

Interview

Interviewee:

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Balogun: Okay, good afternoon.

Coker: Good afternoon.

Balogun: So can we meet you?

Coker: Yes, I'm Oluwatimilehin Michael Coker. I'm an actor. I have to my credit some plays, *Ogun Skugga*, *Once upon an Elephant* that was staged at the National Theatre, and so forth.

Balogun: Okay, yeah. Timilehin let's start like this. How would you describe tragedy?

Coker: Well I'd say tragedy is the totality of all the unpleasant things that happen, that exist.

Balogun: mmm, wow, that's interesting (*chuckles*). Can you be a bit, maybe, some of those totality of things that we do, maybe you can be a bit more-

Coker: Yeah, for example if there is, if someone needs the seat I consider someone needs the seat and doesn't have a chair, things as simple as that. I consider them tragedies because they upset the wish of that person that needs to sit. And so it's also a tragedy when probably a bomb goes off somewhere and a hundred and something people die. They are both tragedies on different scales, with different magnitudes and effects, they are all tragedies. So every unpleasant thing that happens is in effect, a tragedy.

Balogun: So you think tragedy in this sense can be both personal and collective?

Coker: Yes, yes indeed.

Balogun: mmm. So in that sense how would you now say something, okay this is a tragic situation-

Coker: mmm.

Balogun: - how would you, is there any way we can, you know delineate some kind of difference between when we say this is a tragic situation and this is tragedy. Now because of, the way you define tragedy is interesting. So how would you link it to tragic situations-

Coker: I like to take a very relativist view to it. I believe that when you deconstruct tragedy as a concept you discover that tragedy does not have a universal meaning. And I did place an emphasis on effect. When you're talking about effect, tragedy does not effect everybody the same way. While as

long as it causes some sort of upset, causes some sort of unpleasantness and you can always characterise that situation as tragic.

Balogun: Okay now let's come back to the plays that you've done. The two plays or so that you mentioned now, are tragedies.

Coker: mmm.

Balogun: Umm... let's take *Once upon an Elephant*.

Coker: Yes sir.

Balogun: What was your role in that play?

Coker: Well I played Lere.

Balogun: Who is this Lere?

Coker: Lere is a friend, a bosom friend to Dele. One of the, I'll call it the centres in the midst of the youth. They are very jocular and *laissez-faire* about stuff. They are not the most kind guys. And almost every time they are the ones playing the *agent provocateurs* to all the actions. They are not agreeable.

Balogun: And you think we have people like that in the society?

Coker: Yes. I feel like we all have a bit of Lere in us. Difference and that's also why I said it's relativist. In certain situations Dele and Lere raised certain important, brought certain important things to light but for most of the time they were just clogs in the wheel of progress. So, it is very very important to understand that these things go together.

Balogun: Okay, so how did you prepare for that role? What was it like, you know, getting to... In that context we'll say in the relationship that we have amongst the youth, we'll classify your role as one of those antagonists.

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: So to speak.

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: So, how did you prepare for, you know, that kind of a role? Considering ordinarily that's not your nature or is that your nature in real life?

Coker: Well I did say we all have a bit of Lere in us. So, because if you call it an antagonist I believe that we can all be antagonists and protagonists to certain causes. So I believe number one, I channelled into my inner antagonist.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: That's very important to understand that. Where you are not supposed to be an agreeable person, per this role. And then I think to be very very very very considerable extent, the playwright, Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan, really wrote the characters well. They were very very, you could see that there was complexity to the character as well. She introduces them to you in a very very simple way. So it was very very easy to tap into what you were supposed to be. And then moving forward, I do recollect going home, watching movies because it was set in a Yoruba scene. Watching movies, especially those ones that are very very old... old Yoruba...

Balogun: Almost Epic?

Coker: Yes, Epics. To understand how the traditional Yoruba antagonist is supposed to be. His inflections, his, you know, and the way he reacts to certain people's reactions to his antagonism. So those were the kind of things I did in preparation for the role.

Balogun: mmm. Now let's look at that play in totality.

Coker: Yeah.

Balogun: Yeah. How much of the real world did that play reflect?

Coker: Well... I feel like actors, performers onstage we are all living in an ecosystem, you get. We are all existing; we are all part of the real world. So every single scene that is done onstage is... it is deliberate, yes. But they are all representational of what we can obtain in the real world.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: Certain actions are magnified because... yes, drama aims to draw attention to certain issues. Drama cannot aim to discuss every single issue, it can only draw, it can only magnify certain topics, certain characters in society. But they have to be based on a society. So yes, *Once upon an Elephant* was pretty much representational of society.

Balogun: Now let's get a bit into the process of putting the play together, the rehearsal-

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: - the rehearsal process, you know. Let's talk about the casting, the rehearsal process. Some of which maybe you can remember some of it.

Coker: Yeah I remember we had a reading. I remember we had a reading and everybody had a fair chance to be casted into certain roles. And I feel like by and large the casting was superb because a lot of us were put in roles that, he thought- we didn't even know we could do but upon encountering the script with the help of the director and the crew, we, and other cast members were able to deliver. So to a very very large extent I think the rehearsal process was one that was very very engaging, it helped the actors to learn more.

Balogun: So what is one or two moments, or directorial choices that you really find interest in, in relation to how it helps you to really play your role.

Coker: Yeah, something I really found interesting was... I remember there was a time, this one actually happened in performance but it is something that happened because we had good rehearsals. I remember one of the actors came onstage late and then all of us, the youths, were onstage already. And one of us, I think it was me, just gave a line, an ad-lib, that wasn't recorded but just happened because we had been told to read, re-read, research, be attuned with the script, we had done lots of concentration exercises. I'm pretty sure that no audience member could have- even the ones that watched the first show could not have, none of them could have predicted that that wasn't part of our blocking.

Balogun: So it was a spontaneous reaction?

Coker: Yes, yes! It was spontaneous, it was instinctive and it was born out of the fact that all of us had, in the rehearsals were attuned to rehearsing, we were engaging ourselves, we knew each other's lines, we could cover for each other. Even the rehearsals and then he just brought out that instinct during performance.

Balogun: Okay apart from that... well you didn't dance?

Coker: I didn't.

Balogun: But what was it like, you know you were-

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: - at the rehearsal you saw some of those dances and music. How would you describe them in relation to their effect in the play generally?

Coker: Yeah, I think the dance, for example, the dance was well co-ordinated. I won't make pretensions to be an authority on that but I do know that the dances were very very interpretative when an action was going to happen. I mean there were even times when, if you had been attentive enough actions had been played out during dance that didn't need to be repeated. When movements in acting were taking place. And then the music was well co-ordinated, we had an

assorted certain range of- I remember I was part of the orchestra. We had an assorted range of drums, we had an assorted range of vocal types, so music was really good.

Balogun: So let's come back to it. So do you think the kind of drama that we have onstage, that is dramatised...

Coker: mmm.

Balogun: ... have some kind of a deeper effect on the audience than the one that we encounter in everyday life?

Coker: Yeah, I did mention magnification.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: The thing is in everyday life, just like I said, there are so many tragedies. So in everyday life we encounter millions of tragedies in a day.

Balogun: To the extent that we don't- we kind of got used to-

Coker: Yes, we get desensitised. So we become desensitised to all these tragedies. But what happens onstage is, you know, theatre says look this is an issue. The director, the playwright says this is an issue, and this is where I am going to focus my lens. This is where I'm going to channel my creative energy. And so you are able to see that thing in isolation, in isolation from all the other tragedies that you hear about, that you encounter, that you go through. So that is where theatre comes in as a magnifying glass. So there is, when you encounter tragedy onstage it's every tendency that it's magnified and you are attuned to it more than you are in real life.

Balogun: So you think that theatre, the power of the theatre to isolate a particular tragedy and dramatise it. You think it gives it a greater force?

Coker: Yes, yes, yes. Because at the end of the day, as I said before, we encounter so many tragedies that it just becomes a case of desensitising yourself from it. So many things you won't even see them as tragedies, it's just like in Nigeria you don't see power outages as tragedies again.

Balogun: Whereas?

Coker: Whereas they are actually tragedies.

Balogun: It's a national tragedy.

Coker: Yes, so if you bring, what's it called, onstage... the issue of Nigeria for example. And there is a power outage onstage and you make the power outage central to the plot, then you've obviously made these people realise that look come home. You are supposed to be sensitised to the fact that you don't have power. You get? So that's what you've done. So in any case, theatre, drama helps us onstage to magnify, to make big, to exaggerate these problems and to isolate them and bring them to our focus.

Balogun: Yeah that play we talk about, *Once upon an Elephant*, a story of a young man who was, another man kind of manipulated the way for the young man to assume the throne and then this man becomes a tyrant. And then the whole society is in trouble. But eventually when he is defeated you realise that the man who manipulated the way for him is actually his real father.

Coker: Yes, yes.

Balogun: Now, how are we supposed to deal with that kind of tragic situation?

Coker: Well the play is Yoruba and it's traditional Yoruba-

Balogun: But that doesn't mean that, tragedies are only particular to the Yoruba.

Coker: Yes, of course. So I think it shows that- and it's pre-colonial, so I think it shows that in Yoruba, Nigerian, African, world society. Even before colonial influences. There's been cases where people have tried to rule by proxy. You can even see it in our modern world when, during the Cold War, where the United States and the USSR fought through proxies, they would use smaller nations to do

their dirty work. And then it is reflective in today's politics too. What we have godfatherism and stuff. Where people want to rule through proxies even whilst they are not career politicians that did not, that are not actually there for the good of the people. And are only working for their own gains. So yes, society can only deal with it by coming back to... to certain concepts like the *Ubuntu* concepts that we all are because we all exist because one of us exists. One person, a group of people make up a community. So at the end of the day if we all see ourselves as our brothers keepers, if we all see ourselves as transient beings, that are just here to play our part onstage, on the stage that is life. I would try as much as possible that the next person who is coming after us has it better than we do. You get? Then things would be better.

Balogun: So you think these concepts, this whole concept of *Ubuntu*, this idea of collective responsibility-

Coker: Responsibility.

Balogun: - you see the breakdown of all of these can itself be considered tragedy?

Coker: Yes, yes. I think one of the tragedies about our concept is a selfish person probably made it. Because we are all humans and we are bound to be selfish.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: A selfish person, selfish people made that- this thing, to protect their own communality. Now it has happened that even in the creation of that thing because selfish people have made it for selfish people.

Balogun: That's the *Ubuntu* idea?

Coker: Yes, the whole concept. So because selfish people have made it for selfish people the thing is dead on arrival no matter how noble it seems. Because humans are by nature individualist and then of course when we see that community pays the individual, they tend to run and (*inaudible text*) But then there is a tragedy because the whole concept is itself...the concept is not realistic. An egalitarian society is from one indication is unrealistic, it is farce.

Balogun: It seems you have tried to (*chuckles*) hint at the failure of the whole concept as some form of tragedy.

Coker: Yes I feel like... every single human system is a tragedy. I remember one of my favourite bands, *Megadeth*, made a song in the 70's¹ and they said "Peace sells but who's buying?"² and then that if there is a new system that are all ready to go into it. Now since that time I remember it was Reagan, that was in the 80's, Reagan was the president or something?

Balogun: Of America?

Coker: Yes, and then we've had so many changes in America. We've had so many people from the far left, from the far right. The guy there now is from the far right. And *Megadeth*, the members are still alive and the system still isn't working. You get? So the thing is, there's tragedy of the human society?? There will be no system that actually works. Because for it to work you have to take into account the billions of individual minds that have to be pulled together to make that still work. And their own egos.

Balogun: mmm. So in a way you are kind of hinting a very dark picture. Like everywhere you turn there is some kind of tragedy-

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: - and there seems not to be any escape.

¹ While the interviewee claimed the song was from the 70's, the band *Megadeth* only formed in 1983.

² From *Megadeth's* 1986 album "Peace Sells... but Who's Buying?"

Coker: You know there is escape.

Balogun: So what is that escape?

Coker: But the escape is ephemeral. When you pay money to watch a theatre show, you pay money to watch the show, you pay money to be introduced into a new realm of tragedy. A tragedy that may make you laugh. I feel like every single thing onstage is a tragedy.

Balogun: Okay so it's not even, it's not every time that you see a tragedy that people mourn.

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: Sometimes you can laugh at the tragedy.

Coker: Yes because when you are going to watch a tragic play it might be excusing you from the tragedies of your own personal life. Because you are probably watching a tragedy of another society onstage. Just like an American who is watching the story of Biafra, that's a tragedy of Nigeria and the Igbos. It is not a tragedy of the Swedish person.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: So it probably allows the Swedish person to escape the tragedy there- okay Scandinavians are one of the- they have one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Because suicide is not really our reality here.

Balogun: In this part?

Coker: But it is our reality, the civil war is our reality, genocide is our reality. So you understand. So even theatre is a means of escaping that thing and that's why the world is increasingly becoming theatrical. Everything is done, is staged-

Balogun: Okay are you saying now that tragedy, we could consider it a culturally or socially specific concept?

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: Kind of.

Coker: I remember, I once I got taught about the individual, the community, and then the universe. So this thing is, every single thing comes down to these people. When there is an individual, when there's a group and the whole world. So at the end of the day, tragedy has to be characterised to these groups. You have an example, someone- if in Yoruba land you lose a King, it's a collective tragedy. But in some form it is a good thing because then it allows for fresh people to come inside. People, like someone, another ruling house is able to come in. And then it's also placed into the Yoruba maxim of newness and freshness, "eja tuntun ti wole."³ So in any case-

Balogun: And even in that circumstance-

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: - somebody died, that death is actually specific tragedy-

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: - for a particular family-

Coker: Yes, for a particular family. Yes the old community might mourn it but it is not that much of a loss. As it is to the family of the person. So tragedy comes in different magnitudes, some are personal, some are community wide and some are just for what they are.

Balogun: mmm. So like... let's say what is happening in the Middle East for instance.

Coker: Yes Middle East is worldwide. I feel like over the years-

Balogun: Why do you think Middle East is worldwide? It's not happening in Lagos where we are-

³ "New fishes have entered into the ocean" a sort of renewal.

Coker: Wait but if you look at the fact that the Middle East, the problems in the Middle East have affected almost every single nation. Because I feel like there are few nations that have not lost something to the violence over there. We come to Nigeria, we see that they have sleeper cells in Nigeria, the Boko Haram, they have... all these organisations in many ways see these organisations that do similar things like conduct attacks in the Middle East as forerunners, as forebears. Some of them even have direct links to them. You have, I remember there was this dossier released in 2017 or so by the CIA. Where Nigeria was being warned about the Shiite. I think this was during Jonathan era. I do not remember. Because they have direct links to Hezbollah that is being sponsored by Iran to conduct terrorist attacks. So things like that, we find out, and because of the way the country is- I mean the world has gradually become smaller. Due to technology, you see that...

Balogun: Globalisation.

Coker: Yes, you see that just as much as you can import good things, good ideas in a twinkle of an eye you can also export bad ones. So what is happening in the Middle East is really tragic, it's a worldwide tragedy.

Balogun: mmm. So in a way, let's consider this one before we wrap up the interview.

Coker: Yes sir.

Balogun: mmm. That particular play that you talked about, *Once upon an Elephant*, I know one of the strongest tools was music as the material of, you know, projecting the tragedy that the play dramatizes. How would you, would you like to talk about that?

Coker: Well... I did mention it before, the play was a Yoruba play. So the Yorubas are very very... the Yorubas are a people of records. The Yorubas have 500 mediums to record something, they will use it to record a single event. No matter how insignificant you might think it is. Now during the play we imbibed that, every single member of the play, whether you were supposed to be in the orchestra or you were supposed to be dancing, was implored to sing. Because that was the only way the music could project the community. If everybody was singing, if everybody could relate to this story being sung, the lyrics being projected. If everybody could relate to it, then it outlined that this was a community of people who were expressing the same thing, same tragedies, were going through the same channels. So the music was very very integral in that.

Balogun: You must have seen the last Convocation play, *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Coker: Yes I did.

Balogun: And then you know that's a tragedy.

Coker: Yes.

Balogun: I want to ask. Do you think that the aim of the adaptor is simply to portray the fact that the society in which we live in, is inescapably tragic?

Coker: Yes. I think when you look at it the director was deliberate. There was, you could find the myriad of cultures there.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: So that was to tell us that, look whether you are Black, you're White, you're Ibibio, you're Igbo, you're a Yoruba... there is one thing we all share, and that is unpleasantness. There's one thing we all share that's bad surprises. That's one thing we all share, that's tragic flaws and... The director was trying to say, look let's all come together to experience this, let's all understand that tragedy is a human constant.

Balogun: mmm.

Coker: So, yes that was the director's aim.

Balogun: mmm. Now to what extent do you think those directorial choices actually worked? To give some kind of resonance to tragedy.

Coker: Yes umm... I feel like since the director employed those things, I feel everybody that watches it, that saw the play would have seen that... there is a certain universality about tragedy and that's what the adaptor is trying to say. So I feel like, because it was even amplified so much that from the costumes you could tell that this person was from this place. From their tongues, from the inflections, from the languages they spoke; you could tell that this person was from this place. So yes, it was very very effective. I feel like it was very very exciting in putting it in the minds of the audience that there's a universality about tragedy. That tragedy, the tragedy of the protagonist is not just a personal tragedy. It is first of all a personal tragedy, but if you look at it in the actual sense it is not just a personal tragedy it's a communal and worldwide one.

Balogun: mmm. Okay. Timilehin Coker thank you so very much for this brilliant interview.

Coker: Thank you sir.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder