

Interview

Interviewee:

Nosa Omoregie

Interviewer:

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Balogun: Okay, I'm here with another Nigerian actor who has been a production manager in quite a whole number of professional shows in Nigeria. Please can we meet you officially?

Omoregie: My name is Nosa Omoregie.

Balogun: So Omoregie it is a pleasure being with you. So this project that we are having an interview on is entitled "Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South (RETAGS). It's being led by Professor Mark Fleishman, director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town in South Africa. The starting point is that we are looking at the reimagination of Greek Tragedies in Africa and some of other places. And as a student of a Nigerian artist I'm sure without any doubt, you must have been involved in one adaptation of a Greek play, in your career as a graduate of theatre and a professional theatre practitioner. Would you like to talk about it?

Omoregie: Yeah. I think the major one that I'm very familiar with is *The Gods are not to Blame*.

Balogun: What?

Omoregie: *The Gods are not to Blame*.

Balogun: *The Gods are not to Blame*, that's Ola Rotimi.

Omoregie: Ola Rotimi, *The Gods are not to Blame*. I actually played Gbonka. Then I think that was 1998 ...

Balogun: 1998?

Omoregie: Yeah.

Balogun: That was about how many years ...

Omoregie: It was like 20 ...

Balogun: 21 years ago. Wow, that's interesting. Gbonka, Gbonka was the man that was given the baby to take it to the bush, and told to kill it ...

Omoregie: Told to kill it, but he decide to ...

Balogun: Okay, tell us a bit about that production, at least the bits you can still remember.

Omoregie: You see those days, *The Gods are not to Blame*, is one of the *best play ever performed* or that even got myself involved, you know. But you know at that time theatre was a kind of a very important thing... everybody wanted to act, everybody wanted to perform so we do it with every

energy that we had. So we tried not to interpret it, the way the director wants us to. Or that some people don't do research. We went as far as going to Badagry so that we could get adequate concentration on what we are actually doing. Then we just pass--

Balogun: Badagry is like the border to the Republic of Benin

Omoregie: Benin, yeah. So we have to camp there, we camped ourselves for almost two weeks there.

Balogun: Okay, so you prepared the play in a camp just to be away from the city ...

Omoregie: Because already we were supposed to come and perform it to different schools in Lagos State. So we needed a place out of Lagos. We started in Igbobi college, where we normally have rehearsals, you know. But due to, that was when our late president died.

Balogun: Abacha.

Omoregie: Abacha, and the whatever, so went back to Badagry. So that's ...

Balogun: Okay, so let's look at ... so you played ...

Omoregie: Gbonka.

Balogun: ... can you remember the number of actors that were involved in the play?

Omoregie: Well ...

Balogun: I know it is quiet long [ago].

Omoregie: Yeah, yeah, I can say we were maybe up to like 15 or there about 20.

Balogun: 15.

Omoregie: Yeah.

Balogun: Okay. Considering that the play is an epic then it means the director must have tried to manage a small cast.

Omoregie: Yes.

Balogun: Because I would imagine that a small cast, I have talked to people who have said they have used about 40 people.

Omoregie: Yes, yes. There was no fund.

Balogun: To produce it?

Omoregie: Yeah. Even the director did as a result of passion for theatre.

Balogun: Oh.

Omoregie: And we raise fund among ourselves.

Balogun: To put the play onstage?

Omoregie: To put the play onstage. Majorly because, one he has played Odewale before...

Balogun: You mean the director?

Omoregie: The director.

Balogun: Okay. So he acted in the play and he wanted to direct ...

Omoregie: He *wanted* to direct it, and there was this crisis of finance. So he needed to bring fresh graduates from secondary school just to achieve his aim probably after then to start going to different schools for financial, you know, purposes.

Balogun: Okay, so what was his approach like, the directorial approach? How did he approach the work?

Omoregie: The directorial approach was somehow ... kind of rigid.

Balogun: What do you mean?

Omoregie: Thank you. Rigid, in the sense that he wants to realise what he has gotten from the script. There was no ...

Balogun: He just relied on Ola Rotimi ...

Omoregie: ... Ola Rotimi, yeah. And in fact he was more unfortunately the man, the director that played Odewale again.

Balogun: In the same play?

Omoregie: Today, unfortunately the person lost his sight.

Balogun: Wow, that is interesting.

Omoregie: And that's one of the most interesting. I think about the point of the play Odewale removed his eyes, I used to think that because of, you know ... *The Gods are not to Blame* is a very powerful, looking at it from well the script, and again comparing it to the real African culture, that it has a very strong meaning.

Balogun: Kind of metaphysical ...

Omoregie: Thank you.

Balogun: mmm... (pause) So in real life, the guy who directed the play and acted Odewale, in real life at the moment he is blind?

Omoregie: Yes and his name is Dotun Adegbite

Balogun: That's an interesting one.

Balogun: So it means that now considering the fact that there was no funds all of you guys who were involved did it out of passion, so obviously the process of putting it together must have been restricted, apart from you going to camp? And you are in the camp for two weeks?

Omoregie: Two weeks.

Balogun: So how many days did you run the show? When you brought it back to Lagos onstage, how many performances?

Omoregie: I think it was like four.

Balogun: Four performance?

Omoregie: Four performance, I think.

Balogun: The same venue?

Omoregie: No we were going to different venues.

Balogun: Different venues. So you have four performances in four different venues? And you know it feels like *The Gods* rely so much on use of music, dance, choreography... How did you -

Omoregie: Funny enough then, the choreography wasn't really reflecting ...

Balogun: Why?

Omoregie: Thank you. Because one, the cast was few

Balogun: mmm.

Omoregie: And again the director basically relied on the message ...

Balogun: Okay, he emphasized dialogue.

Omoregie: Yes.

Balogun: Alright.

Omoregie: And so the music side, the choreography dance side wasn't really coming up, then -

Balogun: He didn't pay that much attention?

Omoregie: ... much attention because there was no dancers ... except -

Balogun: Oh, there were no dancers? (chuckles)

Omoregie: No dancers. The only thing we could use was the music to illustrate some certain things.

Balogun: So how was the music generated? Like normal songs ...

Omoregie: Yeah, yeah mixed Yoruba songs then the Bini song, (he sings a short tune) – that's Ibo.

Balogun: That's Ibo?¹

Omoriegie: Yeah because I think he had done some few things with the National Theatre t...

Balogun: National Troupe?

Omoriegie: National Troupe, so he could get all those music. And in fact we learnt from that side, so we played on the music. He just used the women and some of the men that could sing to ...

Balogun: And what about the costumes?

Omoriegie: Yeah, the costume. Funnily enough the costume was created or ...

Balogun: Built?

Omoriegie: ... (*tentatively agreeing*) yeah built then some of us came with our parents' old attires. Because they are old, I brought my own grandfathers agbada.

Balogun: Costume to perform?

Omoriegie: Yeah you know to perform. Not to perform for myself because Gbonka didn't really need anything ...

Balogun: Yeah

Omoriegie: So to help the King, Adetusa himself, you know. Then Odewale then never needed... who is Odewale?

Balogun: The lead character.

Omoriegie: ... the lead... no what about this ...Aderopo.

Balogun: Aderopo.

Omoriegie: Aderopo didn't need anything elaborate too. So we played down Aderopo. Then we have to lift the char -

Balogun: So you are just an economical use of -

Omoriegie: Yes, very good, that's the word.

Balogun: Now let's look at that play, in the context of our socio-reality. To what extent can you say that *The Gods are not to Blame* actually dramatises what does that mean, outside and not the one that is performed onstage?

Omoriegie: Yes you see, funny enough you actually brought me back to that time of performance. Funny enough when we were reading the script or performing, we felt we belonged to the past.

Balogun: You felt what?

Omoriegie: That belongs to the past. As in, what has happened in the past and what... Because now I am seeing it even in the present.

Balogun: What specifically are you talking about?

Omoriegie: Yes, like man sleeping with the mother ...

Balogun: With the mother? Okay that story ...

Omoriegie: You know the prophecy and Odewale ...

Balogun: ... killed the father

Omoriegie: ... killed the father.

Balogun: Okay, if I got you, when you were staging the play you thought that the play that that kind of subject would only happen in the past or can only be imagined ...

Omoriegie: Imagined, yeah, thank you.

Balogun: But it is happening in real life -

Omoriegie: It is reality now.

Balogun: mmm.

¹ That was actually Benin (Edo) song/tune

Omoregie: In fact we have had several cases. In fact in the school I happen to be very close to one of their publicists. There are certain reported case of such. And presently Lagos -

Balogun: Of a man ...

Omoregie: Of a man dating the daughter, sleeping with the daughter.

Balogun: mmm.

Omoregie: And it's even rampant now that Lagos State has given all the schools, private schools, a kind of an alert that should inform them if somethings happen – that it's happening.

Balogun: So incest is now like a very common thing.

Omoregie: It's so common.

Balogun: You can actually have a father, you know ...

Omoregie: Most things....

Balogun: ... sleeping with a daughter ...

Omoregie: ...I think that -

Balogun: ... you have the mother sleeping with his son, with her son.

Omoregie: That one has even happened... it's all over the place now.

Balogun: Oh –

Omoregie: ..it's on the news.

Balogun: it's in the media?

Omoregie: Yes, the woman said because she felt she had used all her money or everything in order to train the child. I tell you it's becoming something, she doesn't want her child to take the wealth outside. She preferred that the child bring a bit back home.

Balogun: And ...

Omoregie: And then she decided

Balogun: She thought that would happen if ...

Omoregie: Yeah.

Balogun: She marries her own son.

Omoregie: And there is a case again that the guy happens to be in year two or three in the university, one of Nigerian University. That was sleeping with the mother.

Balogun: mmm.

Omoregie: And he could tell anybody. It was through his friend, and his friend happens to be a kind of a son to maybe an evangelist or a pastor.

Balogun: mmm.

Omoregie: That if he released this secret to the son, the son have to go tell the parents and they have to...

Balogun: That's an interesting one.

Omoregie: So it's becoming...

Balogun: So in a way if you look at it, are you suggesting that, of course we imagine that *The Gods are not to Blame* is fictitious, it is actually a representation of a socio-reality. That's an interesting one. You know Ola Rotimi is also a visionary, the writer said that he wrote the play to condemn the Nigerian Civil War. In terms of tribal and ethnic bigotry, tribal sentiment and so on and so forth. You don't think there's a kind of possibility of reading the play in that light?

Omoregie: Well, as a student of theatre and because I've read about some playwrights. At times they write plays out of inspiration or out of ... that strong ...how will I put it, bite that they want to write a play. But they are not actually in control of that concept of creating what they are writing. It comes, so all they do is to release it.

Balogun: mmm.

Omoriegie: And once they finished, I think Wole Soyinka said that once they finish writing they have forgotten what they wrote about. It is the people and society that come to see what the playwright has written.

Balogun: And give it interpretation ...

Omoriegie: And give it interpretation.

Balogun: Their own interpretation.

Omoriegie: In fact, in my life I have come to admit that there is nothing a playwright or an actor does, that doesn't happen.

Balogun: mmm.

Omoriegie: They are just an instrument to create the story. Because everything that has been written has happened. Except if you are not knowledgeable. If you are knowledgeable you have read, so you are someone that reads. I don't like reading much, but I like watching plays and reading plays. In fact maybe watching a play would draw me back to when I read about that play. Are you getting my point? So I have seen, I have come to that conclusion and realising that there's not that a playwright writes that doesn't exist. And I stand to be corrected.

Balogun: mmm... (pause)... that's interesting also.

Balogun: Thank you so very much for sparing your time to do this interview.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder