you are saying you're trying to move away from that Realism into something that appeared to be surreal or whatever.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So for you as a director-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - and for somebody who has worked on some adaptations of Greek Tragedies, such as the one we are talking about.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Do you think that directorial approach was more useful?

Prof Yerima: Yes, I think so. I think so in the sense that I am, I was not saying anything new to the audience as it concerns Ogun as a deity.

Balogun: Since they already know him.

Prof Yerima: Since they already know him. So had to bring magic into it.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: The theatre, the magic of the theatre. I had to excite them. I had to excite them. I was not bringing the stories about the anger of the women who refused to worship and the Queen and what Ogun decides to do and runs them mad, then she drinks and then she gorges her son and the Bacchantes and the others decide to kill, you understand. And it's a simple straight-forward story.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And the simple straight-forward Yoruba man or Nigerian would understand that. When a God is angry, whether it's an Igbo or a Yoruba or Hausaland, he just thrives on blood, on destruction. I wanted something else. I know that for it, I didn't want to take the Ola Rotimi version of *The Gods are Not to Blame*, which is King Oedipus. Which he made so realistic, so basic, so real, so natural that you could recognise yourself in it. I wanted you to see the power of Ogun in a fluid system...

Balogun: But isn't that already the whole idea of reimagining an old classic or tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Yeah.

Balogun: The contemporary audience-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - should be able to locate themselves-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - find themselves.

Prof Yerima: Yes

Balogun: Isn't that the point of-

Prof Yerima: But the language Soyinka used was not natural-

Balogun: Okay, so-

Prof Yerima: - it was poetic. And for me to get the poetry in the rhythm and in the song and in the music, I had to go into an illusion of presentation. And yet the message was still there. If you offend the Gods you get punished for it. You understand. But don't make it... umm... so natural because Soyinka didn't do that. I could have placed them in a village and then have it done. But the Yoruba Gods do not come physically. They come spiritually, you understand. And so it becomes a point in which to redefine, to reimagine the tragic element. And what gave me the leeway was that Soyinka was bringing it from another culture. So to locate it into my culture and for the owners of the culture not to *doubt* it, I had to make it illusionary. Say something new in new form- see something old in new form.

Balogun: In new form. So illusion was more-

Prof Yerima: illusion became a technique for my presentation.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now, you mention Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*...

Prof Yerima: mmm.

Balogun: You directed that a couple of times. Did you have to make such choices like the one you made with Soyinka's *Bacchae*, when you were handling Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Prof Yerima: Ola Rotimi didn't give you a chance to do that.

Balogun: Why?

Prof Yerima: He wrote a play straight. He took the play lifted it from Sophocles and just put it down.

Balogun: Oh. So are you saying that Soyinka's was more experimental-

Prof Yerima: Soyinka's, yes, was more experimental. And I think that's why Soyinka constantly reminds you that this is *The Bacchae* of Euripides. Soyinka's *version* of *The Bacchae* of Euripides. Ola Rotimi throws away *King Oedipus* or *Oedipus the King* or *Oedipus Rex*, whatever titles you have seen of the play, he throws them away, and says *The Gods are not to Blame*, he brings them within the ideological and philosophical positions of the Yorubas. And places the play within the culture of the Yorubas.

Balogun: But I thought Soyinka also did the same thing, in terms of relocating Greek tragedy into Yoruba environment?

Prof Yerima: He did that but he made even the Yoruba environment floating, I'm the one who located it.

Balogun: So in Soyinka's reimagination of a tragic play-

Prof Yerima: Yes

Balogun: - a classic. He kind of dislocated-

Prof Yerima: He dislocated, he dislocated the setting.

Balogun: While Rotimi actually set it in a specific environment.

Prof Yerima: Yes, Rotimi wanted to understand. In fact I think both, when I look at both of them, the two plays and coming from the Greek thing. I think there is more passion in getting my people to understand the play from Ola Rotimi...

Balogun: Oh.

Prof Yerima: ... than Soyinka.

Balogun: Why is that?

Prof Yerima: Soyinka wants you to make sense of what he saw.

Balogun: mmm... and Rotimi?

Prof Yerima: Soyinka- Rotimi wants you to see what he saw.

Balogun: (*Chuckles*) Can you be a bit, maybe you can shed some light on... Rotimi wanted you to-

Prof Yerima: To see what he saw in the play-

Balogun: ... Soyinka-

Prof Yerima: while I write the play.

Balogun: - Soyinka wanted you to make sense of what he-

Prof Yerima: Yes. So Soyinka's own is more elusive, more fluid. I used to have a director who would tell us this is an actor's play. But Soyinka wrote a director's play. While Ola Rotimi wrote an actor's play. You understand.

Balogun: Yeah, anybody can pick it up and-

Prof Yerima: Anybody can pick it up and direct. "Moves to the left", you know. The struggles of man begin at birth, a simple philosophy. You get the point. And he ends with do not blame the Gods, it is me and my temper that should be blamed. It's down, it's concrete.

Balogun: Now-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Ola Rotimi, tries to be more specific.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: But some people actually had a problem with him-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - when he says that this play was directed at the Nigerian civil war.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Some scholars-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Especially foreign scholars-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: -actually had a problem that that argument was contrived-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - it came after that.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now you are saying Ola Rotimi is more specific-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - in the context of the play-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - doing what...representing a Nigerian situation-?

Prof Yerima: Representing the Nigerian society.

Balogun: mmm. In terms of...

Prof Yerima: In terms of the story. He took Sophocles' play and looked at his own people and situated the play. You can see *Gods are Not to Blame* and not recognise Sophocles' in it. You understand. But in *The Bacchae* of Euripides, Soyinka's *The Bacchae* you will know that this is a play that was, that Soyinka was trying to find and plant within his, within the Nigerian consciousness. Whereas Ola Rotimi is saying see who we are, this is a story of another tragic story of one of us. When I also heard about him saying it was a civil war, if I have a have a write up... When we did it in Durham and we took the play to, I think, Alabama and then in Durham. We had the same influence, you know, the family we did it with the Ola Rotimi Foundation, you know. And we were trying to make sense of that statement and I couldn't find any relevance he read the play, he loved it he must be, you know, at Yale he loved Sophocles'... umm... what's it called... and he wrote the play. Maybe he wrote it during the time of the civil war, but there is nothing there which warns you against the civil war, or... you know. I even see Lejoka Brown being more socio-politically relevant when it comes to lifting a theme out of it than that's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* than when you are talking of *The Gods are Not to Blame*. *The Gods are Not to Blame* is just a beautiful story which effects man and it happens every day except this time it happened to Odewale who was coming also from the Greek world.

Balogun: Okay now let's look at this play *The Gods are Not to Blame* and Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - in relation to Osofisan's *Women of Owu* for instance or *Tegonni*¹.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So, you say Rotimi is being specific.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Soyinka being elusive-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - how do we describe Osofisan's own reimagination of Greek tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Osofisan is a man I call the King of Adaptations. What Osofisan does is he looks always, Osofisan does not move away from his Yoruba culture. And he takes a story and he does it one on one placement.

Balogun: mmm, what do you mean by that?

Prof Yerima: There is a king here, there's a king here. There's this here, there's this here. You understand. So you can... in fact even the name, Antigone/ Tegonni, he adapts it, he twists it so that you find that you know where he is coming from.

Balogun: *Trojan Women*.

Prof Yerima: Yes the *Trojan Women* the *Women of Owu*, you understand. And in fact just recently while I was writing the play on Obasanjo and I now asked him because I wanted three women to appear and I wanted the three women to come from the Owu war. And I called him up, he was in France, and I said "Look where does this Adumaadan come from?" And he started laughing. He said "Ahmed you write your own play and leave my play alone" (*chuckles*) you understand. And I knew I caught him because you know, there is Olawunmi who is in this play who was the wife of the first Olowu of Owu and also the mother of Lisabi. So I could place that one. And then I was now looking for the other two women. And he just, he created them because they had to walk along the Trojan

¹ Tegonni: An African Antigone. Ibadan: Opon Ifa, 1999.

story. So what he did was, what he does is not just to write the plays but to *find* the plays, situate them and add to them and *drag* his culture into them so that they become one.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You understand, so it's easier for the Greeks to watch *Tegonni* and understand the story of Antigone. He brings in the Gods, he brings in the chants but at the same time constantly he... he... Osofisan the skilful adaptor at work. You know, he adapts them to a fault (*laughs*) you get that. And so it's easier for you to understand where he is going, what he is trying to do. And where there is no pain, he brings in the pain like he drags pain into the- he wants you to feel the world, the Trojan women and in the *Women of Owu* and it's very interesting in fact when I was going to produce the play, I didn't direct it. I couldn't direct it because it was going to take too much from me, so I brought him-

Balogun: Okay too much in terms of what?

Prof Yerima: It was going to take too much from me in terms of trying to feel two pains. The pains of the Trojan Women and redefine them in the pains of the Yoruba women. Which he cleverly does in the play. He adds on a lot into it so that it fits, so you can find the parallel, you understand. And turn them to heroines which he wanted them to become, you understand. And so I invited him and I said come and direct your play (*chuckles*) you understand. Be our guest director. And he came and directed it for us, you understand. And I was watching him work, doing that, because what he constantly wanted them to understand was he wanted to transfer to the actors, not... he wanted younger actors, so that he- who were flexible, who could understand what kind of pain he wanted them to go into, you understand. And even Antigone he did that Tegonni, he wanted them to also feel, he likes to work with actors that he can transfer his thoughts into. Because the thoughts he takes the original text, he works it into his own. And they become his own, and then he can transfer it to people, you understand.

Balogun: Prof. is your own process of directing Soyinka's *Bacchae*, Rotimi's *The Gods...* similar to what you think Osofisan was trying to do or try to do-

Prof Yerima: What Osofisan does as a playwright?

Balogun: What he does as a director, when you commission him to direct that play.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: When you were the producer-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - and he was the director. What I'm saying is that your own process of putting Soyinka's *Bacchae* onstage-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Did you find any similarity in the way that Osofisan was handling his own play?

Prof Yerima: Osofisan has already processed it.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: What I processed while trying to direct the play, he processed it into the script.

Balogun: Okay, mmm.

Prof Yerima: So he was a step ahead of me.

Balogun: Okay.

Prof Yerima: So what he was doing was to interpret his processed work. The process of redefinition.

Balogun: So that production-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - is more like a process of regurgitating the idea-

Prof Yerima: Regurgitating the processed and redefined old classic tragic play into his own concept. He had evolved his own theory and concept of tragedy. And it was easier for him to process that. For me to want to direct the Osofisan's *Tegonni* or... I had to go three steps level. I had to take the original Antigone, which I had read in school, go back through it and then to look for the reasons why the burial was not to take place. And then look at what he had done in terms of placing it within the Yoruba, he located the play. He had created the characters, the new characters and he had dislocated them from the Greek original. And so what was on the script was Osofisan's play, you understand. He had processed it. So if I was going to do it, I was just going to interpret-

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: - what he has written. Where the exercise of working on Soyinka or umm... or *Gods are Not to Blame*. I tell you in London centre, I can't remember the year, I think 1986, 87 or 88. A group, a performance of *The Gods are Not to Blame* was done, in Greek costume. And I think that was the happiest day I ever saw or the day I ever saw Ola Rotimi very happy. I was at the production I was sitting with umm... who, I think it was even 2002, 2003. I was sitting with umm... what's his name... Duro Oni and Peter Badejo who took us there. And it was a wonderful performance. It was reversal. It was like *God are Not to Blame* returns home...

Balogun: to its Greek setting.

Prof Yerima: Yes. They took the lines of Ola Rotimi but they wore the costumes of the Greeks, and they used the setting, the set of the Greeks. It was funny especially when Baba Fakunle came in, you understand, and says "this boy will kill his father and marry his own mother" and all that and you know... The narrator was there, the storytelling thing and all that. It was okay, I could buy into it. But there was like... in reverse order.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: You know, which was also re-dispossessing (*laughs*) *The Gods are Not to Blame*. And throwing it back to where it was coming from, you understand.

Balogun: Yeah. You have also written one very powerful adaptation of a classic.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: This time not Greek...

Prof Yerima: Okay.

Balogun: ... but Shakespeare.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: *Otaelo*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: You have adapted *Othello*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Let's talk about that, when you were writing the play.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Similar to the whole idea of reimagination-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - you had the issue that you are going to talk about in mind.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: You had your audience.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Give us a hint into the process of reimagining Shakespeare's *Othello* and the context into which you eventually set it.

Prof Yerima: Well I think it all started from, when I was in Wales, University College Cardiff. We worked with the Sherman Arena Theatre and a Welsh Theatre company in a production of *The Tempest*. Where I played Caliban, and... and I had a problem with them because there I started my redefinition. I up 'til the point, they were having White actors play Caliban and they would paint them up to become Black. To become the hideous creature which Shakespeare had created. And when, they wanted me to play Caliban, the costumière came and wanted to put me in this slave turban of the Black Arabs and give me a hunchback that made me look hideous; and I said "No". I want to understand it from my own point of view. If you're going to pay me to act, then get value for your money by letting me be comfortable with the Caliban that I want you to see. And the basis of my interpretation was, I was from Africa and White man like Prospero had come to my land, which belonged to my mother Sycorax, my mother land. And had taken me a slave and that was my interpretation, and it was easy for people to buy that and understand it from that point because I was comfortable with the character. And so, I wanted a play that would do that for me, when I had become established as a playwright. And I've always loved *Othello* but I didn't like his stupidity.

Balogun: mmm (*laughs*).

Prof Yerima: You understand, I felt, yes, he was lucky and I also did something... I attended Royal Holloway College. And I think I was maybe the first Black man to go to that school. And so instead of being in a racist world I became the racist.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You understand. So what I did, and that is why I was able to finish my PhD in two years, because what I did was I just said nobody wants you, nobody has your colour, nobody understands you (*chortles*). So just go from your room, in the PG school, PG Hall, go to your supervisor's office talk to her, Professor Catherine Wharf and then go to the library- read; and return to your room.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: As so with that, all I did was the eight chapters of thesis was easy to create (*laughs*) because I didn't have time to socialise. Even when they gave me the job as a dance and movement teacher, it was easier for me to just expand it, go to the dance room, teach on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and then go to the library go back to the other functions. So in two years it was all over. But that again was part of the consciousness that contributed into what was going to happen to *Othello*, in my play. And when I had made up my mind it was *Othello* I wanted to adapt and I started saying how do I redefine, how do I bring *Othello*. I have three major cultures in Nigeria, there is the Yoruba culture, *Othello* does not fit in because I must find something... Yorubas never hate one of them to a point where they hate him not because of a sacrilege committed and when they do that they excommunicate him from the village.

Balogun: mmm, yes.

Prof Yerima: The Hausa never do that because Islam has a process for forgiveness or punishment. They either cut off his arm or cut off something, you understand. But the Igbos have. And so I went into the caste system of the Igbos. What would make people hate someone the way *Othello* was hated by the Whites. And so the Osu culture came... became very useful. And so I found that people were used for sacrifices and up 'til *today*, 2019, such people whose great-great-great- great- great- *great*- grandfathers were used for sacrifices are not allowed into the system because they were not seen as freeborn, you understand. And *that* located the play, you understand. So immediately it located the play, every other thing became easier. The names came in, I came close to saying Iago

was Agbo, Othello was Otaelo, the man who chews and swallows. But the dramatic irony was this time he chewed but could not swallow. Then I started to look for the reasons because it was forbidden, there were a lot of taboos around the culture I had chosen.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You could never have been allowed, and the Igbos still say those scholars who read the play, they said look we don't like Yerima's Othello because it was madness in the first place by the Igwe to even bring him to the palace.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: That I now explained, that since he did not complete the burial traditions-

Balogun: of his father.

Prof Yerima: - of his father the King was stricken with momentary madness once in a while. And it was that point of madness that he became, he allowed him to come in. They bought that half way but they threw me and that act also (*laughs*) when it came to dramatic criticism. So you were looking at, in fact that is why I have written another play called *Ala* in which I use the Osu again and trying to still understand. Because I cannot comprehend the dislike and the hatred for a fellow Igbo man for whatever reason, you understand. And I think that's the centre and the major problem the Igbos themselves as a tribe have. They don't trust themselves. They have little rules which allows themselves to say this is not good enough anymore. And so I transferred *that* into the play. And so it was okay for me to redefine that, and then brought in their God, Ala, and brought in the Chief priest, Ebuka and then tried to use that to build the story. Without knowing, Desdemona becomes Chinyere and all that. But without knowing umm... knowing the original, if you saw the play on its own without talking of *Othello* or *Otaelo* you would say, this is it, it's an Igbo play. Whether it was a bad adaptation or a good adaptation (*laughs*) that is left to who is producing it.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: But because you know it's *Othello*, an adaptation of *Othello*, it now becomes the problem where you yourself begins to redefine it within your mind. And it goes under two rules, the orders of the culture first place it within their consciousness and then begin to say, where did *Othello* or Yerima fail or pass in this adaptation. Do we the owners of this culture accept it? Does he reveal things we don't want to be revealed in our culture? You understand. Or do we just feel pity for Otaelo and allow him to die his useless death?

Balogun: Okay, so, this you are saying now, in terms of how the people whose culture you've actually used and situated your play in, viewed the work. And how in the real sense of it how your play reflects the goings on in the environment.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now, are we supposed to take that as a point that tragedy is actually culturally specific?

Prof Yerima: Sometimes, yes. Especially in Africa, because... what is tragic amongst the Hausas may not be tragic amongst the Igbos. The thing, what was wonderful was in my writing *Hendu*, my new play about the Fulani people and when the woman, Wabiti hears that her son is dead, she just lost her daughter, she goes into this normal wild expression of Nigerian women when they hear the loss of someone. The Yorubas would hit their buttocks on the floor, the Igbos would roll themselves on the floor, the Hausas would cry and scream "Wayo Allah!". But the Fulanis do not cry. And that was not going to work for me because it was not dramatic enough (*chuckles*).

Balogun: (*chuckles*)

Prof Yerima: So when I sent it to my Fulani friend and she read it, she said "no you have to rewrite this scene", and I said "how? Are they not humans" (*laughs*). Don't they have emotions, can't they

express themselves? Do you get my point. And she just said no sir, I'm not saying that but we do not express ourselves in that way. We can sniff, we can go (*makes sniffing and sighing sounds*) but we do not go into (*makes loud wailing sounds*). Because the Fulani woman is the *embodiment* of strength and strength cannot be seen to excel in tears. And that is when I knew that sometimes tragedy is culture specific, its nuance is specific, its sensibility is specific.

Balogun: So, this is why you maybe, you might want to say that while a tragic play, whether we are looking at it the staging or the writing or the director or the writer actually made choices, use gloomy symbols or so on. Is that why you think it's like that?

Prof Yerima: Yeah, I think so. Because sometimes the symbols are already chosen, the motifs are chosen, you know. They are selected by the people, the colours are chosen, you understand sir. So you know how to transfer the message and if you want the people to get the message you are trying to transfer or to tell them you *must* be specific. You must be specific, and that's the issue about multi-culturalism, when you write multi-cultural plays like I do. And you're looking at the different cultures. You must come to the culture honest, you must come to the culture clean and you must appreciate the culture. You do *not* criticise the culture because *you* took the pains to come into their culture, into their world. And therefore you *use* the aspects of the culture, you want to use and use it to portray what you want to portray. But again remember that the success of your play is how well the owners of the culture accept the play in which you have portrayed their culture. You fail when they look at it and they say "this is not our play." Which is almost like, look at Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: Which Oba Akenzua commissioned which he watched for two weeks in Benin. In 1960 or 65 or 66. And look at the son of Oba Akenzua, Oba Ereduiwa, who says I don't want to see the play my father commissioned. Because he kills the sensibilities of what I want. I am king, the thing happened in 1897, this is 1997 I want a new play that does away with the differences of the Benin people. I want to forgive the five chiefs who have been seen as traitors. Who sold away the Oba of Benin, my great-grandfather. I want to do away with all that. I want to redefine history.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And I want a performance in which the British counsellor, the ambassador, the British ambassador to Nigeria and a Nigerian Head of State will sit and I representing Ovonramwen who was taken into exile would sit and will watch the play and will see what our ancestors did. And that now made me write his own version, redefining again the history. Not changing it, but redefining it to suit.

Balogun: So the reimagination of tragedy now-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - requires a whole new set of -

Prof Yerima: A whole new set of-

Balogun: - of conception

Prof Yerima: Conception. Who are we showing this tragic play to?

Balogun: So you are saying-

Prof Yerima: What is their definition of the new tragedy.

Balogun: Oh, yes. So to what extent-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - the reimagination of a classic, will help us to come to an understanding of the new concept of tragedy.

Prof Yerima: The director must first understand for whom is this play for. For whom am I showing this play? Are Greeks going to sit in MUSON Hall, or at the National Theatre when I show Soyinka's *The Bacchae*? Or when I show Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*? Or when I show Osofisan's *Trojan Women*? You understand, which is now *Women of Owu*. When Obasanjo retired and I was asked, look do a play by Olowu of Owu, who I'm opportune to call a friend. And to work on him back home. I called Osofisan and I said direct the play. And the Owu people came out, the women of Owu came out, the real ones. And saw it was their story. There were now just looking at what was wrong, what was properly portrayed in the play. The same thing happened to Ovonramwen. The audience clapped only when the Benin culture was properly portrayed. It was their story, they did know the story. You understand. So when you are reimagining or redefining a tragic element you must be able, and that's why the director *must* do his research, and *place* the play within contemporary sensibilities. It's a classic, it captures the people at that particular time. But let us now look at the people who are coming to see it. You don't want them asking questions and saying who is this, why did he look up, why did he look down, which Ogun is this one? The moment they say, I don't know this Ogun, then there's a problem.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: The *moment* that I don't know which Ogun is that, where is this Ogun from, is he Ijesha or (*laughs*) you get the point. And that means already they've displaced the play within their consciousness and you have failed.

Balogun: Prof this is very significant. So you are saying that one thing is to reimagine a classic.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Another thing is for you to be accepted by the audience.

Prof Yerima: It must make sense to the audience, the contemporary audience.

Balogun: It is their own story.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So, you are saying the audience has a whole influence on the choice-

Prof Yerima: Yes!

Balogun: - that you make.

Prof Yerima: Even from the point of adaptation. If Soyinka didn't think of the Yoruba audience he would not make Dionysus, Ogun. If Ola Rotimi did not think of the Yoruba audience, his *immediate* audience, he would not think of Odewale, King Oedipus as Odewale. All those women who appear in *Women of Owu*, would not come in as what's it called, as Greek women, representing any Greek. If Osofisan did not think first... and I think that's the first question the adaptor or the person set to adapt a play has to think about. He says who am I directing this play for? Who am I writing this play for? The play is already written, Shakespeare has written his play, Othello. So if you want Nigerians to understand it, you must put it... and what I didn't like was for a long time it was being performed at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University... It was being performed by University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It was performed by... you understand. And until when the University of Ibadan students decided to perform it that was when I went to see it.

Balogun: And why is that?

Prof Yerima: Why because I didn't want the owners of the culture alone to see it. Or to accept it. I wanted an Igbo, crazy Igbo student of directing in another University in the South to introduce it. And said this is our story. Unless he says that the story cannot be accepted, by me as successful. You understand sir. So when, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) told me we are doing a production of Othello, *Otaelo* in or school today, I said *fantastic*. Now people are beginning to say, okay. Okay we

can accept it a little. And I think it is the fluidity of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* that's why I don't think there are many productions of that play in Nigeria. Because the directors don't even know how to go about it to place it further. Because Soyinka leaves it fluid, he leaves it. He doesn't run away from the original and he doesn't add too much Yoruba and he allows you so- what he does is to give you an African version rather than a Nigerian version or Yoruba version of *Bacchae of Euripides*. You understand that sir.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: So it makes it now for you it makes it a point in which you have to work harder to get the sense of what he is trying to say, you understand. But Ola Rotimi does not do that, when we took Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* to Durham or to Alabama or to Washington and the people saw it, they understood immediately they knew, here was the story, the Nigerian story of (*chuckles*) the *Bacchae*- umm... of King Oedipus. You understand. In fact one came out and said "oh I wish Sophocles had had a dances like you did!" (*laughs*) you understand. And we had to have dances because we are a dancing people. We sing and dance and everything, you know was celebrative, even at the point of death, at the end, where he comes out blind. I saw it, the Greek version, it was really sad. He comes out bloody and his eyes plucked out and you understand. But we still did the communal thing, we got the audience, the singers and all surrounded him and he was saying don't fight this don't fight. The point of loneliness of the tragic impact on *him* as a tragic hero we dissolved it because Nigerians share the essence of tragedy. You understand. We share that. God forbid if something happens in that room now we don't, in the next house, we are going to run there. "What's the problem" we share. You get the point.

Balogun: Yes.

Balogun: So that means, so what do you always want to achieve from your audience when you are directing a play? Let's be specific to Soyinka's *Bacchae* for instance or Ola Rotimi you directed Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* and Osofison's *Women of Owu*.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So exactly what do you want your audience to take away?

Prof Yerima: I want the audience to take away what, I want them to start from where I have started from.

Balogun: And where is that?

Prof Yerima: Redefining, reimagining. I want them to say, to see what I have worked hard to bring to life onstage what the playwrights have worked hard to write. I want to see them see the merger but at the same time to see the originality.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: I want them to associate themselves with what they are seeing, not to draw a dichotomy, and say this is not us. Not to say, no no no, this is a Greek play. I want them to say no this is ours. And this is what Soyinka is trying to say in this play, invariably Euripides also shares in that glory. You understand sir. Because when I say this is Euripides' play, they will say we are not Greeks. The Nigerian audience have a way of drawing the line. And say this play is not about us. Even when you made a play, *Moremi*, the same thing. So people came and said "our own version is this" We were the ones who conquered this. Why is he doing and saying this?" Why is Lekan Balogun saying this, but you do your research, perfect. And yet some said: "no she is not from Ofa." And so the multiplicities of meanings, you know, and because the audience are going to come from different points. I remember when they saw Chuk Mike's *Things Fall Apart*, and they were looking at it, he was looking at it from a professional theatre practice we can only buy ten tickets from British Airways

from (*chuckles*) Britain to London, to London to Nigeria and so he got women to play the roles of masquerade which was taboo in the Igbo culture; they walked out of the hall.

Balogun: (*chuckles*).

Prof Yerima: They were not interested in the limitations of professional theatre, the practicality of getting actors to play the role. It was taboo, in Igboland that a woman should be a man, carry a masquerade. And many they recognised that this is a woman playing an old man or playing the masquerade, it was taboo! Men and women, the line between them is clear. A woman only becomes a man when she stops menstruating, when she is about 80 or 90 years old. When she becomes a man. And there are certain things she still must not do, even as a great woman. And so when you now say we only have room for 13 artists and therefore you are going to play, you are going to double cast, and ... Those terminologies do not work when it comes to culture.

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Yerima: (*Laughs*) You understand. And so when it comes to practice, the people who own the culture will query and must recognise they don't want to know where it's coming from. It's written by our son, Osofisan, it's written by our son, Lekan Balogun. It's written by our son, Soyinka. It's written by Ola Rotimi, is written by Yerima. So you are coming back to look at what is in the play for us. Where is our culture? Where have we gone wrong? And how do we embrace this play, how much of the play do we embrace?

Balogun: We have several levels of meanings here, then.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Multiplicity, you know, several. The one that we have from the playwright, who has first considered the idea-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - of reimagining the classic, the tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: We have the director, who is trying to bring it alive.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: And then we have the audience.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now let's look at this tripod-

Prof Yerima: You even have the actors.

Balogun: We have the actors. Yes.

Prof Yerima: Yes, who also reimagine.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: Who are strange to the character, who must reimagine, who have to be guided by the director. And yet, no matter what you take away from me, he still keeps his sensibilities of Ahmed Yerima the actor into this character of Ogun. Which is a Yoruba character, coming all the way from Greece (*laughs*). Do you understand? Through the mind of one man called Soyinka, who may not even be in the hall.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You understand. And so the process of reimagination or reimagining is in layers, and then the audience now see the play and they also want to reimagine. First they want to look at the totality of the play. From scene one. They say the costumes are not real, these are not our people. And with that, they begin to say this is not our people, the message of the play is lost. It's not talking to us, we cannot find ourselves in the play. We don't worship Ogun in my village, so it's not about

me. And so the universal message of the play which attracted Soyinka to the original, is missing. You understand. And once the audience draw a line, they don't want to see it.

Balogun: So it means that there are even choices-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - specific choices about dramaturgy-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - about theatricality.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: And about every other element that comes together to form the play.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Otherwise we have a problem in terms of exactly what the play is meant to do.

Prof Yerima: Yeah.

Balogun: And what the performance itself is meant to do.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now who determines all of this?

Prof Yerima: The audience. They are the final consumer.

Balogun: mmm. But Prof in a situation where we have a play-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Let's take *Women of Owu* for instance.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Osofisan has reimagined the *Trojan Women*, set it in an ancient Owu environment.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now, the present people, the Owu people-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Are not really the one that the story happened to.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: So how do we draw up this correlation?

Prof Yerima: They draw a line. Some didn't even understand what the play was about.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: The play was over and above their heads. And because Osofisan, like I said, had tried to pull them into the play, they can't find themselves in the play. And so when I was writing my play on Obasanjo who is the great, present, contemporary warrior, the Balogun of Owu. And I asked him, where is Adubiadan in the history of Owu people, he couldn't get it. So what I did was to go to the three kings, the Owus documented all the kings of Owu and I took the wives. Since Olawunmi was the wife of the first king, I took another one and I called. I took another one and I called, and I took their wives, which the Owu people can relate to. Do you understand that sir? So they can relate to that because they will say: "okay, yes this is it". But when you *drag* a process of reimagination, and you *force* it into the culture of the people who have the original history there you have a problem. You have a problem because there is denial, there is that immediate-

Balogun: So in conceptualising and writing the play and directing it-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - you must find moments-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - that are relevant to the people's-

Prof Yerima: They are relevant to the people.

Balogun: - the people's experience.

Prof Yerima: Yes!

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: So, in my *The Trials of Ovonramwen* when they said, when the wives came in and they say "wara gbere", "e tota" and all the chiefs got up and turned their backs (*make sounds of hands clapping*) the people clapped (*continues clapping*). When the king came out for war and dressed up in costumes to the last beat (*clapping*). So they were clapping for the moments of recognition.

Balogun: mmm. So there has to be moments of recognition-

Prof Yerima: Moments of recognition.

Balogun: In imagined tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: In relation to the-

Prof Yerima: Yes, because-

Balogun: - the contemporary audience.

Prof Yerima: Yes! It's like a pair of glasses. You give me the best, Gucci pair of glasses, if they don't fit me and they don't serve their basic function of a pair of glasses (*laughs*) no matter how expensive, 500, 1000 pounds, one million pounds, but they don't fit me! (*laughs*). I can't use it and when I put them on my face, I have to keep putting the hand to hold them on, so they are useless, they are expensive, but they didn't work. They keep dropping down my nose, they forgot the nose of a Black man. It's firm. I need something that will grip me, grip me. And so once I look at the play and I cannot recognise and I cannot find, no matter how imagined, if I can't find myself there, I can't find my culture there, then I have a problem.

Balogun: So the adaptation must reflect-

Prof Yerima: It must reflect.

Balogun: - that the people-

Prof Yerima: It must.

Balogun: - in the audience for which-

Prof Yerima: It must.

Balogun: - it was intended.

Prof Yerima: In my very very humble point of view it must. And from my experience, because if it doesn't the people just draw a line. And say this is not for us. Or maybe the person is still experimenting...anyway it's an experimental play. And once they say that it means they've thrown it half way.

Balogun: *The Bacchae of Euripides* that you directed.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: What are some of these elements that you used-

Prof Yerima: And that's why I cheated, that's why I cheated. That's why I put it on an illusionary representation. I brought in smoke, I brought in all that so it's almost like a dream sequence. So you are the one taking a peep into this world. And therefore you know that it's a world coming from the Greeks and it's coming from Greece and it's coming into Nigeria and it wants to land in your consciousness.

Balogun: But your approach was different in *The Gods are Not to Blame*?

Prof Yerima: It was different in *The Gods are Not to Blame* because the script presented a different thing.

Balogun: And in *Women of Owu*?

Prof Yerima: And in *Women of Owu*, the *Women of Owu* was also definite. But what I now discovered was I could not recognise the people within this, the people could not recognise themselves in *Women of Owu*.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: Do you understand. It's beautiful, it's *Trojan Women* at its best in Nigerian attire, Nigerian characters, Nigerian this. But the aesthetics *overpowered* the historical consciousness of the people.

Balogun: The aesthetics of reimagining of-

Prof Yerima: Of reimagining of writing. Overpowered... it's a beautiful performance and Femi Osofisan is crazy there with lines. His poetry is fantastic. He goes into wonderful lines and stories and, you understand. But then it gives me three hours of a performance where the owners of the culture begin to say... "what is the meaning of the ones here?" And Soyinka brings in, in trying to merge the Greek, in trying to merge the Greek character of Ogun of Dionysius with Ogun, in trying to consciously find the similarities between the two Gods. Soyinka also makes it difficult for the director if you don't put it on an illusionary vision of trip of travel, you will be seen to be deliberately trying to force Ogun into the costume of Dionysus. You understand. So, because the story is strange. (*Laughs*) You understand. To the Yoruba culture, the Gods do not come to punish in that form.

Balogun: Prof. most reimagination of tragedy-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - you will find-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: are usually serious.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: And I realised that even in your directorial approach to Soyinka's *Bacchae* -

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - you tried to move towards that.

Prof Yerima: Yes

Balogun: Even *The Gods are Not to Blame*-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Although we have one or two point, where we-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Now the issue would be this-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Some people imagine that comic relief-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - doesn't really have a place in tragedy.

Prof Yerima: It does.

Balogun: How?

Prof Yerima: Because in Africa it does. Sometimes you find the most mundane and tragic thing would happen to a person and you will just be laughing. You understand, he will just be laughing. The different ways people handle tragic or tragedy, tragic moments or tragedy, is different. Again it can even be culturally specific. I just told you of how the women would handle it, and how in *Hendu* my woman, Wabiti, the daughter, killed by Fulani people, thinking that she was a Hausa. She was Hausa, a Birom who had married a Plateau man. And then her son who is, what's it called, he's killed again. She loses her three children and yet I am told that she must not cry. When I the playwright was

bleeding within. So, you find what I mean. And in... I don't want to say in Africa because it happens all over the world... but in Africa specifically death comes sometimes in the most interesting way.

Balogun: (*chuckles*) What do you mean interesting, funny?

Prof Yerima: Funny.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: You understand. Very funny. So he comes, (*puts on a hurried pacing in his voice to create a character*) "oh my wife if only I knew she was going to die I would not have allowed her to go to the market. She just kept saying she wanted to go to the market, (*makes woeful sighing sound in character*) and then she now said we didn't have palm oil at home, and we didn't have this at home, I didn't even know. I sat on the chair, watching T.V, he was not even looking at the programme I didn't know when I slept off and she carried the car, and from nowhere she said she wanted to stop and pick something when this bicycle just came, hit her- (*taking deep breathes in character*) she died." (*End of enactment*) You get the point. You are laughing as she is telling the story and you know, and before we knew it she was gone. And so the tragic element becomes a shock.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: But comedy must lead you towards the tragic element. The African man does not want you to keep narrating, he doesn't like the Epic system, the aspect of the Brecht theatre. Where the alienation technique of Brecht were he keeps saying this is the drama put on the lights, this is drama don't cry. Don't cry (*laughs*) it's drama. The African man wants to laugh. He wants to cry. He wants to feel. I remember when I was in a hundred level in school and we did the first production of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, and I was just a villager. And I sat close to the audience, you know Oduduwa Hall, it thrust into the audience it's like a thrust, a curved thrust into the audience. And these three women were seated, lecturers, wives of lecturers, professors, and they were saying (*putting on a softer voice*), "oh thank God I know my son, at least I know that my son will not sleep with me or kill his father. My son can never do that. Thank you father!" You understand. And I crossed the line of being the creator of illusion into to reality. And I started saying "oh thank God too I know my mother" (*Laughs*). You understand.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: And I think the process comes, in fact comedy, the comic moments *prepare* you for the *impact* of tragedy. Because it's the opposite. So when it hits you, you begin to say "Oh my God, ah look at me, stupid me I was laughing. So you mean..." Especially in the play where Ola Rotimi writes and he said... umm... "ah you know, you wanted me, why did I not stay, eh? Why did I not stay? You wanted me to kill my father and marry my mother?" (*laughs aloud*) He says: "Is that all? You mean not because you thought you'd kill your father and marry your mother, Ogundele your father and his wife Mobike. They are not your real parents." And the tragic moment starts and we've been laughing, come on see my friend and there's this song they sing (*sings a song*) and they meet they sing and we dance, but it does not prepare us for the tragic moment. You understand. And he says: "ah, Ojuola this is my best friend, we grew up together, this is Gbonka, and they go on and he says bring him pounded yam. Bring him palm wine, bring him palm wine" and he says "do you want to have your wash?" And all that is building up, and they are laughing, and you are welcoming, helping them to welcome their guest. Not knowing that that's the figure, the tragic figure, who's coming to shatter all the joy of happiness. You understand. And so I... and from that moment, he said "what did you say?" He said: "your father, you people you think I your father, your parents, I'm not your parents." You understand. And he says: "what happened, what happened?" He said: "let's leave it

alone.” He throws it away and the guy says “no!” His stubbornness now propels the tragic moment to happen. And it all comes to an end.

Balogun: So Prof. are you saying people are more sensitive to tragedy than to comedy?

Prof Yerima: Yeah. They are more sensitive to tragedy than comedy. They love comedy. We have so many stand-up comics now, who come up and talk and we laugh. But when it comes to a play we want to see a level of seriousness. We want to see the moments where the dagger of tragedy is thrust into our hearts. And we begin to feel the weight of the burden which this man is carrying. And he does not necessarily have to die. Odewale does not die in *The Gods are Not to Blame*. But the tragic essence is there. We feel it, we are sorry for him.

Balogun: So Prof.-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - if you are to direct any of these plays again-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - would you adopt the style that you directed them in previously?

Prof Yerima: I’m older now. That was 2003, 2005, and now we are looking at 2019. You know. So time has really gone. I can remember 14 years, 15 years ago. And so... gradually, a lot of things would change.

Balogun: Such as?

Prof Yerima: Such as one, the kind of actors I’ll be looking for. I’ll be bolder now because I would, I now have the technique of transferring more information to the actor. I’ll be bolder now because I will now even want the actors to show me what they have. And how I can rework them. I’ll be bolder now because my society has gone from a very umm... secured society to an insecure society. So the elements that I have to highlight in those plays would be more. You understand. Now there are deaths everywhere, there is xenophobia in South Africa, there is this, there is that... in what’s it... in Vietnam, or Taiwan, there’s so much- America is even going crazy. So there is so much craziness. So now you want to relate these plays to the audience who are experiencing this. In my country, the Niger Delta are quarrelling, the Boko Haram are fighting, the Chibok girls are being kidnapped, you know, so many things are happening. Ritual. And so you begin to tell yourself, what is the place of Ogun in all of this? How do I now show this? If Ogun is angry with just a woman who refused to worship her, in the Bacchae, how does that relate to the whole country? Is a woman a representation of the country? Do you understand? Why is Ogun wasting his time with one woman, when he should be angry with the leaders? Do you get the point sir.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: And so I would totally redefine that and then look at Odewale and then say okay, the man, the Gods have even... they are dead. They are not as powerful all those- and now the Yorubas have a system of counter and counter points of curses. This boy shall kill his father and another God. And another babalawo, an Ifa priest, a priest. And he will tell you, okay, yes he will kill his father and marry his mother but we need to do certain things. Kill a cow, kill a donkey and we shift it to something else.

Balogun: Now Prof. you mentioned Boko Haram you mentioned all of those things-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Place in Nigeria-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - just like in some other country-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: There's all sorts of moments, tragic moments-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Tragedies, The Boko Haram is there, the Fulani, killing Nigerians, kidnapping them. I just returned from South Africa and in two weeks a number of young people have been killed, raped, murdered, and ... umm... How much do you think these Greek tragedies that we are reimagining, how can they contribute to understanding, first and foremost, this present tragic reality that is sweeping through the whole of the African continent. And then, to what extent can they help us to... come to an understanding of how to deal with these tragedies?

Prof Yerima: I think the first thing is that the Nigerian writers or the African writers, must begin to look at other Greek plays that have thematic relevance to what is going on in Nigeria. The period of looking at the *Anger of the Gods*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Aphrodite the Goddess of Love*, all those things have gone.

Balogun: mmm. And which of these Greek tragedies would you suggest, Antigone has-

Prof Yerima: Antigone has been going on for long but we've gone beyond that.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Yerima: The problems are, you know, have gone... my favourite play is... umm... *Prometheus Bound*. But it's gone beyond the love of a stepmother for her handsome son who does not... our problems are gone beyond that. We've gone beyond don't bury your brother, it's against the rule. Don't bury, you know, - we've gone beyond Ogun, Dionysus The God of Wine, we've gone beyond that. We've gone beyond *The Gods are Not to Blame* or Sophocles, even though Aristotle says it's the best play of the Greeks. We've gone beyond that. So maybe even the Greek Gods are dead. The Greek plays are dead. Maybe we should leave them alone. Maybe now the playwrights should now begin to look at the problems themselves, and begin to write these plays. And if we cannot find, if we must look at the project like, your project, if we must look at plays that are relevant within the Greek project, then we must look far away. We must go beyond Euripides and Aeschylus and Sophocles. And look at Seneca² and maybe we'll find in Seneca some of his plays that are relevant now. Maybe *The Frogs*, maybe because they were ridicules they were satires. And look at how we can ridicule the society. You understand.

Balogun: Ridicule in order to-

Prof Yerima: In order to, yes. No maybe...

Balogun: sanitise the society?

Prof Yerima: Maybe the tragedy we are looking for is not the tragedy... it's a mass tragedy now. You know in fact this morning I told my driver, if the world is going to come to an end, let it come to an end, sudden. Like what happened with Noah's Ark.

Balogun: (Laughs)

Prof Yerima: (Laughs) You understand. Because I don't like this slow death, where life has no meaning, the meaninglessness of life. And you find that plays like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is beginning to become relevant again. Where nothing comes out of nothingness. Where life has no meaning, you understand. Maybe those are the kinds of plays we should now be looking at. Maybe we should bring back Ionesco, *The Chairs*, where a man just sits, stands, talking and preparing the party for an empty chair. Because when we are dying and killing ourselves, where life has no meaning and man is doing the deductions in the mist of new machines, new- that should prolong life. Maybe, maybe... You travel today from Lagos to Ife you spend the whole day traveling, just because some

² Lucius Annaeus Seneca

people neglected to do what the right thing they should do. I used my car, with brand new tyres, when I started working at Ife and half way through I bought new tyres, all four at the same time. So the money I should have saved, I have spent because the roads are bad. Maybe even things we are looking at are not in the... maybe even the whole issue of Greek tragedy is now a frivolity. Maybe! Because of the seriousness of our reality, social-political seriousness. Even everyday seriousness. Maybe worships is not and maybe that's why the African himself is a God of – multiple Gods, is a worship of multiple Gods. Trying to find answers. Maybe that's why we preach prosperity, prosperity in our churches. Because we are looking for immediate answers. We don't want to work, we don't want... you understand. So maybe the plays we are looking for now are beyond those Greek tragic plays. Maybe.

Balogun: Or we move from them.

Prof Yerima: Or we move from them and move away and come closer. Or look at areas where- because tragedy... nobody wants to see that. We can't make sense of tragedy because there is so much tragic moments around us. So the essence of a tragic play: to take you into it, to see the frailties of man, the failures of man, the peripeteia. We do not have that kind of time any more, we do not have that kind of a... process of waiting and trying to find sense in such things any more. Maybe, and that becomes what pulls man from one angle to the other. You understand.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Yerima: You know. And that is the reason why man himself must begin to find answers for himself. And what I'm saying, I'm not saying that the Greeks plays are non-meaningful, I'm saying that maybe we should expand the search for plays now. Maybe we have run out of the plays that look at... we have run out of romanticism. We have run out of romantic essence or romantic elements in man, maybe aesthetics, maybe Plato is right. Maybe we should go back to play to Plato's statement that the plays must be organic like the society, the Republic. Because the issues of Republic are organic. Issues of existence is organic. So now we can no longer be seen to be looking at plays that deal with just... umm... Gods getting angry, going beyond even Othello, one angry Black man is who is full of temper. Maybe Shakespeare is dead.

Balogun: (*Laughs*)

Prof Yerima: You understand. Maybe we should go to Friedrich Nietzsche who talks of the death of tragedy and says the Gods are dead, long live man. Maybe man has started taking over his environment. And does not want the Gods around him. Maybe man is God. You get the point. And that is why I'm rethinking the whole concept of the protagonist. And I'm saying that the protagonist may not be as sentimental as we think he is. You understand. Maybe he's not that kind of, that kind of God that we are looking at. Maybe man, man, has deified himself.

Balogun: Yeah, there are so many maybes, so many maybes, so many maybes. And at any rate that I want to believe is part of the project of what we are doing.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: To raise questions, to raise new questions and to try and find some new answers to some of these new questions. And to try to redefine, the way we've received the meaning of tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: And the way... events in our own present society-

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: - are helping us to have such a rethink in order for us to be able to kind of come up with new concept, new idea about tragedy, tragic element, tragic concept and a whole lot of ideas about the reimagination of tragedy.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: Thank you so very much Professor Ahmed Yerima.

Prof Yerima: Thank you very much.

Balogun: It's really very late.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun: We are having this interview...

Prof Yerima: *(Laughs)*

Balogun: Wow, and this is a few minutes to midnight.

Prof Yerima: Wow.

Balogun: And we've been doing this for...

Prof Yerima: *(Laughs)*

Balogun: ... for nearly two hours.

Prof Yerima: Yes.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder