

Interview

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Balogun: Okay, so I'm here tonight with the most distinguished Professor Femi Osofisan and I must say it is a very very rare privilege for me-

Prof Osofisan: (*Chuckles*)

Balogun: - to get Professor Osofisan... For this project entitled Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South – RETAGS. Being led by Professor Mark Fleishman, director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town in South Africa. A project that is sponsored by the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

Balogun: So we'll begin. Good evening Sir.

Prof Osofisan: Good evening.

Balogun: Yes. Sir this project is about adaptation, reimagination of Greek tragedies from the 1960's up until now. And it is impossible to talk about adaptations of Greek tragedy in Africa, indeed globally, without mentioning Femi Osofisan.

Prof Osofisan: (*Gently chuckles*)

Balogun: Especially because of your- those two very powerful plays *Tegonni* and *Women of Owu*.

Balogun: Sir, let's start from here. What is it about Greek tragedy that interests you?

Prof Osofisan: I think it has been talked about many times, the worldview of the Greeks at least the ancient Greeks' metaphysical aspect of it you know, corresponds very much to the Yoruba metaphysics you know.

(Prof Osofisan's cell phone rings and the audio recording is stopped.)

Prof Osofisan: As I said the metaphysical world of the Greeks corresponds very much to the Yoruba one. They have multiple Gods just as we have (*There is some activity in the room that distracts from the conversation momentarily*). They have multiple Gods. Although as it is now there are of course

serious differences. The kind of Gods they have which are- who are quite implacable (*chuckles*) Gods...are not the same as we have in Yoruba land. Where we believe in duality of essence, duality of things... So you have that. But at least that aspect you know of multiple Gods you know, of the dead and the living you know, co-habiting and so on. Umm we have so many things in common that way. So it's very easy therefore when you are reading the Greek plays to imagine that actually you are in the Yoruba world. And so this... and then the kind of themes that they dealt with. Umm very fundamental issues about the world, about death and life, where power and so on... also relates to Yoruba world. So it's not difficult to imagine therefore that we have adaptations from the Greek world to our one.

Balogun: Okay now Prof. umm I know apart from... you seem to be so different when it comes to adapting these worlds in terms of the way you probe even these Gods that you talk about and you probe them. And in probing them you kind of... more often than not question even the way we relate to ourselves in terms of our relationship. So in that situation I want to ask Prof. in looking at these Greek Gods in relation to the Yoruba Gods... the Pantheon, the environment of the Gods often become our own. Now are we then saying that tragedies seem to have more effect in terms of the way we need to look at ourselves very critically, unlike comedy?

Prof Osofisan: Hmm... well I don't know, I mean... I really haven't got an answer to this because umm comedy tends to be light, to deal with... you know, issues on the surface you know. Umm whereas, you know, tragedy deals with very deep issues: the question of death, the question of power and so on you know. In a very moving and sometimes more lasting ways than the comic. So I think that's why but you know the point of course is that, I don't really believe in the Gods you know...

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Osofisan: But I want to reflect the world that believes in it. I mean... traditional life you know, the belief in the Gods is very strong. And even now it's still for some people it's very strong although mainly it's hypocrisy and so on. But it was there. So my- I have... usually I consider the problematic task you know, first of all I want to reflect that world of the Gods. At the same time I want us, I want to reflect it from a critical perspective, you know. That is I don't believe we should just go slavishly back to the past. Particularly as many of the Gods were also human beings... anthropomorphic ...they were human beings before being deified. So that means they were human beings like all of us you know. And dealt with social problems like we do. They became exemplary in the way they then associated in dealing with this, through cowardice, some through power (*laughs*), through bravery, through valour, through beauty and so on you know, they symbolise certain aspects of society which are enduring and so on... you know. But at the same time we must always remember that man is responsible for his own society to a very large extent. I don't pretend to know everything about life- but to a large extent many of the problems which bedevil are man-made and can be cured by man. I don't want us to surrender all our (*chuckles*)...

Balogun: Initiative? (*chuckles*)

Prof Osofisan: Initiative and will to divine order. So this is what I'm trying to do if you like you know. The... Greek plays give me a chance to do that you know. So that I can reflect on the really human-humane aspects.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: Whereas at the same time as dealing with the divine aspects.

Balogun: Yeah so Prof. often times you'll find that in that- in your moment of reflection you'll almost always try to look for points in history that will be so- not just dramatic in what they've thrown up but in terms of the very tragic essence that you're trying to deal with. If you look at *Tegonni* for

instance, I think you're trying to look at that point when we still have this contact with the colonialist in a way. And then if we look at *Women of Owu* which is even more... violent so to speak. So are we now looking at, aside from the fact that you're trying to demystify the Gods on one hand, history also becomes a tool in doing that.

Prof Osofisan: Well because- not really. You see history is an ideological thing. The interpretation of history always depends on who is interpreting it, you know. And it's usually the victor, the conqueror who interprets history. We have too many instances here you know where in our oral tradition for example, once a new ruler comes up all the palace historians reinterpret all history immediately (*chortles*) They bring up his ancestors and so on. They rewrite everything. So it's always the person who has power, who interprets history. So... once... every September 23rd or what was it- we all marched out with British flag singing of the Empire (*laughing*).

Balogun: (*Laughing*).

Prof Osofisan: (*Laughing*) The Empire whose sun will never set. That was the history they taught us. We were very happy... we were celebrating them you know. Not knowing all the damage they had done and the colonising and so on. They had completely twisted our brains and up 'til now we haven't even recovered.

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Osofisan: But you know that's it. The person who wins is the owner of the story. So we need to know that all the time. But you know it's not extremely abstract. You know, in *Tegonni* I was interested very much in the issue of power you know. Particularly in its misuse you know. Also when I'm dealing with these issues I always want to show that these things can be confronted. Power can be confronted and defeated. It's not just one- you see, I try to align myself always with the lower class, with the victims. When I hear something, I always look for who is the victim and you know, that the women, sometimes it's the women, the poor, the underprivileged, and so on. And I try to ask, okay so what if they were writing this story, how would they write it? Not just to listen to the version of the conquerors. So I was- *Tegonni* I was looking at that too you know. And of course all the false stories. White women and black men and women should not meet. Lugard's very draconian law about you...

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Osofisan: ... white people marrying colonial people and so on you know. But when it comes to love, you can't stop it. Even that work and from our own perspective here, it is not out of weakness you know always that you find somebody you know, going to align herself with a white man or anything. *Tegonni* had her own senses, she had you know, she reasoned it was good for her and it wasn't out of inferiority complex at all you know. And she could confront the Governor. So you know, but with *Women of Owu* we were dealing with different issues here. We were dealing with the issue of war. And particularly in this present moment, especially in times, it's really, really tragic what America is doing you know. America that we all look forward to... the leader of the free world and so on. See how they almost completely destroyed Middle East.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: You know, the Arab Civilization that was so... you know, the basis of all civilization. See how almost completely ruined. Baghdad is in a complete wreck and so on you know. Umm so... and this story was told by Euripides you know.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: War is destruction. War you know... nobody actually ever wins any war, everything ends up on the negotiating table. But you know, there's this myth about you know, killing and so on

you know. And it possesses the people who have power. And the people who suffer in the end are the women and the children. Look at pictures we see of Iraq and ...see all those children, it's heart-breaking. So... that's one, then the other thing is that you know... so the White people use their own stories to tell this particular subject, to teach this subject. But we have several stories too, it's not just there. And unfortunately we don't know our own history. We don't know our own history. So... at the same time that I'm writing about these things I'm also concerned to show you know, our own part of that story you know. You know, until I wrote about *Women of Owu* many people did not know Yoruba- I am talking about people of Yoruba origin who did not know the story of Owu at all, you know (*chuckles*). You know did they care anyway? Everything was from the Greeks and so on. So when asked, we had towns, we had walls, walled towns and-

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: Owu had two... double walls around it, you know.

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Osofisan: To think that there was a time, can one imagine in this place, there were walled towns? At the time that Ibadan, look at how big Ibadan is now, but it did not exist... (*laughs*) at the time. Abeokuta did not exist. So you know... can you try to imagine take your mind back. But we take all of these things for granted now you know (*chuckles*). And they existed as our histories as well. All the Fulani invasion that we are talking about now you know. It happened in 19th Century you know, exactly the same kind of pillaging that are happening.¹ So you know, we need to know our own history. So that's part of my own concern also in the play.

Balogun: Now, thank you so much Prof. Let's come to the staging of these plays. I'll start with *Women of Owu*. I know *Women of Owu* was first commissioned in the UK I guess and I think it was directed by Chuck Mike. Let's have a- I know a number of articles have been written on the staging itself, but this is going to be a very rare privilege to actually hear from you, the choices that you made in terms of first even that particular aspect of Yoruba history that you just talked about now, why you think it was relevant and very close to Euripides' *Trojan Women*. And then we'll look at the Yoruba resources, theatrical resources that also went into putting the play onstage for that first performance.

Prof Osofisan: Well I must say I didn't have much part in the decision to do the play or how to do it, you know because the play was commissioned by a Theatre in London, you know. The Chipping Norton Theatre commissioned me to write the play I think it was when I was in Leeds when I had written the play about the Rwanda Genocide² I was commissioned to write this play. Umm and we had Chuck Mike who was very good because Mike and I had worked together in Nigeria here. And it was very very familiar, I mean he's worked several years in Nigeria so he was familiar with the material, the background and everything you know. And he's also a very good director. So he was the one who recruited who he wanted...

Balogun: The actors?

Prof Osofisan: Hmm (*affirmative*). He recruited the actors because... don't forget he had a Troupe in Nigeria, and a Troupe in London as well. So he recruited all the women he wanted and umm had the rehearsals as he wanted. Umm... of course it included collaboration with me. We were in dialogue all

¹ Osofisan is here making reference to recent events in Nigeria, that is, the Fulani Herdsmen invasion which he links to the tragic events that led to the defeat of Oyo Empire by the Fulani Jihadists towards the end of the 19th century.

² *Reel Rwanda*, published with *Tegonni* in Osofisan's *Recent Outings*.

the time we had to... it was mainly his... his directing. And I was very glad the way he used umm the chorus and the women. Umm... and also the... uh how will I put it now... the double casting because umm... we don't have many, much means of doing these plays where you are outside the continent here you know. We put the whole village onstage here.

Balogun: (*Chuckles*).

Prof Osofisan: You know, large cast and so on.

Balogun: Yeah we're going to talk about National Theatre Performance...

Prof Osofisan: I've always loved that. But because of financial problems you have to economise you know (*brief chortle*). And you have to, if the cast is too large no director will touch it, I mean no producer will touch it. And that's always been a problem with African plays because we write for large crowds and so, and to put them up there then becomes a problem. Umm so I was very glad the way he economised, the double-casting and so on. And his interpretation was very interesting to me. In terms of how they used the stage and so on. But of course... when we came back down to Nigeria I had more means, you know, more because we were using students mainly and not professional theatres really. So you know... in fact you have more than you need because (*brief chortle*) all the students want to get the experience so you have many more than you need. So, like yes, you have a larger room to work the actors here and to perfect the songs. We couldn't...Chuck Mike couldn't use all the songs there because you know... but here now we could use all the songs that you needed and so on. Umm... I directed it for the National Theatre myself, but I don't think the conditions were ideal, you know, I wasn't quite happy or so, I didn't have the kind of... actors I needed. You know they have many of the fantastic actors you know, but you know there are actors for certain parts that you were looking for and we didn't have that in... And umm I didn't, couldn't then, maybe now with the hindsight...if we have this space to look at the play this passionately, to be able to work on the way I will work on it now. But since then other directors have done it, I've been interested in their various choices you know. Umm... Awosanmi has done it twice and the two productions are vastly different (*brief chortle*). Umm...Awodiya just did it for the Convocation play two weeks ago in Osogbo. Different again you know. It's a problematic play.

Balogun: (*Laughs*).

Prof Osofisan: In the sense that not much happens.

Balogun: Yes, the staging that's what you mean.

Prof Osofisan: Yeah, in a way the play itself.

Balogun: Problematic in terms of staging it.

Prof Osofisan: No even the play itself... it's a long lament if you like. It's just a lament about war. So it's static it can be very boring you know. Unless you handle it very well that is the challenge you know. I didn't see the one that was done in Ado Ekiti which you know, I was told it was very good but umm... The second one that Awosanmi did you know, he, this time he decided to confront that challenge through choreography. So the women's movements you know really cut out that boredom you know and it was very well done I must say. In fact it's the best I've seen done so far. So the challenge of directing that play is how to get rid of the boredom, how to get through, how do you use the actors and the song and so on to keep people interested you know. It's just a lamentation about war, about war, about war, about death and so on. So then, I think it's very much a director's play you know, how do you work it out onstage you know? Where there is very little action, very little action. So how do you now make it work for the audience? (*gentle laugh*) So that's the challenge of the play.

Balogun: Okay now Prof. umm... the lamentation something really significant was part of it, that's the songs. The repertoire of song. How did you come about it? Did you compose them or these were drawn from Yoruba stock of...

Prof Osofisan: I think only one song... yes, was drawn from the traditional repertory. All the other songs I composed myself. Umm which was a big challenge to me you know. But in the end I was quite happy about it. And this is obviously a pointer to the director who can make use of those songs very... creatively. That's why you get the kind of movement that you want to get through the boredom. Particularly the scene in the end where the women go in to trance and all this you know. I think you need familiarity with African... rituals you know. At least you know the traditional rituals but for example I mean the Pentecostal Churches you know who actually go into trance and so on. Very powerful moments you know. So if you're familiar with that you know how to draw out the... you know that last moment of the play umm where the women go into trance and so on. And then, Anlugbua...the God Anlugbua comes and speaks you know... So I'm not sure if you're not familiar with that tradition that you can handle it (*laughs*). You know just read it like dramatic speeches (*laughs*) It's going to be a pity.

Balogun: In Awosanmi's version...the directorial work that he did. He also relied on the song that you have composed?

Prof Osofisan: Yeah very much. I haven't seen any production- I mean there are many songs you know. Why will you now want to start looking for other songs (*chortles*)?

Balogun: Yes so Prof. how did you deal with the audience when you had it in London. The audience who didn't really understand the language.

Prof Osofisan: Songs don't have to- you don't have to understand the meaning of the songs you know. Songs carry a mood, you know. In fact the more powerful songs are the ones whose words you don't understand.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: But the move you, they stir you, if they are well handled, you don't know what they're saying but you know, it creates it a certain mood, a certain, you know, feeling, an affective power on you. It does you know. I've always...take all my texts, I've always written there that songs can be substituted. I have just written the ones we used in Yoruba... and the meaning will then guide you, you know. If they are not Yoruba, if you're not Yoruba context, you are in an Igbo context...I imagine you should be able to do the play using Igbo songs and so on. But to understand the kind of songs it's... not a dance music (*laughs*)... you can substitute the dance you know. So the words, the meanings themselves don't really... you know matter. It's the affective power that they convey. The effects that they have on you that really matters.

Balogun: So Prof. let's go to *Tegonni* now. Did you have the chance to stage *Tegonni* in any point in time? Like yourself that you directed it?

Prof Osofisan: (*Brief chortle*) I directed it in Emory in the first production in Atlanta. I've directed it here too. I made changes, for instance in Atlanta I used puppets. Puppetry you know here I don't have that you know. So we had to cut it out. When the spirit of stories...I have always- when I was Head of Department here I was trying to bring puppetry here you know... never really could find somebody to come and teach it. But puppetry is what I- I really love puppetry you know. So I used that in Atlanta because I found a puppeteer who could do that for me. But what I've explained again and again in many places, that one of the things that umm... I mean of course when I'm doing a play, I'm not just worried about the theme. I'm also worrying about the format.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: The technical aspect you know. What will it take? And I'm always trying to go back to Yoruba traditions to see what we can use... for its effectiveness but also to remind ourselves that we had these things. Which I mean like puppetry for example, people have forgotten that we had puppetry here in Alarinjo...a lot of puppetry work... nobody does puppetry anymore now. But okay- so umm... when I got to Atlanta I had not written the play you know. I was just going to write it, you know. Which was very good in the end because you know this was a totally new world to me, I was familiar with it at all you know. Worked in Philadelphia before at Penn when I did *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* and all of it. It's a totally different atmosphere. Umm and... my play was supposed to be the *lead* play, the main play of the year. And so I was given every resource, everything you know. But I hadn't realised this (*laughs*), or I didn't realise the context you know. Where everything is totally programmed from the start. You know when this play is coming, when the next play is- unlike here. We don't have (*laughs*) such a programme for (*laughs*)...

Balogun: That's true.

Prof Osofisan: You could decide that what you're going to do a play next week (*laughs*)...

Balogun: You put the poster there.

Prof Osofisan: (*Laughs*). You know. So I didn't know this. So that pressure suddenly I realised "Wow I had to do this play". And then the Black students began to come to me. "Ah we are glad at last we're going to do a play, you know, where we will not be servants and so on, you know, we don't have plays we always play servants". I look for the first time... it had not occurred to me that there are very few plays in which we have Black heroes.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: I mean we can read, I mean we can act *Macbeth* with Black people or...

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: ... you know. But essentially the play was written for White actors. So you can adapt it and say we are using- but there are very very few plays with Black actors. I mean they will be servants or (*chortles*) maids and so on. Secondary figures. I had not thought about that. That these students are happy now there's a Black man.... (*laughs*). So I just thought wow we need a play with Black actors... with Black heroes you know. And there have to be a number of them. And then I saw that there were even more female Blacks than the male Blacks. All that conditioned the play.

Balogun: The writing?

Prof Osofisan: The writing... yes.

Balogun: That's of *Tegonni*?

Prof Osofisan: Yes, yeah *Tegonni*. And since then you know other plays because I then, one of the concerns I have nowadays as a playwright is just to provide plays where you have equal roles for both races. Where you have a Black man, a Black hero and you have the White hero. Not one in disguise for the other... but having ...you know so we can have truly mixed casts. You don't have mixed casts, we just have somebody going to act...look at what we do here you know and... it doesn't- I won't say it disgust me (*chortles*) to have a Black man made up like a White person you know. Wearing wig and all that, and we don't do it well. I think with the White people it's easier to just paint themselves black. You know black face and so on. Although this is heavily resented nowadays, by Black actors. And so if he paints his face a bit brown, he can be passable as a Black man. But how do you paint (*laughs*) a Black person (*laughs*) white?

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: So... these are some of the concerns I have you know when I- so I want plays in which you have both Black and White. And so I decided that I would tackle the easiest approach I thought: White classics, the classics of White theatre. And infused them with Black characters. So that you know, *Tegonni*, you have both Antigone and Tegonni.

Balogun: mmm, yes. Together in the play.

Prof Osofisan: Together onstage you have Claudius, you know... so you know coming onstage. In *Hamlet*, and *Wesoo, Hamlet!*-

Balogun: *Wesoo, Hamlet!*

Prof Osofisan: - same thing you have... and I'm still going to do a number of such plays where you can have powerful actors of both races.

Balogun: mmm. But Prof. why is that? Having Tegonni and Antigone together, why is that?

Prof Osofisan: Well I mean there are many reasons. I mean the first part I've told you, I want to have two actors, strong actors-

Balogun: Playing the same-

Prof Osofisan: - of two races. Two races playing roles that are not subsidiary to the other one.

Balogun: To the other one.

Prof Osofisan: Yeah. Where Tegonni is just as important as Antigone. *Hamlet* as...

Balogun: *Wesoo, Hamlet!*

Prof Osofisan: Yes. So that's the first thing, practically having two equal roles for actors. So that no actor feels that- the White man feels that he's acting an inferior role to the Black one. Or the Black one feels he's acting an inferior role... they are both- they are-

Balogun: On the occasion that you've done...like the one Chuck Mike directed for his UK premiere. Was this part of the...

Prof Osofisan: No he hasn't done-

Balogun: ... kind of-

Prof Osofisan: He's done *Women of Owu*.

Balogun: He's done *Women of Owu*.

Prof Osofisan: Not... *Women of Owu* I situated it purely in the Black world. But he hasn't done *Hamlet* or okay... we did *Many Colours*. Okay, we did *Many Colours*³ in New York together yeah. But he hasn't handled... *Tegonni* or *Hamlet* you know. Because you know... I had White and Black actors in the department who needed so-

Balogun: It was easy to get them.

Prof Osofisan: Yes...usually they will put a play where there will be a strong... White character or so. And then there may be many Blacks there but they will be underneath, (*chortles*) they will be subsidiary roles. So this is what I'm saying. So you need roles, strong, equivalent roles- and it's not easy, not easy. But that's one and the second is that it allows you to look at the races from a different perspective. They are acting equally onstage. And then culturally it allows also to put a cultural question on the original script. See when we do that everybody already knows *Hamlet*. They know *Antigone*, therefore it's easy to let them see a different way you are trying to question it. So they know the story already, it's not... So you can... all the other questions you want to ask now can be done. You know, easily. People are not struggling with the story or anything, they know the story already. So you know, so the other things you want to bring out can then come out. So this is the.... as I said, I said that in a paper, I think it's the challenge for new playwrights you know. That we

³ *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*.

should now have plays, we have multicultural cast not subordinate cast or anything. Most plays where people cast, they have multiple casts, what you call blind casting. So you know (*chortles*) but that's not what I mean. You can do that too but now let's have plays where this one is a Black one, this one come from two different cultures and see how do they confront purely human situations, human problems in our... So that's what I mean by that you know.

Balogun: Yes. Now Prof. umm another aspect of it is... in terms of the staging. Let's talk about the *Women of Owu* that you did for the National Theatre. Umm like you said, it wasn't really that mobile. Although there were moments where the women held hands and they move in circles and then maybe some part of it where Adumaadan comes in and before Maye Okunade came in. But in spite of that you still had a choreographer do all of those movements. And so, what was really the goal in terms of... uh... the choreography? In what ways- or what were the considerations in having those dances and the specific steps that the choreographer had to do?

Prof Osofisan: Uh the choreographer was subservient, to the one who did the drama- the dramatist you know. Where as in fact Awosanmi devised that. The choreographer had to conform to what he had to do. And made the play totally different. Brought it out very strongly. So that's it you know. There are dances, there are movements so you can have the choreographer handle those parts and go on with your drama. But the thing now you can then reverse it. With the whole thing now more of a movement, or several movements anyway. Umm where the drama then because subservient to that you know. And when you look at the play then you see there are many instances where in fact the choreography that is needed you know, but... almost every instance in fact you know. When the women talk and exchange and all this, the speeches conduce to movement you know, to dances. When they're talking of the... when they talk of how... their town was captured for example, the rhythm of-

Balogun: And burnt down.

Prof Osofisan: Yeah. So you know the whole thing is like moving towards a crescendo. And so you can choreograph that, with the choreographer you know... it's like a series of dances in fact. A series of dances rather than just willing. Of course willing and... but you know if you look at it properly you know you understand that. So a very sensitive choreographer can handle that you know. In such a way that the play loses its boredom you know. And becomes more dynamic you know, in a series of choreographed moments you know.

Balogun: And then was there any ways in which the-

Prof Osofisan: But when I thought of choreographer... don't forget I'm referring here to traditional African dances. Not the...

Balogun: Contemporary dance.

Prof Osofisan: Contemporary... no. We're talking of you know there are... differences. Major differences between traditional movements and contemporary dances, which are influenced very much by the West.

Balogun: Sir I was going to ask like umm-

Prof Osofisan: You don't drink at all?

Balogun: No, I don't. Like the music that you've already composed into it and then we'll look at... in terms of the realisation of the ambience. That ambience of gloom... while you were trying to compose the songs... was there any particular situation apart from what you have dramatised in the play that you were thinking of while composing the songs? In terms of... the kind of emotional level that you imagined you want to take your audience to when they..?

Prof Osofisan: Yeah I mean obviously at the back of my mind... you know...traditional dirges...traditional movements of mourning... that I'm familiar with you know.

Balogun: Yes.

Prof Osofisan: So of course I take my inspiration from there you know. When I'm composing the songs I'm thinking of traditional dirges among our people... singing *orin aro*⁴ and all that. So I'm already thinking of that. And you know... umm... wedding songs that they have. So... I'm trying to actually... I've written a paper about my coming to music you know. I'm not- I never thought I could write songs myself. Until I began to work with Tunji Oyelana. And if you are familiar with Tunji Oyelana...

Balogun: Hm.

Prof Osofisan: You know how he sings at very culturally rich you know. And since he composed most of my songs you know. Normally-

Balogun: Your other plays, the early plays?

Prof Osofisan: Yeah, when he was around... even up to now if- unless he's busy I prefer him to do all the songs in my plays. So I just write the plays and indicate where songs will be and give them to him. So when he has finished then I rework them and then I work on lyrics and so, then we sit down again we play together you know. When he has the time, when I have the time you know. We will go with a guitar and so on back and forth, back and forth until it came to... but he was always the principle inspiration. So when I sit down to compose a song, I'm actually trying to revive Tunji Oyelana in myself, I'm thinking how will he... how will he you know (*laughs*)... and finally I get something. But you know he is the principle motivator.

Balogun: For the music?

Prof Osofisan: Yes. Umm... so that is that actually. So when he is not around then I have to compose myself, it's Tunji who inspires me.

Balogun: There was this connection that a number of people have been trying to do... with the *Women of Owu* and the Iraqi war. And then to some extent we are looking at some, apart from the history, some aspect of very recent history of violence and so on and so forth. Especially the ones dealing with women. You see there is something significant about *Antigone (not quite/not quiet)* that Mark Fleishman just did and that is the way that he centres women.

Prof Osofisan: Can you stop it sorry.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder

Balogun: Okay so I was asking about- I was trying to mention that one of the things, one of the powerful aspects of Mark Fleishman's *Antigone (not quite/not quiet)* is the way he centres women at the middle of the action. Well *Antigone* we have Jennie⁵ taking the first part of it as a solo performer and then doing *Antigone* but *Ismene*. But by the time we have *Antigone*, we had a whole cast, ensemble of people, something close to like the Greek chorus but this is even more than the kind of chorus that the Greek had. Now we have something similar in your own play in terms of bringing to the centre, the lamentation of the women. But then grounding it in that Yoruba sensibility where these women had to make use of a whole lot of *aro*⁶ and so on and so forth. Is there any particular- apart from the fact that *Women of Owu, Trojan Women*, is there really something more dramatically

⁴ dirges

⁵ Jennie Reznick. Performer and writer for Part 1: *Ismene* section of *Antigone (not quite/not quiet)*.

⁶ dirges

significant in terms of centring situations dealing specifically with women? In relation to the dramaturgy of the....

Prof Osofisan: Well okay... I mean there are many aspects of it. First of all you know, you know I've always taken the side of women you know...

Balogun: Yes in most of your plays.

Prof Osofisan: ... in my plays you know. But the point is that I also want to counter the Western view that it's an individual act.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: The individual doesn't just act alone you know. He is surrounded by a number of other women you know. So that Tegonni is not just Tegonni, she *is* Tegonni but she's also all the other sisters who are with her, who are giving her support, who are... pushing her on. So the hero is not a hero alone, you know. So you have other women Kunbi etc who also surround Tegonni, who give her the encouragement and so on, they're collective heroes you know. *Women of Owu* in any case this is all about women, so there's even no choice you know about that, not so much of a choice. The women... but it's also important to show that the women are not of the same mind all the time, you know. It's not just a sea of women without colour or contrast you know. Each one has her own view and all that. It's not just one woman. But it's the women who suffer. Who suffer when there's war. The women in various ways suffer, okay. We can just pause... you know, and then we can go on.

Balogun: So in a way because when Mark Fleishman's version also really emphasised that aspect of you know... the plight of the women in terms of being raped, being dehumanised, being brutalised and in the performance of *Women of Owu* that I saw, the one you directed at the National Theatre, we had the same thing, and we had the Erelu Afin having to be the one... you know carrying the weight of all of these tragic... situation. That's why at the end, towards the end of the play where we had that kind of a ritual dance and then she collapses in the middle, it appeared that the tragedy was complete so to speak. But in a way if we look beyond the plights of the women, are you trying to say that what is happening to the women is actually what we have caused and what we are at the same time faced with- the consequences?

Prof Osofisan: Well I mean you know I think in a way it's probably easier for the men. In the sense that it's clearer you know in what you have to do. Go and fight and die and that's all. But the ones who are left behind, who are not fighting in front of the war, they go through a lot of- they are the ones you have to think of how people will eat, how they will survive, how the children will not go down. I mean... almost every second you know of trauma. Even a soldier you are taking care of by your battalion or by your commanders. So you die anyway (*laughs*) you go away and so you solve the problem you know. But what of the women who are left behind? And if you are wounded it's the women who also have to care for you, who will find a way, how you eat and so on, who will nurse you. The thing is really hard for the women and for the children who have no choice. You know they are not, nobody asked them their view or anything. They are brought to the world in spite of themselves. Then they find themselves in this, no father, no... It's really terrible. And the women who have to care for them are... for the children too. But the bulk of this... the consequences are born by the women. It's the women... and they are the ones who can actually stop the war if they want to. You know by using their- putting pressures on the men you know not to fight, not to do... Or encourage it by- encourage the men to go and fight, hero-worshipping them and so on. Push the men you know. Look at Lady Macbeth for example. So... this is why the women are very central to all this... uh social problems you know.

Balogun: And if you look at the play, and if you look at the staging of what you did there was this emphasis there. To the extent that... what the women go through at the end of the day becomes a sort of trauma even for the men who actually were in the theatre that saw the performance, in a way. Because that's some kind of metaphor for... what they have created but are unable to manage you know. In terms of (*chuckles*) creating the problem that-

Prof Osofisan: I don't know that they are unable to manage. They just don't care about the women, that's all.

Balogun: mmm.

Prof Osofisan: They hardly put the perspectives of the women or the children in (*laughs*) to account when they're doing this. In fact if they do it, there'll probably be abused and say they're cowards (*laughs*). Clinging to you the wrappers of the women and all that... They don't give a damn about the women. It's their own will to go and fight for valour, fight for land, fight for you know glory and so on. The women are just victims. Of course not all women. Some women are warriors you know, as we know. But the bulk of the wars are caused by...

Balogun: Some of them are even very clever enough to even manipulate the situation. Adumaadan for instance when Maye Okunade comes in to want to execute her and she's still-

Prof Osofisan: Iyunloye.

Balogun: Iyunloye. And she's still able to turn the table around and umm... Is there something about the kind of power that the women have in spite of being victims of some of these kind of-

Prof Osofisan: Some of them, not all women, some women.

Balogun: Some of them.

Prof Osofisan: And... I mean down the ages this has been a problem. The power that some women hold/have on their men... Cleopatra and Caesar for example, you know (*chortles*). How do you explain that? I mean men who are otherwise very clear-headed and... become weaklings (*laughs*) because of some women.

Balogun: The women.

Prof Osofisan: Yeah. They lose their senses you know. And yet... in other circumstances very brutal, very clear-headed, very strong but some women comes and (*laughs*) and they become totally unreasonable, irrational and so on. Nobody cares... but I guess that's why the two genders have been created (*laughs*).

Balogun: (*Laughs*) In the first instance.

Balogun: Prof. thank you so very much for granting this wonderful interview.

Prof Osofisan: Well I hope we have been able to... (*laughs*)-

Balogun turns off the audio recorder