

CAPTURING THE PAST IN SCENIC DESIGN OF VIDEO FILMS: FEMI LASODE'S SANGO AS A PARADIGM

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Abstract

Apart from the aesthetic function, scenic designs in stage and screen theatrical productions create enabling environment to enhance character interpretation of actors and actresses. This is more so in historical plays that compel capturing of the past in costume, make-up, set and properties. A close watch of some Nigerian Video films have revealed that, detail attention is not given to scenic design in modern and historical films. While this is made up for in rented well-furnished apartments and hotel rooms in films with modern setting, much still need to be done in films with traditional setting of the past in history. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the use of scenic design to capture the past in the film, 'Sango' by Femi Lasode. With the enactment of the past in design of the film, Sango, it is recommended that historical or periodical films should always capture the past in set, costume and properties. Creating the architecture of the period in history will go a long way to authenticate the history being dramatised. Closely allied to this, is the fabrication of the attire in vogue to enhance characterisation. This should be spiced up with appropriate make-up and properties for aesthetic. Casting the minds of the audience back to the period in history therefore demands from the set designer, costumier and make-up artist thorough research and resourcefulness.

Keywords: Capturing, the past, scenic design, video films

Introduction

In simplest terms, scene design is the designing, executing and lighting of a stage setting. Scene design in the modern theatre is concerned with the total visual effect of a dramatic production. In any production, the total visual effect is the sum of all elements that depend upon being seeing to make their impression on the audience. The scenic background is the largest and most obvious visual elements that support the spoken word of the dramatic forms (Parker & Smith, 1979:14).

This definition and postulation on scenic design underscores its importance in

stage and screen productions. The visual effect of scenic design is discernible in creating the environment of the play that is captivating to the audience. This is enhanced with appropriate costume, make-up and properties relevant to the characterization and the period of the setting.

However, in the flourishing Nigeria Video Film industry much attention is not giving to this creative aspect of the theatre. There are only exceptions in some historical plays that demand capturing the period in architecture, costume, make-up and properties. In plays with modern setting the access to well furnished private houses and

hotels has contributed to the neglect of Scene Designers to save cost. The flaw in this arrangement in video films with modern setting, is the contrast in the furnishing of the sitting rooms and the bedrooms. This is because the benevolence to use the sitting rooms are not extended to the bedrooms.

An attestation to this relegation of scene designers to the background in home video productions is the fact that, there is no guild for scene designers in the industry. It is pertinent here to note that, the choice of tastefully furnished sitting rooms for stories with modern setting in particularly, Yoruba and Hausa films is a recent development inspired by the healthy rivalry from the English Segment of the industry.

Essence of Scenic Design in Stage and Screen Productions

The inevitability of scenic design in dramatic production lies in the fact that, it encompasses all the visual elements that arrest the eyes of the audience to sustain interest. These visual elements are namely the set, costume, make-up, light, colour and sound effects when necessary. The symbiotic relationship of these visual elements in design beautifies the environment and enhances action, characterization, establishes time, place and mood. The thematic focus of a play is also reinforced with expressive design.

To Albright as cited in Jacob (2011:3) “design is the visual scheme of the production, including scenery, costume properties and stage lighting”. Design therefore constitute all the elements of production that contribute to visual effect of the production. Actors and actresses do not act in a void but on a set with a background to relate with. For instance, the level of furnishing in a sitting room depicts the social class of the characters. The scenic background, Johnson (2004:199) contends ‘is

the most imposing visual unit in a production. Its primary function is to support the spoken word of dramatic form. To attain the aesthetic in the scenic background, the depiction must truly be the visual interpretation of dramatic genre. For instance, a tragedy could not come with a green or blue colour background. Nor could satire come with royal colours, Johnson (2004:199). This is aptly exemplified in Amaco Investment’s *Queen Pride* and *Palace Crises*. The royal pride, love, betrayal that characterized the two video films is portrayed in use of appropriate colours to express emotion and passion.

Character interpretation has symbiotic relationship with the environment. Characterisation may not be realistic if the scenery is not real. Scene design according to Brockett and Ball (2004:361) virtually characterizes the acting space’. This is done based on production concept. If the concept demands realistic setting, the designer may select architectural details, furniture and decorations that will indicate the period in history. For instance, the persistence setting of witches and cultist scenes in most Nigerian Video Films with red background, black outfit with an embellishment of fetish symbols emboldens the priests and prepares the mind of the characters in the scene and the audience to the unfolding of evil machinations. Plays are in time and place. This is particularly applicable to historical plays. Capturing the past in time and place is mostly achieved in scenic design. A specific time in the historical past, Ododo (2015:38) affirmed that the scenery is most dominantly noticed, so it appears before the actor and remains, even when the actor has left the locale. It is also obvious that in any theatrical production that the scenery goes a long way in interpreting the action being seen.

This is dramatized in Tunde Kelani’s *Oleku* which captures University of Ibadan in the 1960s in setting, costuming make-up and

properties. A similar scenario is replicated in Alaafin's palace in the film, *Afonja* which is set in ancient Oyo town. The audience watching these scenes is translated to the place and time of the event.

Scene design aims to create in the first impression an expression of the mood its relationship to the action and characters. Mood can be described as the quality of a play that, when properly transmitted, effects a state of mind and emotional response in the audience. It can be expressed in such words as sparkling, warm gloomy, violent, earthy, mystic, and so forth (Parker & Smith, 1979:20). The two visual elements normally used to express emotion and moods are colours and light. It could also be enhanced with sound effects. This can be portrayed with blue background, light and costume for a love scene. In contrasts, the mood of a bereaved family can be visually expressed in all black outfits with a set and background that is devoid of decorations.

Theme to Park and Smith (1979:23) is closely linked with mood as well as with the storytelling part of the dramatic form. The expression of theme in scenery cannot always be done pointedly. More often the theme is treated with subtlety and in symbols known only to the designer and his muse. For instance, the home setting of Ukwa with only chairs in the sitting room and his shabby mode of dressing capture the personality of a loiter and unserious person in contrast, the well furnished apartment of his brother, Aguiyi in Lagos and his flamboyant lifestyle reinforces the thematic focus of questionable wealth in the midst of the deprived.

Sango (The Legendary African King) Storyline

Produced by Bourdillion Bodio Eyaguobor and directed by Femi Lasode in 1998, the film is a re-enactment of the life and times of a Yoruba king who reigned in the old

Oyo Empire long before the arrival of Europeans in Africa.

The film depicts the story of legendary *Sango* before he became king. His ascension to the throne, coronation, reign, love with Oya and the historic face-off between Sango and his famous war generals.

It featured these top and seasoned actors and actresses among others; Wale Adebayo (Alaafin Sango), Bunmi Sanya (Oya), Racheal Oniga (Oba), Bukky Ogunnote (Osun), Jide Ogungbade (Alaafin Ajaka), Antar Laniya (Olowu), Jimi Solanke (Oranmiyan's ghost), Albert Aka-Eze (Eliri), Peter Fatomilola (Babalawo Oyo), Wale Ogunyemi (Lagunna), Kola Oyewo (Ashipa), Joe Layode (Elempe), Gbenga Richards (Samu), Laide Adewale (Agbaakin) and Ayo Akinwale (Basorun).

The film opens with warriors in the battle field to re-enact the confrontation between Alaafin Ajaka and Olowu of Owu. The Oyo warriors are eventually subdued with many casualties. Back at the palace, Alaafin Ajaka discusses the war with his chieftains as he awaits his warriors. The discussion is still on, when Olowu's emissaries arrive to arrest Alaafin Ajaka. Amidst protest by his chieftains, Alaafin Ajaka oblige. As he leaves for Owu, he asks Basorun to hold forth for him.

At Owu, as the Olowu awaits the arrival of his messengers, he reiterates the fact that, he cannot spare a king who does not accept his supremacy. He contends that, the invasion of Oyo kingdom by the Fulani warriors is an attestation to Alaafin's weakness. Olowu threatens to dethrone and kill Alaafin should he fail to meet his condition of paying tribute.

Alaafin Ajaka, who feels insulted with the request rejects it with this time tasted saying; "No true born of Oyo is ever subservient to anybody". The Oyo high chiefs return to Oyo to consult Ifa Oracle on the next line of action. The oracle directs them to seek

the assistance of Alaafin Ajaka's brother, Sango who lives in Nupeland.

At the Nupeland, Sango is being inflicted with incisions for power, when Oyo high chiefs, Samu and Agbaakin arrived. The two chiefs met Oya on their way, who describes the way to the new palace to them. On entering, the courtyard of Elempe's palace (King of Nupeland) where Sango resides, the chiefs announce their mission to Sango's wives. One of them instantly leaves for the inner chamber of call Sango. Sango directs them to the King's reception and promise to join them soon. The chiefs are still reporting the detention of Alaafin and the attendant threats, when Sango, breathing heavily bumps in on them. Irked by the degradation of the institution of Alaafin, Sango dashes back into the inner chamber to consult the oracle on how the release of his brother in captivity can be realized.

After performing the sacrifices prescribed by the Ifa priest, Sango goes on to acquire the spiritual power to spit fire and leaves for Owu on the rescue mission. At Owu, Sango prostrates before Olowu in reverence. Olowu rehashes his demand and Sango re-echoes his brother, Alaafin Ajaka that: "to no King, no matter how powerful should we Oyo mortgage our consciousness". As an alternative, Sango asks Olowu to name his price as he is ready to pay a ransom. Olowu lists the items, which comprise two well fed horses, Olowu orders that, Alaafin Ajaka should be released at dawn.

Alaafin Ajaka returns to Oyo and expresses his appreciation to the two high chiefs, and his brother, Sango. He thereafter goes into exile, while Sango returns back to Nupeland, the town of his late mother. At a hustling and bustling market, Sango sights a mysterious lady, who happens to be Oya. He walks up to the lady, introduces himself and continues the chatting by admiring her beauty as they walk side by side. The snubbing by

the lady did not deter Sango, who follows her to her abode in the forest. The lady later conjures water to take her bath while Sango watches from a distance. No sooner she finishes, she transforms to antelope.

Back at Oyo as Alaafin Ajaka is still in exile, the Oyomesi consult the oracle on how to fill the vacuum. Ifa divination subsequently reveals that, the next Alaafin lives far away from Oyo. When the Oyomesi ruminate over it, the name of the prince that crop up in their mind is Sango. This is further confirmed by the oracle.

In the forest, Sango still tracing Oya, steals and hides her leather skin which is source of spiritual power she begs him to return the skin but he refuses and requests that, she becomes his wife. She consents with the condition that, he will keep the secret of her leather skin. Sango returns home with Oya, as he introduces her to his senior wives, Oba and Osun, they inform him the message from Oyo on his choice as the next Alaafin.

Sango is eventually installed on the exalted throne of his forefathers with pomp and pageantry. At Owu, Olowu who feels slighted for not being invited to Alaafin Sango's coronation requests for tributes from him. He thereafter sent his messengers to Oyo to demand for the tribute with a threat to extend his territory to Alaafin Sango's palace if his request is not granted. In furtherance of his affection for his new wife, Alaafin Sango is so much in love with Oya that, he wants to adopt her hair style. He therefore asks her to plait his hair. But, is abomination for anybody to touch Alaafin's head.

It was in this romantic mood that the arrival of Olowu's messengers is announced to Alaafin Sango. Alaafin Sango wearing a new look with his plaited hair adorned with cowries and earring to match comes out to attend to them. He rejects the request and insists that, he is not Olowu's subject. One of the warriors in the palace shows his

resentment at message by cutting off one hand of the messenger. Alaafin reacts instantly that, 'that is an invitation to war' worried by this incessant harassment, Alaafin Sango relocates to Oyo Koro.

Back to Owu, Olowu prepares for war against Alaafin Sango. Alaafin Sango on the other hand, at Oyo consults the oracle on how to subdue Owu. To fortify Oyo koro from external attacks, the oracle directs Alaafin to consult his father, Oranmiyan at Ile-Ife, on the method to adopt. In line with the divination, Alaafin travels to Ile-Ife for further instructions. At Ile-Ife, he prostrates before Opa Oranmiyan, eulogizes him and seeks guidance. Oranmiyan directs Alaafin Sango to Nupeland for solution. At Nupeland, Alaafin acquires a magical axe to prosecute the war. Back to Oyo Koro as he settles down, the Owu warriors invade Oyo Koro. Alaafin and his wife Oya instantly ward them off with rainfall and fire.

At the battle field, Alaafin explores his magical powers to hasten the defeat of Owu warriors. As Oyo peoples call for peace and suspension of hostilities, Oya pleads with Alaafin to give her the charm for spitting fire for save keeping to minimize his temperament.

To achieve peace in his kingdom and minimize the urge for war, Alaafin Sango transfer his war generals out of Oyo town. While Oluode accept the posting to Ede, Eliri (acted by Albert aka Eze) rejects the posting to Osogbo and resolves to remain in Oyo. Oluode eventually ascends the throne of Ede as Timi of Ede. Slighted by the sudden transformation in status of Oluode without his endorsement, Alaafin Sango calls for his head. He immediately sent Eliri a fellow war general to Ede to arrest Oluode. To the amazement of Alaafin and his chieftains, Eliri succeeds in arresting Oluode and bringing him to Oyo with hands and legs tied. As Alaafin Sango is out to eliminate Eliri by

deception, he initiates a physical combat of the war generals in his courtyard to ascertain the more powerful warrior.

Eliri again overcomes, as he overpowers Oluode and cuts off his head. An emboldened Eliri declares to Alaafin that; 'I now know you want me dead' and challenge him to dare him. Irked by this affront, Alaafin Sango dashes into his inner chamber and begs Oya to give him the firespitting charm in her custody. By the time Oya gives him back the charm to spit fire after much pleadings, it has lost its potency in custody. But by the time Alaafin swallows the charm again, the potency is revived as he is able to ignite an inferno that consume the whole palace. He thereafter resolves to retire to his mother's town in Nupeland. The people of Oyo pleads with him to stay back, but the pleading fall on death ears. When Eliri ambushes him on his way out of Oyo, he disappears and later consume him with fire. And so, the king did not hang (Oba ko so) but disappears underground at a place called Koso in present Iseyin Local Government of Oyo State. Ever since then he became a god being worshipped.

Scenic Design in Sango

Sango (1997) directed by Obafemi Lasode paid remarkable attention to design issues. Every costume used in the film was specifically designed and built. Oba's palace and the Nupe scene were designed to reflect the architectural design of the ancient Oyo and Nupe towns that form significant locales in the film Ododo (2006:29).

The above attestation by one of the renowned designers and scholars in Nigeria affirms the effectiveness of design to capture the past in the film, Sango. The scenic design from the well constructed gate at the well crafted throne captures old Oyo and the period in history. It is further embellished with weaved mats on the walls and the floor.

This captivating scenic design is blended with the costume of Aso-Oke (weaved cloth) for all the chieftains. While Alaafin Ajaka and Sango are decked in big gown of Aso-Oke, the high chiefs wear the jumper equivalent of the same material to enhance status and ranking. The construction of gates with royal touch is replicated at the entrance of Olowu's palace. This is backed up with an elevated throne with inscriptions at the back. The same designed gates usher visitors to entrance of Nupeland and the palace of Elempe. This elicits nostalgia of ancient city walls and gates in Nigeria. Modernized version of these walls and gates constructed for defence mechanism against aggression still exist Sokoto, Kano and Zaria.

The throne of the king of Nupeland is a reminiscence of the period in history in terms of the entrances, small windows and the seat placed on a platform. This is enhanced with his costume of richly embroidered gown with a white turban to match. Equally, historic is the Babalawo scene at Oyo and Nupeland with all the paraphernalia of the oracle in terms of cowries, curved deities and charms fastened to the ratters and hanged on the walls to depict spiritual potency of oracle. Also, awesome is prince Sango's all red outfit to express mood and passion.

Periodic costuming in the film is heightened in the outfit of the spiritual carriers of Prince Sango's ransom items which is made dry grass like material with a heavy make-up to highlight their strange nature. The means of exchange for transactions in the period is captured in the use of cowries in the hustling and bustling market of Nupeland. The fact that, the use of heavily embroidered Aso-Oke with beaded crown by an Alaafin is from time in memorial is affirmed on the coronation day of Alaafin Sango. The aesthetic effect of this outfit is the imposing figure of Alaafin and accentuation of his domineering role.

The new look of Alaafin's palace of Oyo Koro with a backdrop of leopard skin visualizes the attributes of a warrior in Alaafin Sango as characterized in his aggression, boldness and temperament. In a similar vein, the costume of the warriors in the war scenes which are made of silk and leather materials affixed with charms portrays the potency of charms and local ammunition war fare of those days when compared to sophisticated weapons of today. Architectural design of the period is depicted in mud building with thatched roves that dotted the ancient towns of Oyo, Owu and Nupeland in the film.

Conclusion

With these periodic visual elements identified in the scenic design of the film *Sango*, one can state without fear of contradiction that apart from beautifying the environment and enhancing characterization, consciousness of period in scenic design has the visual effect of casting the mind of the audience back to the period in history for ease comprehension of the thematic focus.

Recommendation

Based on the findings from critical reading of the film in focus, the following are recommended;

- (a) To enhance characterisation in acting space on stage and screen for periodic plays, there should be representation of the period in history in architecture, properties, costume and decorations.
- (b) Services of versatile and creative designers should be employed for production of periodic plays on stage and screen. In the case of the film, *Sango*, realisation of the visualisation of the past was due to the involvement of a skillful designer, Abiodun Abe.

(c) Set designers in Nigerian Film Industry should partner with their foreign counterparts to update their knowledge and replicate techniques and styles that conform to international best practices.

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