

Edited Interview

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Batzofin:

Okay, I am honoured today to be interviewing Dr Awo Mana Asiedu, a Senior Lecturer in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana. Welcome Awo to today's interview.

Asiedu:

Thank you very much, Jayne. Thank you.

Batzofin:

I was hoping to get us going that you could introduce yourself to us so we know a bit more about your background and context.

Asiedu:

Okay, sure. So my name is Awo Mana Asiedu as you've already said and I teach at the University of Ghana, the theatre arts department, at the School of Performing Arts, and I've been doing that for quite a long time now (*laughs*). I teach courses mainly in African theatre and performance. I consider myself as a theatre historian. I do more theory and history courses than practical courses. Yeah, so that's it really.

Batzofin:

Thank you so much. I like how you say that's it but there's already a lot within that.

Asiedu:

Okay, great.

Batzofin:

I would like us to get going because the RETAGS project is all about and looking at the use of tragedy, especially on the African continent. I'd like to start with getting a notion of what do you consider to be tragedy?

Asiedu:

Okay. Well, like many African students we studied tragedy through the Greek eyes. So we learn

about tragedy through the definitions that are given by Aristotle. So that's how we started off thinking of tragedy as some grand tale about a noble person who has a tragic flaw and things like that. And then you get to Arthur Miller and you get to learn about the tragedy of the common man and things like that. But I guess for me, tragedy would be a tale that inspires a great deal of sadness and pity. Well, going back to Aristotle, aren't I? (*laughs*) But a story that is profound, in many ways, a story that really deals with the realities of human life, the realities of human pain and human struggle. Yeah, I think that that would be it for me really. And it doesn't have to be about any noble person. It can be about any ordinary person.

Batzofin:

Ah okay, and then taking that notion of the tragedy as we understand it for theatre and for Classical Studies, what do you understand by the concept of the tragic?

Asiedu:

Well, the tragic as in everyday life, I guess out of the context of theatre and drama, you mean?

Batzofin:

Yes.

Asiedu:

Okay. It's difficult to say without reference to things that happen around us, things that...I think we all recognise what is tragic when we see it, something that perhaps could have been prevented but wasn't. Something that results in the loss of life or a loss of quality of life. Because we talk about an accident for example, a road accident as being tragic when there's a loss of life. Or we talk about somebody's life being snuffed out through illness, like the current pandemic, I'm sure we would describe it as tragic. There's so many loss of lives. Yeah, I think we all would recognise the tragic when we see it, you know, something that would make us fearful and sad. Yes.

Batzofin:

Would you say that the tragic is quite commonplace in your Ghanaian context?

Asiedu:

Yes, definitely. Tragic things happen all the time. I think in terms of the everyday life, that's what you mean, right?

Batzofin:

Absolutely.

Asiedu:

Or in terms of theatre? I guess we have to be going between the two (*laughs*) as theatre really is a reflection of life.

Batzofin:

Exactly.

Asiedu:

I think tragedy is part of life. The tragic is part of life. And so definitely within the Ghanaian context, we do have that, yes.

Batzofin:

Reflecting on the everyday tragedies that are experienced in Ghana; I must say, tragedy is a very commonplace theme and experience in the everyday in South Africa. And I think this makes the research really interesting in regards to the understanding of why do you think it is that we are still studying the tragic or tragedy on the African continent?

Asiedu:

Research often looks at phenomenon in life, I guess so. And since tragedy didn't end with a certain era, and is still with us, I think it makes sense that we'll continue to study it. Maybe what is interesting is studying it as a feature of theatre and performance. And I guess we, I don't recall- I should have read about the research and how tragedy has been defined. But there's this interesting notion about how tragedy works on the stage in Ghana for example, like when tragic scenes are performed. Ghanaian audiences they say, would laugh, rather than be moved to tears and I often say it's not necessarily the case; that laughter may be out of discomfort or out of the fact that people want to have fun when they go to the theatres. So no matter what you put before them, they're going to find something funny to laugh about. Or else it could be because, from my experience anyway, sometimes the portrayal of the tragic is such that it becomes comical because of poor acting or poor delivery or whatever it is. I'm running ahead of myself, but all these things would make for interesting study, I guess.

Batzofin:

Absolutely. And I think that's interesting, especially on the reflection of comedy and humour, and maybe actors playing up to the humour 'cause they don't trust that audiences can take the gravity of the tragedy, or that they would prefer um in the moment to be more light.

Batzofin:

But this, this, also makes me think, do you think there is such a notion, Awo, as the concept of an African tragedy for the stage?

Asiedu:

For the stage?

Batzofin:

Mm hmm.

Asiedu:

There could be an African representation of tragedy. But I think tragedy is universal. Though, if it's an African tragedy, are we saying that that experience is exclusively African or are we looking at an African rendition of a tragic incidence? I don't know if that makes sense. So when we say African tragedy, what do we mean? I mean, is it an African play that is representing something tragic? Or that is presenting a tragic moment? I don't know. Do you see what I mean?

Batzofin:

I do. I do see what you mean. And I think it's also interesting because, is there such a thing as an African tragedy that can be a theatrical form that can sit outside of an Aristotelian model?

Asiedu:

Okay. Yes. If that's what we mean, then we are looking at a *form* that is African. But I don't think that's necessary, I mean, that's my point of view (*laughs*).

Batzofin:

What makes you believe that it's not necessary?

Asiedu:

It's like feeling a need to have a parallel system that is African or creating something new... *that* is what I don't think is necessary. (*Laughs*) I don't know if I'm expressing this right.

Batzofin:

So potentially the idea is that the form of tragedy, even though Aristotelian and European at its core, still reflects and has meaning to audiences in different contexts. It doesn't have to be entirely reappropriated and stuff and like created in a new form for it to hold context and meaning?

Asiedu:

I guess that's one way of looking at it. But I feel that the Aristotelian version of tragedy has already been revised over time, and looking at, for example, Arthur Miller's idea of the tragedy of the common man looking at *Death of a Salesman* and...

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

... and others that have come after that. And so maybe we could look at some. I haven't thought about it fully before, but perhaps might be interesting would be to look at some African plays that present the tragic and try and see if you can identify a certain form that may emerge. But I haven't done that.

Batzofin:

That is why we're starting to partake in this research so we can have a better understanding of what kinds of forms tragedy is taking on the African continent.

Asiedu:

Within the context, yes. Definitely. Because if I were to use a familiar text like Athol Fugard's play, I've never thought of it in these terms, but if I were to look at some of his plays that dealt with apartheid for example, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Could we consider those as tragic plays? (*Laughs*) I don't know. Do you see what I mean?

Batzofin:

Yeah.

Asiedu:

Or if we looked at Wole Soyinka's, *Death and the Kings Horseman*, for example, would we consider that as a tragic play in the African context? I mean, all of these plays deal with tragic incidents. So maybe the question we're asking is, what is it that makes a play tragic? Outside of the Aristotelian definitions of tragedy.

Batzofin:

And what do you think makes a play tragic outside of those definitions?

Asiedu:

I think I have to go back to what we all recognise as tragedy what we all recognise as *the* tragic

in life.

Batzofin:

I'm also interested in the notion of myth in tragedy. Because that comes up a lot, right? And I think we can look at the production that was done in 2007. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*.

Asiedu:

... *the Nightingale*, yeah.

Batzofin:

Yeah. Which is based on a Greek myth¹.

Asiedu:

It is, yes.

Batzofin:

Yeah, correct. So do you know why this play was chosen to be staged at the University of Ghana?

Asiedu:

It was staged by two of my colleagues². And I think they were essentially interested in the issue of rape. Issue of women being taken advantage of. If I remember correctly, I think they were interested in those issues and Ekua studied in the UK, and I guess she probably came across this text and probably liked it and wanted to explore it with her students in directing. So, all of those things might have influenced their choice of the play. And I must say that it is quite a powerful play and it worked very well on our Ghanaian stage.

Batzofin:

When you say it worked very well. Do you mean in terms of a performance? Do you think it was also how it was received by the audience?

Asiedu:

Both, I would say in terms of performance, it was quite a difficult play for our students to interpret and to realise, and I think it took a lot of hard work on the part of the directors to actually realise it. But I think that it was also very well received actually. Unfortunately, we don't have any written reviews that I'm aware of, of the production, which is not unusual (*laughs*) in our context. We need to do a lot better in this area.

Batzofin:

Because that's also an interesting point. I was looking up about the production on Wikipedia. And I've seen other adaptations mentioned on it, but this one was not.

Asiedu:

Was not, yeah.

Batzofin:

Yeah. And just the lack of information about stagings of productions in Africa, are just very hard to come by on open access platforms.

¹ The Myth of Philomela.

² Referring to Dr. Ekua Ekuamah and Dr. Sarah Dorgbadzi

Asiedu:

Indeed yeah. I think we need to, how do they say it? "up our game" in that area (laughs)...

Batzofin:

(laughs)

Asiedu:

... in terms of documenting and reviewing our productions. I think that's an area in which we need to work a bit harder on in these parts. I remember when I was doing my own PhD research in 2000s, thereabouts, it was very difficult getting information on productions that have been done by our School. The best you'd get perhaps would be the programme notes for the production. So that's an area that needs to be worked on. Definitely.

Batzofin:

So coming back to this production, your involvement is you were performing the character of Niobe.

Asiedu:

Yes. Actually, my colleagues managed to get me on stage after a long time (laughs).

Batzofin:

And how was it to perform?

Asiedu:

It was interesting 'cause I think she represented everything that I'm not (laughs). In a sense, that she kind of accepted the inevitability of women being taken advantage of by men. And she was a bit matter of fact about it. And for me, that was a bit problematic, but I had to present that role 'cause that's what she really stood for, in a certain sense. It was quite a challenging role, actually. And in the end, I thoroughly enjoyed playing the role (chuckles) in the end.

Batzofin:

But do you think there are women who in Ghana who do potentially hold that view? I mean, we know there are atrocities done against women and young women throughout Africa. But do you think there are women who do believe that culturally that is appropriate or okay?

Asiedu:

Unfortunately, I have to say yes. I think there are a lot of Niobes in Ghana, and that is perhaps because they've come to the point of feeling powerless themselves. It's like there's nothing that you can do about this. This is what happens, and you just have to accept it. And so there are women like that. And I think it's just sad that they are accepting of their position of powerlessness. And so that's why they need to be empowered, it becomes necessary, there is need to educate and let people know that there you can have a voice and you can resist oppression you don't have to accept it. Interestingly, I have read studies on rape and abuse of women, which have shown that some women even think that it's a sign that their husbands love them when they beat them up. It's really bizarre. I think it's bizarre, but I've heard people say that, and it doesn't make any sense to me, seriously.

Batzofin:

Yeah. And in a way it becomes its own myth, right? It's this myth of the woman who deserves this kind of treatment. I want to ask in terms of the staging of the production, was there any

adaptation to the text to make it more, I don't know how to say-

Asiedu:

Ghanaian?

Batzofin:

- speak to the Ghanaian context more because I note Niobe is still the same name that was used in the original text.

Asiedu:

I don't think there was any conscious adaptation. I should have checked with the directors but looking back, I think it was the same script that Wertebaker had written. And that is not uncommon really. We do a lot of European plays without adapting them to the Ghanaian context.

Batzofin:

Why do you think that is?

Asiedu:

I think there are some things that just translate without needing to be translated (*laughs*). If that makes any sense?

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

Unless there's some political reason or some interpretation that would be best if adapted, but I think most of the time we do a lot of plays without adapting because they translate easily into our context somehow. Maybe because of the issues that they deal with. I'm thinking we've done lots of European plays in this school, like there's a Czech Republic play called *R.U.R.*³, I don't know if you've heard about it?

Batzofin:

No.

Asiedu:

About robots and stuff, I can't remember it very clearly but that (*laughs*) was done without any adaptation. We've done Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* in Ghana without any adaptation. *The Crucible*, a lot of Shakespeare and recently my colleagues, who did Wertebaker, also translated- did Lara Foots... what is it called? Something about the moose.

Batzofin:

Oh, *Karoo Moose*.

Asiedu:

Karoo Moose. They did that without much adaptation, I think.

Batzofin:

And when we talk about adaptation I guess in this context, we're talking about a textual- a text

³ *R.U.R.* premiered in 1921. A science fiction play by the Czech writer Karel Čapek. R.U.R. stands for Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti (Rossum's Universal Robots). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.U.R.> accessed 2020-08-15.

adaptation, but what about, for example Awo, about the visual adaptation... such as adapting the clothing so it's more familiar to a Ghanaian context or adapting the music? Or do you think the look also represents a more Euro/American centric aesthetic?

Asiedu:

In fact, the Wertebaker's text they tried to represent it with the costumes that Wertebaker would have suggested or the text would have suggested.

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

I can't remember it clearly but it certainly wasn't Ghanaian costumes. There was no attempt to make it into a Ghanaian context with Ghanaian costumes and things like that. No, that didn't happen.

Batzofin:

I found this really interesting and I guess it raises the question of why do you think some theatre makers or directors or writers feel the need to adapt texts to their local context?

Asiedu:

Yeah, that's something that's of interest- I haven't really thought about it, but often, they try to represent it as is because we've done some Shakespearean texts in Ghana where we've reproduced 16th century (*laughs*) British costumes, 17th century British costumes. So maybe it's a way of getting our design students to be creative or to imagine other contexts, but this is interesting. So unless the play is an adaptation clearly where the context has been changed and is being produced, like for example, we've had *Julius Caesar* done in Akan with Ghanaian names and Ghanaian costumes. So that also does happen but by and large, I think- and it's the same if we're doing a Nigerian play for example. I mean, directors don't necessarily feel the need to adapt it to the Ghanaian context, so we would have costuming that is Nigerian, for example. I guess there's this thing about trying to create the context of the world of the play on our Ghanaian stages. But having said that, there are instances where directors are consciously translating into the Ghanaian context, so they might change the visual as you put it. But in this particular production of Wertebaker there was no attempt to change that.

Batzofin:

And that makes me reflect when you talk like this, about the idea that I wonder if adaptation is also a mistrust that an audience won't receive the information unless it's being put into a localised context.

Asiedu:

Mm.

Batzofin:

And you're saying, we don't really have this need to adapt so much because the audiences understand, they are already making in a way that translation in their own mind.

Asiedu:

Yeah. By and large that may be true but there are certain instances where that might be necessary. These are raising questions that I haven't really thought about. I've just recently taught a play that was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by a Mauritian, called

*Toufann: A Mauritian Fantasy*⁴ and he makes some very interesting choices by way of adapting the play. And the conclusion I draw is because he wanted it to be... he was writing back in a certain sense. There was a political motivation. Because he also translates, he uses Mauritian Creole, for example, as a main medium, but then of course, then we in Ghana are reading it in English because then it's been translated back into English for us. So there are all kinds of interesting things happening when people are adapting. So their motivation, I guess, would be one of the issues.

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

What is motivating this adaptation? What is the aim, what are they trying to achieve? All of those things would come into whether or not they change stuff. I'm thinking again about another adaptation that I've taught students, it's an adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into a Nigerian context.

Batzofin:

Do you know who that play is by?

Asiedu:

Yes, it's by Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh. And it's called *Nneora: An African Doll's House* so obviously referencing Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. And she also makes very interesting choices because of what she was seeking to do in the play. So I guess whether or not to adapt will depend on the motivation of the director and the playwright.

Batzofin:

Absolutely and I think you are also very accurate and astute in the comments around that it usually also speaks to a political climate, and a particular one that artists need to speak towards, and in a way using the forms of tragedy seem to be very strong in a context for you. In this regard, I'd like to come and talk about *Edufa*, by Efua Sutherland because this is a famous Ghanaian adaptation right of a Euripides work?

Asiedu:

Yes.

Batzofin:

How in your opinion, has she made it a Ghanaian adaptation versus just an African adaptation?

Asiedu:

First of all of course the context is clearly Ghanaian. With the opening, the names, the references that are made, some of the traditions that are introduced at the beginning. Is Abena collecting dew or something? I can't really quite remember the text. Some of the references that are made... the way she recreates some of the characters and all of that certainly makes it all very Ghanaian. Some of the rituals that are adopted for example, when Ampoma is about to die, she takes off her waist beads and puts them around Edufa's neck for example. It has a certain Ghanaian interpretation, I'm told, you know that she's claiming him. And even though she's dying, she's put her seal, her mark on him and so on. So all of these things definitely mark it out as very Ghanaian and very recognisable I guess to the Ghanaian audiences. I can't remember the equivalence in, in *Alcestis* to be honest. Is there a similar (*chuckles*) thing in

⁴ Written by Dev Virahsawmy and published in 1999.

Alcestis? I don't think so.

Batzofin:

I don't know. Do you teach this text as part of your coursework?

Asiedu:

It's a long time since I taught *Edufa* but I have taught *Edufa* before.

Batzofin:

Are there ever performances of it done in Ghana?

Asiedu:

Oh definitely, there are quite a number of performances that I have seen of *Edufa* from my student days here and even 'til now, maybe as recent as the 2010s. It's in the repertoire of our resident Theatre Company. And I think for some time also, it was part of the Secondary School set texts, so they would perform it for schools. So *Edufa* is quite a common text in Ghana.

Batzofin:

And when it's performed, is it usually very similar each time or do directors take incredibly different portrayals of it?

Asiedu:

I'm trying to remember some of the productions... maybe not very different. Yeah, maybe the interpretations of the roles by the actors might differ. I've seen *Edufa* played as a very strong individual. I've seen *Edufa* also represented as somebody who's quite unsure of himself and his own identity. So again, it's the interpretation of the roles of the various characters, and of course, maybe influenced by the directors or directorial vision. No two productions, I guess are ever the same really.

Batzofin:

(*Laughs*) This is this is very true. I also want to come back to another trope that seems to be quite common in tragedies and that is that they all have very tragic endings.

Asiedu:

Mm hmm.

Batzofin:

And I wonder, do you think that all tragedies should have tragic endings?

Asiedu:

Well, I guess, if they didn't they wouldn't be tragedies would they (*laughs out loud*)? I don't know. I mean... *Alcestis*, the original text, doesn't end in a tragic manner, actually. So we would call it a tragic comedy perhaps, or a bit of a melodrama perhaps. I think tragic texts often should leave you... feeling that this is really tragic. I mean, if the ending becomes less so then I guess it takes away from it. I hope that makes sense? (*chuckles*)

Batzofin:

It does, it does. And then I'm also just wondering in terms of audience reception because you mentioned the last kind of production, at least of *Edufa* you saw in the 2010s. But do you think it's... I don't want to say commercial, but do you think that typical Ghanaian audiences would choose to go watch a tragedy in their free time as entertainment?

Asiedu:

Well you raised an important issue here. I mean, all these productions of *Edufa* I'm talking about where not commercial productions. That may be a difference between the Ghanaian theatre industry and maybe the South African and in other parts. A lot of the productions of these tragic plays or that we have in Ghana are often done in the University context or in a schools' context. And our productions are hardly commercial productions. So they might be staff productions or students' productions or productions by our resident Theatre Company. Hardly ever commercial. Commercial Theatre in Ghana is often comic, is often comedy. So this kind of theatre we're talking about here would not make it commercially, it won't. People will not be able to produce this and break even at the gate and pull crowds. That is absolutely, at least at this point in the history of Ghanaian theatre, I don't think that's possible. The kind of theatre that pulls crowds is more the comic, comedy, melodramatic plays that happen at the National Theatre. If you do *Edufa* at the National Theatre for paying audiences you may not be able to fill the auditorium of the theatre to halfway, if you are doing it commercially. At least nobody has really done it. That's the reality of the Ghanaian theatre industry right now. That the kind of plays that are filling the National Theatre are plays by Roverman productions that are highly commercial, very light-hearted, people go and laugh and laugh and laugh.

Batzofin:

So then the performances- these tragedies that are being done within the university space are predominantly marketed at a university audience?

Asiedu:

Yes, for university audience and at very low gate fees. Because the philosophy of the school really, is that our productions are meant for teaching, for research purposes, and don't really have a commercial intent. So we do sell tickets at the gates and people do buy tickets and come but it's not with a commercial intent.

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

If that makes sense?

Batzofin:

Yes, I mean it really is, it's a pedagogical tool, really-

Asiedu:

Mm.

Batzofin:

- for understanding theatre.

Asiedu:

Yeah.

Batzofin:

Is there anything else? Any other points you might like to raise about tragedy and how it's presented in Ghana that I may not have thought to ask you?

Asiedu:

One thing I have always said is, I have seen excellent performances of plays outside of Ghana that have been spellbinding, because of the quality of the production, because a lot had gone into the production. And I often feel that if we're able to achieve that kind of quality in terms of acting in terms of production for Ghanaian audiences, it's possible to eliminate laughter when the tragic is presented, that is my own thinking. I think I often feel that the reason why Ghanaian audiences might laugh at the representation of the tragic is because of a level of acting or something going wrong. For example, I think I mentioned in my, the questionnaire that I filled⁵, that a tragic scene in Wertebaker's play *The Love of a Nightingale*, turned very comic when the little boy who was being killed, decided to wake up (*laughs*) and laugh when he was being killed. Which was really very sad- for me this was tragic. And the directors were very upset about it. And obviously the audience would laugh. Because the audience laughed then he felt (*laughs*) encouraged to do it again, which was really unfortunate. And so some of these mishaps in acting or lack of professionalism or lack of quality, detracts from a true representation of the tragic on our stages I think.

Batzofin:

Absolutely.

Asiedu:

I don't know if that makes sense?

Batzofin:

Oh it does. I mean, I think the quality is very important and if not done sensitively starts to move into the melodrama, right. Which starts to hold humour.

Asiedu:

Yeah.

Batzofin:

But also in the form you wrote something that I thought was really interesting⁶, that you noted that even though audience members were laughing in these very tragic moments, if they were to have that moment in reality, or in their real life, there would be no laughter. That they-

Asiedu:

Of course.

Batzofin:

- understood the difference about the reality that was happening in the theatre space versus it as real. Could you elaborate on that?

Asiedu:

Yeah. I mean (chuckles) nobody would laugh if they saw a young boy being murdered in real life. I mean everybody would be horrified. But on stage everybody knows this is make believe.

⁵ On 2020-06-24, Dr. Asiedu completed a RETAGS Google questionnaire in regard to her opinions and experiences of tragedy and its adaptations, prior to this interview.

⁶ "There is a common notion that West Africans laugh at tragic scenes on stage. My view on this is that, this is because they are very aware it is make believe. These same people would not laugh about these if they were to happen in real life. I often maintain that the acting quality has to be very good to hold audiences spell bound, making them forget they are actually just in the theatre." - Dr. Asiedu, 2020-06-24, RETAGS Google questionnaire.

Especially if it's not done very well then it's like an opportunity for laughter. But at the same time it's quite interesting that even though people know what is on stage is make believe, sometimes they, I don't know how to put this. I've noticed that where some people have played very terrible roles on stage or maybe on screen, and then in their real lives people associate them with that kind of characteristic.

Batzofin:

Mm.

Asiedu:

You know? So, it's quite interesting how people relate real life to onstage or onscreen life and they know that it is make believe but when you go off the stage or off screen then they kind of associate you with that kind of role, that kind of type casting; and assume that's how you really are in real life. So it's quite an interesting thing, actually, audiences' perceptions of reality on stage and off stage.

Batzofin:

Absolutely and I also wonder if it also speaks to the form that tragedy takes. Is that it is in a way- versions of it don't allow us to become so absorbed and start to take it as reality. The form can push us back a bit, so we can go "oh we are watching a play". The language reminds us, or the visuals or the use of chorus, it all reminds us constantly that it is a play.

Asiedu:

Yeah. And then of course we can be a bit more comfortable.

Batzofin:

Right! There is also that (*laughs*). Because as you say, the themes are very big and also sometimes not very far away from our own reality.

Asiedu:

From us, definitely, yeah.

Batzofin:

Okay, well thank you so much for your time and your insight and your thoughts and reflections on this topic.

Asiedu:

Great, thank you. I'm glad I could be of help in this.

Batzofin:

Oh absolutely. So just thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Asiedu:

Great Jayne.

Batzofin ends the Zoom meeting