

# Interview

**Interviewee:**

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**O. Balogun:** Okay, can you introduce yourself?

**A. Balogun** My name is Abdulwali Abiola Balogun. I'm a music director and also a professional stage director.

**O. Balogun:** Okay, yes. I'm going to be talking to you in two capacities, as the music director of *The Gods are not to Blame*, the adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, that was performed earlier this year that I saw. And then I'm going to be talking to you again as a director who has worked on quite a whole number of tragedies, like now I'm aware that you are actually working on another adaptation. This time on *Otaelo* an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

**O. Balogun:** Now let's begin to look at it, let's start from this recent one, then we go back, so we find a way of linking, because of your own experience as a musician and as a theatre director. Now let's start like this. How would you describe what is tragic and then tragedy?

**A. Balogun** mmm, for me, tragedy is not when somebody dies. Tragedy is when one person's behaviour puts the whole community into problem. And if that is the case, it now becomes a matter of one for all, all for one. So when tragedy happens to a man in a community especially in the African context, it means that not one person, just like the Yorubas would say, that "*Òrún nya bó, kii s'òrò enìkan*" that is, If the heaven falls, it's not one person's tragedy. So tragedy in that light has to do with collectiveness among the people.

**O. Balogun:** Okay, before you answer what is tragic, I noticed that earlier when I interviewed Sunday Chukwuma, he also mentioned something about the African society. Are you saying that, tragedy is culturally specific?

**A. Balogun** Yeah ... Most times, I will say yes. Because what is tragic to a particular tribe, might not be tragic to another tribe. Just like in some cultures, colours they have these semiotic they send to the people. If you look at a culture like the Maasai tribe in Kenya, red to them is celebration of love of culture in its diversity. But if look at the Yoruba race, some of them will see red as danger even in

these are contemporary times, they see red as danger. So what is sauce for the goose most times might not be sauce for the gander. So that's why every culture is peculiar to what they see as tragedy.

**O. Balogun:** So what then now is the tragic?

**A. Balogun** mmm, let me bring you from the Yoruba culture. The Yorubas they believe that when a community is turning to disarray, there is always one person amongst them orchestrated that thing. I can also draw example from the just concluded play we had which is *The Gods are not to Blame*. If we look at the play itself we will see that the tragic hero in that play, is actually not Odewale, it's the mother in person of Ojuola, who by one way or the other lost her husband without the knowledge of when he was going to return and then having to bare children for his own son. Which for me can even trigger some sort of psychological trauma to any woman who has the fore knowledge of that kind of situation. Even the people that saw the play, many of them were saying that they can never bare that emotional trauma.

**O. Balogun:** So you think people are usually more sensitive to tragedy than comedy?

**A. Balogun** Always.

**O. Balogun:** Now let's now take it from that point. You know, each time you describe tragedy you have a way of validating your point by making, you know, a recourse to African society and the rest of them. So let us use the African context that you've sited profusely as an example. Should we now take it that, tragedy is a reflection of society?

**A. Balogun** mmm... well ... I will say yes.

**O. Balogun:** To what extent?

**A. Balogun** In the sense of saying that tragedy cannot happen just to an individual. No matter the distance of where the tragedy is happening. It has this, it's just like smoke. It will always – people will see it.

**O. Balogun:** Okay, now let's go back to the play which is really our main concern.

**A. Balogun** Okay.

**O. Balogun:** You were the -

**A. Balogun** Music director-

**O. Balogun:** - music director. A play that now moved from the "original Yoruba setting of the playwright". Now in the hands of the director, the play becomes a multicultural play and one of the main pillars, so to speak, of the performance itself is the music, which you actually conducted, you wrote, you actually put together the whole thing. Tell us what it was like, having to "direct the music" for that performance?

**A. Balogun** I will use the word tasking because originally I am a Yoruba person. I'm not Igbo neither am I Bini person. So during the course of the rehearsal when I had a discussion with the director and he was able to explain his own idea of the contextualising the play. And then having to look for songs from different tribes which include the Yoruba, Bini, you have the Igbo tribe and some other contemporary songs. I went as far as calling some of my Igbo friends to interact with them, I had to learn some words in Igbo so as to infuse them into my songs and at some point we had to code-mix in the sense we use some parts Igbo and then some parts English. And at some point we had these Edo community close to where we rehearse, we had to bring some of them to come and rehearse with the singers and at some point and since it's an ensemble, we had to go across teaching everybody in the whole production so as to make it heavy and also to enlighten them on – "this is what you are saying" and "this is the meaning of what you are saying." So it was not easy at all.

**O. Balogun:** Now these choices that you made, were they informed about some other factors aside of the fact that the director said that he wanted to make the play multicultural. What other factors did you put into consideration while you were, you know, developing, while you are writing, you are directing the music?

**A. Balogun** First we should understand that our own environment is multicultural based. And then we do not want a situation whereby the play will be one sided. But that still does not lead to the fact that if the director had decided to still remain, put the play in the context of the Yoruba setting. Everybody would still have been able to go along with the play. But the director was unstinting in the sense that he was able to create an amiable environment for other cultures to really participate and then see themselves being reflected onstage. Either with their songs, with their costumes, or with some of their ad-libs. So it created this connection within the audience, everybody felt loved, everybody felt appreciated. You see an Edo man sitting beside an Igbo man and then there is this mutual conversation as to what is being presented onstage.

**O. Balogun:** Now, one of the things about it is that this performance held on the University of Lagos campus which, what meant was that the audience that you had was slightly made up of students that were on campus. Students from various homes, and students who actually have ... some people will say we're the age of the post-modern age. Let's take it this way, how were you able to blend their interest, without the cultural environment from which you have actually sourced your music?

**A. Balogun** When we looked at the environment we saw that 80% of our audience they are going to be students. So 20% would be from the age of early thirties, 'til let's say late eighties. So we decided to now do what we call a trado-modern way of blending the songs. In the sense that we brought some instrumentals that fit into this generation. And then we also brought songs that fit into their own generation. So the blend of these two, really wowed the audience. One, there were some hip-hop artists that we have now, that their songs –apart from the fact that they use modern instrumentals they are still talking about the culture. They have still not deviated from the culture. So we were able mix the instrumentals this generation understands, with the lyrics that generation understands. Blending the two together.

**O. Balogun:** So you think that performance was able to reflect the reality, the contemporary types of living up to what people are familiar with...

**A. Balogun** Yes.

**O. Balogun:** ... and at the same time trying to introduce them to what they were not familiar with...

**A. Balogun** mmm.

**O. Balogun:** ... in terms of the origin of the play itself as a Greek Tragedy. Now let's look at it, to what extent now, do you think that music that you actually conducted was useful to the tragedy that was dramatized?

**A. Balogun** First the songs helped to set the location. Secondly, to set the pace and most of all to create the mood. Because if there is no emotional purgation in Tragedy, then that thing is not meant to be called Tragedy. And then we have these points, that when the play gets to a particular, which is the apex, at least everybody in the audience should feel pity for the main character, or let me say the tragic hero. There should be this form of self-pity for the members of the audience as well as relating it to the actor onstage. Whereby they are able to also put themselves in the shoes of the tragic hero. So it is song, or let me say the songs, helped to push the reality at their faces by making them remove

themselves from the hall to reality. So they don't see actors onstage anymore, they see themselves *participating* in what is going on.

**O. Balogun:** Yeah. In the Nigerian society where some geographers or historians or scholars will tell us that there are over 250 ethnic groups and tribes in Nigeria and then there are over 400 languages being spoken. And then we have about eight or so of these tribes represented in that play. And then looking at the volatile nature of ethnicity of Nigeria, did you think that play was a reflection of the Nigerian crises, you know the tribal crises, the ethnic animosity that was going on. Did you think that the play was a reflection of that, and what was the role of music in asserting that view point, if indeed it was like that?

**A. Balogun:** Okay, let me say that the three major ethnic groups that are recognised in Nigeria as we speak, they are the Igbo, Yoruba, and the Hausa. There is no other tribe that will not successfully fit in into any of these three tribes. So I feel there is no tribal sentiment. Because if they are Igbo and you are Aqua Ibom, you know that the pillar of the Easterners, or let me say, South-south, they are the Igbos. So, in this sense we are able to use music to balance the mood for everybody, so as not to feel left out. And again if you look at the way the country is now, just like people will say that "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." We look too much into what the leaders are supposed to do for us. And then we leave what we are supposed to do for our leaders.

**O. Balogun:** So you think the performance and the music that you actually created were able to direct your audiences mind to this point that you are making?

**A. Balogun:** Yes.

**O. Balogun:** Let's now look at it again. So, much of the music that you added to that performance were dirges, you know, had this gloom around it. Now should we take it that tragedy often employs dark and gloomy theatrical elements for effect?

**A. Balogun:** If you do not take all of those things into consideration, I feel it is now proven that people even laugh at the face of tragedy. If you don't bring something that will dig down into their minds, they might not relate to what you are saying.

**O. Balogun:** So you think dirges, very dark tones, sombre music, has a way of enhancing the tragic quality of it? Of the performance?

**A. Balogun:** Yes.

**O. Balogun:** Let's now look at it some people who will say what it means is that comedy has a way of trivialising terrible situation, while tragedy has a way of exaggerating. So should we take it that, the kind of music that you developed for the performance of *The Gods are not to Blame*, early this year, was meant to do that, to exaggerate the tragic situation?

**A. Balogun:** That is the whole idea.

**O. Balogun:** mmm.

**A. Balogun:** Because one, I feel the action is not enough. When actions are going onstage and then you have something to accompany that action, and then it makes it elaborate. You make people see beyond what reality offers. So when they see that, they face the hard reality of life that okay, if this thing is not happening to me that does not mean it is not happening somewhere. So music in this sense throws them into that mood of this is how people are supposed to relate to some situations in reality.

**O. Balogun:** mmm.

**A. Balogun:** So music just so we know, that it has two forms. You have euphony and then you have cacophony under the literary term onomatopoeia. So if that is the case, the euphonic aspects of that

music, whereby you have different parts coming together with different instruments playing... accompany what action is going onstage. Goes a long way into putting the audience into the right frame of mind to feel sober. Because we want some of them they actually are a reflection of exactly what is going on onstage. So when... they don't realise it until you say to them, so by saying it to them you don't say it in an easy way you throw it at their faces. And that comedy cannot do. Comedy has a way of watering down a serious situation to make it look so common. So people at the end of the day don't go on thinking about what they have done, they laugh out of the hall and then that is the end of the whole message. So I feel tragedy is stronger... as a way of passing the message in a stronger form, than comedy.

**O. Balogun:** Okay, now let's now take this other question. As a director now, you are working on Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo*, an adaptation of *Othello*. I know you've actually introduced a whole lot of music in there. So are you saying that, similar to what you did with *The Gods are not to Blame*, you think that you're using music as a kind of a mainstay of a performance or an addition to what it is doing?

**A. Balogun** Umm, like, about two/three weeks into the rehearsal I didn't bring the musicians to come and rehearse with us, although the actions were coming on strong. But if you are a strong member of the audience or even a director from another place, you will know that there is something missing. They were throwing the lines, people could hear it, they could feel it, but I feel when there is music you don't need anybody to force you to take that bitter pill, you just take it by yourself and then it has a way of penetrating. Even though you're not really paying attention the music will just make you stop whatever you are doing and then so... later on I had to invite some set of musicians using some instruments that will *easily* penetrate through the minds of the audience, and that is: violin, flute and then keyboard. So the drum set comes in at intervals just to set the mood, the pace but the violin and the flute they are really doing a very good job by one, making the audience listen to the lines so that the lines will make sense and again setting the mood. Because when there is no emotional purgation tragedy is not complete.

**O. Balogun:** So you think for tragedy music is an essential element?

**A. Balogun** Exactly, yes.

**O. Balogun:** And then you also think that, especially for African tragedy it is almost impossible not to infuse music -

**A. Balogun** Music.

**O. Balogun:** Well, Soyinka also said something about music being the language of ritual or a ritual language and then he says, drama or theatre is not just a performance but a totality of existence. So, if we now look at these possibilities in terms of language, music as language, and music as ritual and the music as a way of life ... so you are saying in essence that a tragic play or a Tragedy has a stronger way of bringing to light the human reality of existence than comedy. But some people think comedy could actually do that too.

**A. Balogun** Comedy has a way of hiding the identity.

**O. Balogun:** What do you mean by identity?

**A. Balogun** Like if we want to talk about the President of the country, talking about what he is doing wrong or what he is doing right. Comedy will not mention the person's name. Comedy will not throw it at the person's face. Comedy has a way of just using symbolism to relate to the other stuff and then they feel like "oh you are talking about this person!" Comedy has a way of leaving the audience in that dark state of mind to make sure they are thinking by themselves. But Tragedy will not do that.

**O. Balogun:** Okay.

**A. Balogun** Tragedy will make sure that it is calling a spade a spade. You will see the tragic hero, no matter how noble he is, he will have his own tragic flaws. He will mess up, the people will feel pity for him and at the end of the day he's left between the King's message and the deep blue sea. He has to make a very costly decision, which comedy would have looked for a way to tone down and then make the audience laugh about. So Tragedy will never toy with any serious message no matter how minute.

**O. Balogun:** But then, now you're talking about a singular person the tragic character or the tragic hero. What if the tragedy is not about one man or one woman but the collective? You know, earlier on you mentioned that Tragedy in Africa is communal...

**A. Balogun** Yes.

**O. Balogun:** Chukwuma Sunday also said that. Well, I am asking this question because you know about two weeks ago or thereabout I saw a performance of *Antigone*<sup>1</sup> in South Africa where the tragedy is not that of one man but the collective or society. So, if we are looking at a Tragedy then as a connective reality, a collective situation, what role does music play in explicating that to the audience? Use your own experience for *The Gods are not to Blame*, and the music that you are doing for the play you are directing. How will you connect all of these things?

**A. Balogun** mmm... music has this special way of linking different situations. What Man A will shout for Man B can just sob for it. And what Man C wail and shout and cry about, Man D may just look at it and then it's just there, just looking, but that does not mean he has no feeling about what is going on. So the way people react to tragic things are different. So music in this sense will help you to look at the different ways people will react to tragedy. And then if you look at the situation of Odewale in *The Gods are not to Blame*, he was fated to behave like that. But his failure to now understand when he's supposed to now become what Yoruba's call *Omolouabi*.<sup>2</sup> When they give birth to you, you go through the process of rebirth, if he had applied that method maybe the prophecy would not have come to pass. Just like the situation of Otaelo who is being like stigmatised all in the name of being an Osu, which is the Osu caste system in the Eastern part of the country. So his own problem was the fact that he was able to fight his way to becoming a noble person but at some point his own pride, just the same way Odewale had pride, he too has his own pride, what is leading him to his doom. So even I look at the role of music in this aspect. The music is not just to be playing instruments, the music is there to just emphasise. To just emphasise the fact that, this is the mood, this is what we are trying to say and it must be passed across in this particular manner.

**O. Balogun:** But in my understanding of that play, Yerima is actually trying to lampoon the Igbo society that is practising the Osu. So if you say that Otaelo is boastful, he has pride, he has his tragic flaw, fine. And he dies at the end. Don't you think at the end of the day, he dies, he kills his wife, kills everybody then he commits suicide. And then the society itself is thrown into mourning. Don't you think that kind of a situation is a communal tragedy and not that of one man, you know? It's like a question I asked earlier in the performance of *Antigone* that I saw, where you have a whole collection of people that are traumatised in different ways but then, it is a reality of society in which the performance has been given. But then not just that single society but a reality of societies that

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<sup>1</sup> *Antigone* (not quite/quiet) directed by Mark Fleishman. Performed at the Baxter Golden Arrow Studio September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Yoruba principle of human relationship, acceptable standard of behaviour regulated by customs and norms.

we are familiar with and those ones that we have only read about. Now let's look at this, your music is meant to accentuate those elements...

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

**O. Balogun:** Now, in what ways, specific ways, now are you planning on doing that, in relation to what you did in *The Gods are not to Blame*?

**A. Balogun** Umm... at this point in time I'm looking at music in *Otaelo* by Ahmed Yerima to help me put in the mind of the audience that tragedy has its own tone. It has its own feeling, it is something that is devoid of levity. If you look at, if by chance you be free to come see the play... you will hear the force that will be coming out of the musical instruments. If you are not in the hall and you are outside, you don't need anybody to tell you that something serious is going on in this... it is just helping me to portray the fact that we are treating a very serious situation.

**O. Balogun:** mmm.

**A. Balogun** It is no time for anybody to press phone. It is no time for anybody to look away. It is just for the fact that I want the audience to concentrate on what I'm trying to say. So the music has been like has been set there to make sure that we don't have any divided attention.

**O. Balogun:** mmm, so you think tragedy, I mean music in a tragedy is often useful to *assert* the seriousness of the situation.

**A. Balogun** That is very correct.

**O. Balogun:** Okay, thank you so very much for this, you know, for granting this interview.

*O. Balogun turns off the audio recorder*