

Interview

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O. Balogun: Okay I'm here with Balogun Abdulwali Abiola. Let's talk about the tragedy that you directed, the adaptation of *Othello*. Now let's look at it, you were part of *The Gods are Not to Blame*, another tragedy. Is there any similarity between the adaptation of that classic tragic play and the one by Shakespeare that you directed?

A. Balogun: The funny thing is the tragedy in *The Gods are Not to Blame* which came as a result of fate. Which we all know you cannot eschew it no matter how far you run. But the same thing happened in *Otaelo*, who one way or the other by accident was placed with this stigmatisation of being called an outcast. So at some point he was able to rewrite the story, but in rewriting the story he went back to the beginning.

O. Balogun: What do you mean by that?

A. Balogun: He had the chance to clear his name as an Osu. Osu in the eastern part of Nigeria, in the Igbo system. He was able to clear it by injecting that noble blood into his system. But at some point pride set in and, as a matter of fact, he was respected by almost everybody in Umuagu. So while he was enjoying the bounty of what he has achieved, he backslided. One, breaking rules, making the ego go against the law and custom of the land and also proclaiming himself as being superior to the God, Ala. But what Odewale did in *The Gods are Not to Blame*, was the fact that he tried to run away from destiny but by running away from destiny he met destiny.

O. Balogun: But then there is always something about this kind of tragedy, even if you say in Odewale's case that it was his *tragic*... his tragic end so to speak, was the result of what has been designed for him.

A. Balogun: mmm (*in agreement*).

O. Balogun: Whereas in Otaelo's case it was, you know, the fault that he commits. But if you look at it isn't that a kind of a statement about the way we conceptualise tragedy. I mean in this part of the world, is that supposed to be a statement of how we conceive tragedy?

A. Balogun: Most times in African oral tradition, they believe that something must prepare an action to happen. That is, there must be an action before a reaction which will lead to an interaction. So in that case there is no how something can be called a tragedy or a play can be described as a tragic play without having a remote cause.

O. Balogun: That's your own definition of it?

O. Balogun: Okay now let's go to the process of staging the play, let's look at the directorial choices. I noticed that that play is set in a traditional environment but you didn't totally present it like that. Can you give us an insight into the process, the directorial process?

A. Balogun: I decided to adapt *Otaelo* written by Ahmed Yerima into this post-modern period.

O. Balogun: What do you mean by that?

A. Balogun: Like moving it away from the period it was set in, bringing it to the 2019 period, whereby we can have a fusion of trado- modern setting. Whereby the fact that it is a modern play does not take the play away from its original setting.

O. Balogun: Which is the traditional-

A. Balogun: The traditional setting which is the Igbo tribe. But bringing it in a way that some of the characters can mention some things that are applicable in this period. Because at some point in the play one of the characters mentioned that somebody sent something to her on Whatsapp, which normally it was not part of what the playwright was talking about. And at some point too you will hear one of the characters, in person of Agbo saying that Amadioha is a sly God that he can dribble more than say Ronaldo and Messi. So all of these "adlibs" were able to come to play as a result of the adaptation. And then it was also intentional so as to bring this generation of people, audience, to really fit into the play. They can *relate* to it. So we have two, we divided the audience into two. The younger generation seeing what they know, to learn what they don't know. And the older generation see what they know and still fitting into this present generation. So that was the intention of the adaptation.

O. Balogun: Okay, so what are those, there are some other physical choices, you know, symbolisms that you use to... Can you talk about some of these?

A. Balogun: If you look at the architectural ingenuity because as at that time the kind of structures we used onstage, they were not present at that time which was also a way to show that this is... this time where architecture science and technology has really improved. We saw in a situation whereby, if by chance we didn't have some of these technical issues, the set would have made more sense than that. And then the edifice we are trying to represent onstage would have been very visible. Whereby we represented the Igwe's palace to be down stairs whereby we have his own abode. Upstairs he has other chambers.

O. Balogun: More like a duplex so to speak?

A. Balogun: Yes.

O. Balogun: Okay and the set was meant to do what specifically?

A. Balogun: Was meant to divide the scenes, whereby we have a case of Otaelo's house, we gave him his own structure. One of the chiefs in person of Ogbuefi Ezeugo, we gave him his own structure too. So you as a member of the audience, once you come in the partition is already clear. The Igwe's palace and his chambers are downstairs and then Agbo who is the War General is also supposed to be living in the palace. So we wanted to put his own house on one part by the balustrade but unfortunately it was not balanced.

O. Balogun: Then I noticed that you used a whole lot of heavy music, the fusion of you know, modern, European, music instrument: the guitar, the drum set, the piano, the sax, even the violin.

A. Balogun: mmm.

O. Balogun: Along with African drums like the gong, the talking drum. What was this meant to do, like this fusion of the contemporary-

A. Balogun: Since it is an ensemble I decided to Westernise the play. Without removing the traditional instruments. And so to speak, if you look at it: violin, viola and flute, they have this way of piercing through any wall. So in that light we were able to use, let's say at some point, we had the *ekwe* playing alongside the violin, which is a real mash-up. And the *ekwe* is to put-

O. Balogun: What is the *ekwe*?

A. Balogun: *Ekwe*, the slit drum.

O. Balogun: Okay.

A. Balogun: The slit drum. But they didn't play it like the *ekwe*, it was on loop, we already recorded it. So once you strike the loop, it plays as if you are playing the *ekwe*. And that is to create, because the *ekwe* is particular to the Igbo tradition. So once you hear it, it still-

O. Balogun: Okay, so in terms of the ensemble, the musical ensemble, the *ekwe* is meant to give us the sense of the traditional setting of the Igbo-

A. Balogun: That we are dealing with.

O. Balogun: Whereas your-

A. Balogun: Violin-

O. Balogun: Yeah was your own way of adapting it into contemporary time. Wow that's really brilliant.

O. Balogun: And then what about the music, how did you compose the music or it was derived from some sources, or whatever. How did you do it?

A. Balogun: The funny thing was that the person that I talked to about some of these songs, she is also a student.

O. Balogun: Okay.

A. Balogun: She is a student of the department.¹

O. Balogun: Okay.

A. Balogun: So in that light, she is rooted in the Igbo tradition.

O. Balogun: Okay.

A. Balogun: She-

O. Balogun: Okay so you actually got somebody that is really rooted in the tradition, irrespective of whether the person was a student. But just you are more interested in the knowledge that the person possess.

A. Balogun: Yes and she was able to look at the words that would suit the particular scene we want to use it for. So this is not a case of, I know one song from my secondary school. So it was not garbage in, garbage out. She composed the song for each scene.

O. Balogun: How about adlibbings, you know, I know most of your cast was likely made up of people-

A. Balogun: Yorubas.

O. Balogun: - Yoruba. But then the believability was there in terms of the way they were able to use-

¹ Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria.

A. Balogun: Igbo adlibs.

O. Balogun: So how did you do that?

A. Balogun: We had a session for the actors. So when we did the interpretation of each role and then these are the things you are supposed to say, so we also made them say it in English.

O. Balogun: mmm.

A. Balogun: For the sake of some of our audience that will not understand what they are saying in Igbo. So somebody like Otaelo now, we were able to discover that Otaelo means 'One who chews and swallows'. So instead of just saying Otaelo, we say "I am Otaelo, one who chews and swallows". So when you hear the word Otaelo, you know that is the meaning. So we creatively looked for a way to say the Igbo language and still say it in English without you knowing that we are interpreting it.

O. Balogun: mmm.

A. Balogun: So they just flow like that. So that it doesn't look like the pastor and the interpreter.

O. Balogun: That's interesting. So how would you describe this use of language to the tragedy that was dramatised?

A. Balogun: Just like I know in tragedy, it is said that the language of tragedy is always elevated. And almost poetic in nature. So if you look at the choice of words, they sound almost like riddles. Some of them they are even proverbial in nature. Whereby you need somebody that is, umm... let me say creatively inclined to understand the meaning of these proverbs. But by so doing to we also look for a way to make sure that this generation too that are not really used to saying proverbs, they can also understand it by making the proverbs as simple as they can be. But still glossy, poetic and elevated as it is still supposed to be.

O. Balogun: Let's now look at something else. I know the Osu practise² that the play is about is still ongoing, and what that was meant to do. To what the play was meant to do is to engage the Osu as a very terrible practise. Now in your own way, the way you directed the play, how are you able to give punch to that kind of opinion that the play was meant to dramatised in terms of the tragedy?

A. Balogun: I am happy with the fact that we didn't just create the problem. We also looked for a way to propose a solution but the solution is not for us to propel. It's just for us to say, if this is ongoing, if you can try this. Whereby the marginalisation I feel it is almost intentional. From the Igbo system of marginalising the Osu people. One, the way Ahmed Yerima presented Otaelo in the play it was not his fault. Even in one of his monologues he said it that, it is not his fault that in trying to obey the nature of birth, and passing through the passage of life, he offended the earth.

O. Balogun: mmm... saying literally that why would he be discriminated against because somebody gave birth to him-

A. Balogun: To him. Which is not his fault.

O. Balogun: - he didn't choose his parent. That's a very strong one. So it means that, while we look at the tragedy... that play...what it is trying to say to us specifically is the environment where discrimination or form of maybe xenophobia for instance, was taking place. And the violence associated with it as well as the tragedy that actually pertain to the society.

O. Balogun: But if you look at that play very well, let's come back to your directorial choices again. Another thing you noticed there is, your use of colour. Can you, I mean, give us an insight into, you know, exactly why you thought colour was significant to what you do?

A. Balogun: Okay talking in...

² Osu caste system among the Igbo encourages marginalisation and ostracism of those so designated.

O. Balogun: The costume for instance-

A. Balogun: Yeah, I'm going to even break them into sessions.

O. Balogun: Alright.

A. Balogun: So for the costume we will see that Otaelo... his own was red.

O. Balogun: Why is this like that?

A. Balogun: He tends to be, that is the highest form of elevation.

O. Balogun: mmm.

A. Balogun: Because it is an adaptation and then colour to us we were able to also rebrand the meaning of colours according to how we want the audience to see it. So in this sense the colour red took more value than the gold that Agbo was wearing.

O. Balogun: Gold was meant to be what?

A. Balogun: The gold is a little bit lesser than the colour red. Which means that in their own battalion...

O. Balogun: That's in the Igbo tradition, or whatever?

A. Balogun: So in their own battalion they have a way of showing the hierarchy. And if you look at Ichiagu, who is Otaelo's boy, he had green. And green to them means something that is living, that is just growing, that is coming up. So we were able to use these three major colours. And then if you look at the chiefs normally the red-cap chiefs all of them are in red. And then we see the most senior of all the chiefs in person of Ogbuefi Ezeugo, he had feathers to show-

O. Balogun: In his cap?

A. Balogun: Yes. To show that level of-

O. Balogun: The seniority.

A. Balogun: Yes.

O. Balogun: And the rank.

A. Balogun: Yes and then other chiefs, some were holding walking stick as a result of old age but the walking stick had nothing to do with superiority. So the feather, the red cap and then you have some sections of the Igbo too. Which is the Umu-Okparas, those ones wear the *okoro*, the multi-coloured red, black and white cap. So they have a way of using colours to know that this is a particular set of people, this is a particular set of people and then the partition-

O. Balogun: Okay so that aspect of the costume that some of those actors wore were you just trying to give us an insight into the Igbo culture in which it was set.

A. Balogun: Yes.

O. Balogun: But then the gold and red for the soldiers was your own creation-

A. Balogun: Yes.

O. Balogun: - just to distinguish one soldier from the other.

A. Balogun: From the other.

O. Balogun: That's really good. And then the props, we noticed that the Igwe had something maybe a small-

A. Balogun: It's called the *ofor*.

O. Balogun: The *ofor*. So what's that supposed to be?

A. Balogun: The *ofor* is like the insignia of office. So when the Igwe is with it, he has this immunity whereby nobody can talk to him anyhow. Whatever he says at that time is law. But when he is without his *ofor* he is just like a normal man in the Igbo system. And then the Igbo tradition, they believe in "kings-ship" and not kingship because-

O. Balogun: What do you mean by that?

A. Balogun: They operate on this system of government called Egalitarianism. They believe that all man is equal and then they use acephalous system of government, head-less. So they make sure that the Igwe listens to the people to even make some decisions. So with his *ofor* they believe that at that time that he is making decision he's in his right frame of mind to say whatever he feels is right. And then if you look at the background too, you see one *ofor* so that one is made from the elephant tusk. He wanted to get two but (*chuckles*) it was pretty expensive-

O. Balogun: Now you said something about when the Igwe holds his *ofor* it is assumed that he is in the right frame of mind. But then, the tragedy that the play dramatises, the people believe that the Igwe's pronouncement of some kind of elevation for the Osu whom the society disparages, is the result of the fact that he's out of sense (*chortles*). How do you now reconcile that?

A. Balogun: (*laughs*) The problem was that the Igwe banked on the fact that he had this *ofor* to himself, so he feels that if he can- because there is always an exception to everything. So at that time, by making that pronouncement for Otaelo's elevation, he believed that that thing was blasphemy. So he shouldn't have done that, even with...

O. Balogun: That's the challenge, that's the challenge and one of the tragic situations that the play tried to highlight. In terms of the social perception about what is right-

A. Balogun: And what is wrong.

O. Balogun: - and what is wrong. What is ideal and what is... Now it's a bit of a thing because now isn't that... a statement on its own about tragedy. When we have to grapple with what is right in relation to what the society wants. Let's look at it. The Igwe feels compelled to honour the Otaelo because-

A. Balogun: Because he helped him.

O. Balogun: - because he helped him and because by even helping he helped the entire society. But this same society has already condemned the Otaelo as an outcast. Now let's look at that... is this not an aspect of the tragedy of the society where, let's use a country for instance. Where a country believes in something and an individual in that same country believes in something else.

A. Balogun: That has to do with matter of choice. Because I feel the Igwe apart from the fact that he's feeling some sense of being indebted to Otaelo for saving his life, he also loved his heart, that this person is not just doing this thing because he wanted something. He had to put his life on the line just to save me without expecting anything in return. And if we look at it, if we look at the play very well, Otaelo did not say that "Igwe give me something." Igwe was the one that said that ask me for whatever you want. And in order for Otaelo to move, he was not even speaking for himself. He was also speaking for the entire Osu setting. That if I can leave this setting of being an outcast then every other person can too. So he was like all for one, one for all.

O. Balogun: But then that's even the problem, while the Igwe tries you know, his project of rehabilitating the Osu is considered as a sin against the community. Now... the tragedy here that is dramatised in that adaptation is the fact of a society glorifying the wrong ideal. Is that supposed to be a statement about the world in which we live in?

A. Balogun: Hmm (*chortles*). The funny thing is that, I can even use the music industry to buttress this point.

O. Balogun: Okay.

A. Balogun: We see people that, that their songs are didactic in nature. Where they check their followers on Instagram, they don't have more than 200 followers. But when you see people that are talking about things that are like phallic element, things that are not even moving the society-

O. Balogun: obscene, dirty-

A. Balogun: - you see 4 million followers.

O. Balogun: mmm.

A. Balogun: And it is heart-wrenching that people that try to do the wrong thing they are celebrated. And people that try and do the right thing they are condemned. So *Otaelo* is compelled as a result of his birth. He tried to do something right for the first time and he was condemned because of his background.

O. Balogun: So the society does not even value that heroic-

A. Balogun: No.

O. Balogun: - you know, it's like... it is difficult to even determine what is valuable.

A. Balogun: mmm.

O. Balogun: Is that supposed to be (*chuckles*) another form of tragedy in the environment of today?

A. Balogun: It is always tragic because the kind of environment we live in tragedy just match up on other tragedies. In the sense that, if you look at politics, a man that stays in an area, on getting to that area he sees that there is no water. He tries to look for a way to put borehole in that area. People will start enjoying his benevolent act. One person, there is always *that* person that will just cause that public distress. He will just say "this person is an Igbo man, why would he be the one fending for Yoruba people?"

O. Balogun: mmm.

A. Balogun: Or there will just be...if it is a Yoruba man that is doing that. They will always be one person as a result of his background, either his tribe, his religion. Some can even say "this man is a Muslim. Why would he be feeding Christians? Hope he's not using our destiny". There is always this traditional inclination in every interpretation we give to everything. So, which means that it is very difficult to understand value even when it is placed on our laps. Because one, the sentiment from everywhere, religion, tribe. And even the things that are demanded by the society because our society is even now certificate conscious. So if you cannot meet up to some academic levels, there are some things you will say nobody will glorify you for it.

O. Balogun: They would not even listen to it.

A. Balogun: So the tragedy is just there in every step we take in our lives.

O. Balogun: So you think a play like *Otaelo*, a play like *The Gods are Not to Blame*, is actually dramatising the fact that society itself is tragically composed?

A. Balogun: mmm (*in agreement*).

O. Balogun: mmm. And then that tragedy has actually become-

A. Balogun: A part of us.

O. Balogun: - yeah, a norm so to speak. Wow that's an interesting submission.

O. Balogun: Thank you very much for this interview.

A. Balogun: Thanks sir.

O. Balogun turns off the audio recorder