



# Directing In An Educational Theatre: Reflections On Etop Akwang's Experimental Directorial Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined directing in an educational theatre with a focus on Etop Akwang's directing stylistic approach. The main goal is to assess how much Etop Akwang's experimental directing approach contributes to the Nigerian educational theatre. This paper employed the qualitative research methodology with emphasis on the literary/analytical, historical, and sociological approaches of research. The aim of this method is to trace the beginnings and development of people, institutions, and things. This research explores the historical roots and evolution of directing across the ages. The last component of the sociological approach is the researcher's interaction and connection with the environment or society being studied. The research revealed that Etop Akwang had directed more than 10 plays. Additionally, Etop Akwang's directorial style is distinct as he is a multi-talented individual who is a manager, liberalist, friend, teacher, curator, and supporter of formalism. Furthermore, he is a radical experimental director who uses any accessible area to produce his plays rather than being restricted to a theatre or other physical site. Thus, the study comes to the conclusion that Etop Akwang's stylistic directing techniques have greatly enhanced Nigerian educational theatre. Therefore, the study suggests that, researchers should locate the works of Etop Akwang who have contributed to directing, and catalogue their works so that other researchers can appreciate their contributions to theatre practice.

**Keywords:** Directing, Educational Theatre, Reflections, Etop Akwang's Directorial Approach

## INTRODUCTION

Generally, any major undertaking that a person or group of people undertakes for the benefit of a community or society usually requires rigorous planning in order to guarantee the greatest potential result. Apart from providing amusement, ingenuity, knowledge, guidance, and education, theatre is a collaborative art form that needs preparation to achieve its objectives. It is expected that different theatre staff members would work with the director to create a just ending that will please the audience because theatre is a collaborative art form (Sidiropoulou, 2019; Olufemi, 2018, & Enita, 2016). Meanwhile, the director has to have a clear artistic vision and style that they can convey to the group they are supervising in order to encourage a collaborative creative process: ensure that participants contribute as much as they can give their skills and the resources available to them; exercise caution when delegating tasks; possess the ability to negotiate and provide remuneration; and understand the need of maintaining regular group communication (Foster, 2003). Interestingly, the method the director employs during the performance is referred to as the directorial style. Mark and Emasealu (2018) define directing as the director's ability to creatively and interpretatively combine the efforts of all the theatre partners in a production to create a cohesive artistic experience that is a fascinating interpretation of a play performed in front of an audience

in a particular place and time. The stage director must be aware of the technical, aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual components of the performance space. This will allow him or her to best place the work within the context of the audience's worldview and psycho-social understanding. The director hopes that the play will be more deeply understood by the audience.

Therefore, the environment in which the audience is located needs to be able to enhance their understanding and promote enjoyment of the performance. For instance, a drama intended for a broad audience cannot be obviously excellent both artistically and intellectually. The audience may miss the most important parts of the performance. As a consequence, the director creates their performances keeping in mind the conventions of the performance locations as well as the audience's comprehension. Therefore, understanding staging guidelines is necessary for interpreting a play. As such, a play that is performed on an arena, thrust, or proscenium stage follows its conventions.. Furthermore, for the audience to understand a play that the director has artistically created for staging in a realistic, symbolic, epic, hilarious, or environmental idea style, it must follow the conventions of the concept. In experimenting with stylistic eclecticism, a filmmaker needs to understand the foundations of each style and be open and honest about the reasoning behind the decision as well as the audience's understanding level. After all, the purpose of plays is to entertain the audience, not to perplex them.

In addition, Paterson (2024) claims that theatre began as a man's attempt to imitate something which he so dearly admired. In an effort to understand the supernatural powers that surrounded him, it recounted stories that eventually turned into rituals that were carried out during festivals. Over time, the director's dexterity and sense of aesthetics became more and more crucial. It has been claimed that a director's role in a theatrical production is to coordinate and package the contributions of both artistic and non-artistic partners such that the audience is delighted and enjoys themselves. Nevertheless, the role of the person in charge of supervising the operations of the theatre company was never properly addressed until Georg II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, joined the picture in 1874. Meanwhile, Hubert Ogunde, whose touring company has been active in Nigeria since the 1940s, is widely acknowledged for having established professional theatre practice in the country.

There are several well-known approaches to filmmaking, such as the deconstructionist approach, the auteur method, the psychological approach of Konstantin Stanislavsky, the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the epic and alienation effect of Bertolt Brecht, the poor by Jerzy Grotowski. Still, experimental theatrical directing is the primary focus of this study. In particular, as defined by Mark and Emasealu (2018), the phrase "experimental theatre directing" "Experimental theatre directing" has been defined by Mark and Emasealu (2018) as a new and unconventional approach to directing theatrical productions It makes sense that this style of directing encourages experimentation, creativity, and pushing the boundaries of conventional staging and narrative strategies. Still, according to Davey (2019), a number of scholars, theorists, critics, and others have tackled the subject of theatre directing as an artistic undertaking that necessitates the collaboration of other theatrical professionals in order to realise the director's vision for a play. Musa Rasheed's play directing and directors: Effiong Johnson's play production techniques and Vision towards a mission: The Art of Interpretative Directing (2001, 2003). A dynamic history of Nigerian performing arts, together with other pieces offering a peek of the nation's theatre landscape Several books have studied the role of theatrical directors and directing in Nigerian theatre, including *The Play Director and Production Philosophy* (2002, 2006), Emmanuel Emasealu's *The Theatre of Ola Rotimi: Production and Performance Dynamics* (2011), Odiri Solomon Ejeke's *Creating the Performance: a Manual for Theatre Directors* done in 2012 (Ejeke, 2021), and Sam Ukala's essay on *Two Decades of Directing Educational Theatre: The Problem of Funding* published in 2005 (Ukala, 2016).

According to Okeke (2023), directors at Nigerian educational institutions face a variety of challenges, such as a lack of funding, institutional bureaucracy, a dearth of directing courses offered in the academic curriculum, and a scarcity of modern theatre equipment. Educational theatre directors need to sharpen their directing skills in today's fast-paced world by rejecting traditional play-directing methods and embracing innovative concepts in order to produce fresh theatrical experiences, especially in light of the quick growth of technology (Ebohon, 2018; Idogho, 2013). Once more, research must be done on the

issue of mentee preparation for those who would learn directing from experienced theatre directors (Okwulogu, 2024). Furthermore, not many students who show an interest in directing during their time in school end up choosing to direct plays for their practicals and those that do usually cannot continue directing theatre beyond graduation because of a lack of encouraging settings. Based on the aforementioned, this essay aims to investigate how much Etop Akwang's directing style has enhanced Nigerian educational theatre.

#### **Justification for the study**

The rationale for this study stems from the need to identify the theatre directors in the selected South South Nigerian colleges that provide theatre arts courses, as there has been little research in this area. Owing to the dearth of mentoring programmes that teach directing skills through apprenticeship in most university theatres, it is important to conduct examinations at a select few universities in South South Nigeria. Additionally, theatre directors should experiment with various artistic techniques when directing plays in order to spark students' interest in the directing profession at the selected universities in South South Nigeria. Lastly, as the current study's justification suggests, it is critical to look into the extent to which theatre directors have significantly influenced Nigerian education...

#### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed the qualitative research technique with emphasis on the literary/analytical, historical, and sociological methods. Qualitative research begins as a descriptive research in that it describes characteristics of a population or phenomenon, but it goes beyond that to examine why the characteristics exist and what their effects are (Ukala, 2016). Qualitative research is also utilized to identify patterns in thoughts and opinions and go deeper into the problem (Defranzo, 2020). On the other hand, the historical method of research comprises the examination of documented sources like books, journals, reports, films, video & audio tapes, archival materials, archaeological excavations, artifacts (such as carvings, drawings, sculpture, paintings, and textile prints), alongside oral sources (Ukala, 2016). In contrast, the literary approach obtains information through the examination of written and printed library materials like books, journals, theses, articles, and so on. This approach aims to track the origins and evolution of individuals, institutions, and objects. This study investigates the historical roots and progression of directing. The researcher's connection with the environment or society being studied is the final component of the sociological approach.

#### **ANALYSIS OF ETOP AKWANG DIRECTORIAL APPROACHES**

This section focuses on Etop Akwang directing approaches and how these approaches have helped improved the Nigerian educational theatre.

##### **4.1 Brief overview of Etop Akwang**

On September 30, 1962, Etop Akwang was born in Mbioto Ekepene Ituen, in the Etinan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. He attended the following schools: Community High School, Ikot Essen, School of Arts and Science, Uyo, University of Benin, 1987–1990; University of Calabar, 1987–1990; Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Directing; and 2001–2006, for his PhD in Theatre Arts. He completed his studies in these institutions from 1975 to 1980. In 1986, while doing his NYSC, he was employed as a Literature Tutor at Army Day Secondary School, 3rd Mechanized Brigade, Bukavu Katsina Road, Kano. He also held the position of Youth Cultural Coordinator at the Cross River State Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Social Welfare.

He started working in the University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom's Department of Theatre Arts in 1994. He held the positions of Lecturer II from 1994 to 2007, Lecturer I from 2007 to 2010, Senior Lecturer from 2010 to 2013, and Associate Professor at this time. In addition to supervising more than six (6) postgraduate students, he has taught a number of courses in the field of theater arts, including Introduction to Directing, Introduction to Theatre Practice, Production Participation, World Theatre Survey, Script Analysis and Interpretation, African Traditional Theatre, Topics in Theatre Studies, Advanced Acting, Theories of Dramatic Criticism, Research Method and Materials, Theatre Workshop, Oriental Theatre, Advanced Dramatic Literature, African Theatre History, etc. Within the University of Uyo, he has managed a

variety of duties. He served as a Diploma Examination Officer from 1995 to 1998 and a Degree Examination Officer from 1996 to 1998. Member of the Department Board of Studies, Theatre Arts Department, since 1994; Member of the Faculty Board of the Faculty of Arts, Faculty Board of Arts, 1995–1998; Founding Editor, Parnassus: University of Uyo Journal of Cultural Research, 1999–2000; Co-coordinator, Community Theatre Project (CTP), 1997–2010; Chairman, Postgraduate Committee, Theatre Arts, 2009–2010, 2012–present; Graduate School Representative, Fine and Applied Arts, 2016–2017, till date; Supporter of the Save the Children Campaign, a Non-Profit Evangelization Network for Adolescents in Schools (Colleges), from 2000 till now; Leader, Community Theatre Project (CTP) for Afaha Oku Village, Oku Clan, in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State; Member, Akwa Ibom State Committee on the Revival of Indigenous/Games/Sports, Ministry of Youths and Sports, 1997; Writer/Director, Paradigm Shift: Written and Produced for the Akwa Ibom State Public Service Week, 2012 edition; Chairman, LOC, Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) 2002 Conference, University of Uyo; Resource person, Radio, Television and Theatre Workers Union (RATTAWU) State Delegate Seminar, November 13, 2003; Member, National Conference Planning Committee of the Emergent Church in Nigeria, 2003 to date; Director, Akwa Ibom State Council for Arts and Culture Drama Entry for NAFEST, 2006, among other positions.

He belongs to the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) and the Association of Nigeria Authors (ANA). His published works include more than twenty (20) journal articles, more than twelve (12) chapter contributions, three books, and about eleven (11) journals that he co-edited for the University of Uyo Journal of Cultural Research between 2002 and 2016. From 2002 to 2014, he participated in and gave papers at about nineteen (19) conferences.

Etop Akwang has directed over ten plays, some of which are Bassey Ubong's *By Any Means* (2002), Effiong Johnson's *Not Without Bones* (2004), Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* (2004), Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (2009), Edet Essien's *Ekeng Ita* (2009), *The Clampdown* – An Adaptation of Ben Binebai's *Beyond Nightmares* (2010), Etop Akwang's *Paradigm Shift* (2012), among others.



Figure  
Source: Interview (2023)

#### 4.2. Etop Akwang's Radical Experimental Approach

Etop Akwang directs educational theatre plays with a bold, experimental approach. He sees every available space as a stage for his productions. Especially when we take into consideration the notion that theatre transcends the real building or performance space, he is not constrained by the notion that he must show his plays at the theatre. While discussing his directing approach, Akwang asserts that:

*My primordial instinct in directing stands in exhaustively towards the radical experimental fold. Of course, there are basic things that are done in directing. But I can sum up my directorial experience and that is it. As that radiating mostly experimental directing... I am more or less an experimental director. I am not bound by restrictions. I just see art as a thing of gathering and urgent experimentation. You know and so basically, I believe in experimental directing. Any work that I do may have recourse to the previous one and I could even borrow from the conventional directing but never permanent boundary... (Interview, May, 2022).*

As a director who uses the radical experimental style, he is less concerned with his actors strictly adhering to the stage divisions and more focused on how he may use any available space to interact with the audience through the players. Akwang offers the following explanation for why he uses a radical experimental method in his productions:

*You know in all my productions I rove freely between what is conventional and what is iconoclastic. I explain myself: conventional is what you know very well that you go to the theatre to rehearse on stage. You tell your actors and actresses: this is the stage, these are the sightlines and you have centre stage, down stage, up stage, down stage right, down right centre. All these are stage divisions and so you know, you perform within that. And of course, you have the things that you are going to use to build up the environment. You know the setting, the scenic accompaniment of the performance. You know and so if you are doing a realistic production you need to put a realistic impression... (Akwang, Interview, May, 2022).*

He tries to deviate from the conventional direction system by using spaces like parking lots, hallways, stairwells, in front of multi-story buildings, and so on. For example, instead of designing the multistory building for the play, he replicated Wole Soyinka's *Camwood on the Leaves* in a courtyard. He used the offices of lecturers as both church spaces and portals to people's homes since he is a radical experimental filmmaker who makes the most of his surroundings. This allowed the performers to engage with the audience in a natural and fluid way. Effiong Johnson performed *Not without Bones* in front of the Chinua Achebe Arts Theatre in a parking lot. Additionally, he has staged:

*I have what I want to do as a director, I begin from that moment, early in the production planning, to let the actors and actresses know what I am going to do, and I begin to apply it. In this particular practical production that I am talking about, I was to play in the playhouse...I played in the playhouse. What I did was I rehearsed at the centre of the playhouse where the audience normally sits. I removed the chairs; I removed the seats and rehearsed there. That was where we played and that was because I took a line from the text that shows that this action is taking place in the village. I just deconstructed the stage, the same thing happened in Effiong Johnson's *Not Without Bones*. These are African sets and you know the dynamics of African aesthetics...so what I needed to do was to defy those conclusions on the set and use African dynamics...I*

*let people know from the beginning that this is what I am going to do. I brief my scene designers, the sound people on how to manage acoustics and of course I ran trainings with my actors and actresses on entrances and exits using that same set(Interview, May, 2022).*

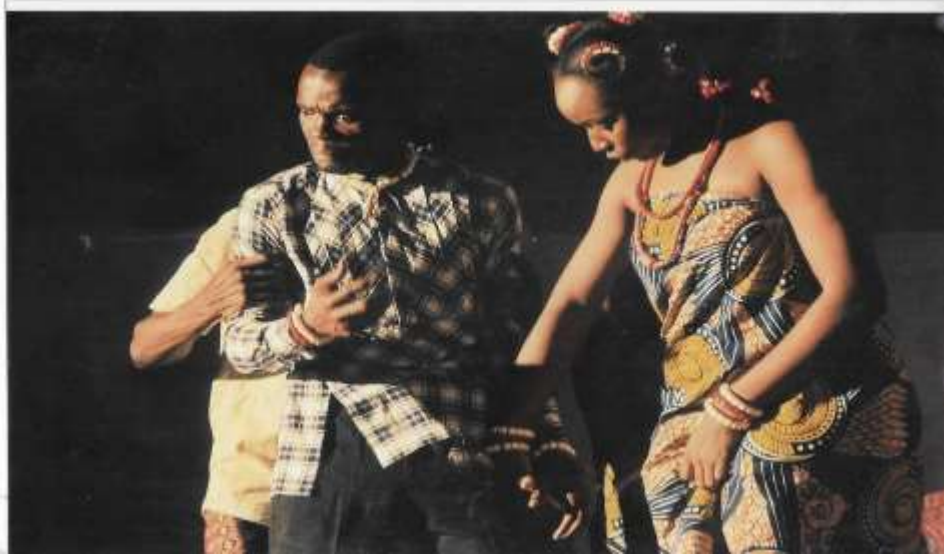
Throughout his productions, he pitches his ideas to his performers and team, ensuring that they work together to make them a reality in order to keep them motivated. By using his players and the space(s) at his disposal for performance, director Akwang always looks for the most direct way to communicate to the audience the idea of the play he is heading. His doctoral work centered on flexible environments. With regard to that effort, he says:

*I was pursuing how the stage can be set free from the slavish adherence to Euro American human dynamics, and so I was trying to see how African directors can move out from the restrictive clinic that we find in Euro American directing...I brought it to the car park and I was graded there (Interview, May 2022).*

Throughout his projects, he keeps his actors and staff motivated by pitching them on his ideas and making sure they collaborate to realize them. When implementing his directorial style, director Akwang always seeks the most straightforward manner to convey to the audience the concept of the play he is directing through the use of his players and the space(s) that are available to him for performance. He has certain difficulties directing his plays as a director. The fact that the venues he uses for his concerts are unusual presents one of the difficulties. In his attempt to defy the conventions of stage design, he finds himself having to manage a new area in which, according to his chosen methodology, he is unable to take advantage of the amenities offered by traditional theatre.

Another issue is that some patrons of the theatre may choose to watch performances in uncomfortable locations, such as standing, sitting on bricks, or lying on cars, among other things. This might eventually hurt theatre attendance. Actors' inability to adjust to these surroundings' demands is another issue brought on by the experimental methods. Since most theatres are too tiny for performers to walk about freely, they are frequently unable to give it their all. Additionally difficult might be the entrances and exits. The set is frequently understated, outfit changes might be difficult, and makeup application should be kept to a minimum. Another challenge that is not specific to him is managing his time between his family, his work as a lecturer, and his responsibilities as a director, all of which put him in a triangular situation. It could also require some extra work and skill to stage his plays in the given area because of his extreme experimental method.

Below are extracts from Etop Akwang's works



1. *By Any Means* by Bassey Ubong directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2002.



2. *By Any Means* by Bassey Ubong directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2002.



**3. *By Any Means* by Bassey Ubong as directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2002, was staged in between two buildings outside the theatre auditorium showing his experimental approach of adaptating available space for performance.**





**4. *Not Without Bones* by Effiong Johnson directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2004.**



**5. *Not Without Bones* by Effiong Johnson directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2004.**



**6. *Not Without Bones* by Effiong Johnson as directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2004, was staged outside the courtyard as part of his experimental production.**



**7. *Not Without Bones* by Effiong Johnson as directed by Etop Akwang, University of Uyo, 2004, was performed around the courtyard outside the theatre auditorium.**

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the numerous analyses provided, the research affirmed that Etop Akwang is a manager, liberalist, friend, educator, curator, multi-talented individual, and formalism-supporter. Even more, he is a radical experimental director who uses any accessible area to produce his plays rather than being restricted to a theatre or other physical location. According to him, locations such as parking lots, hallways, pathways, in front of buildings or lecture halls, beneath trees, and so forth can be suitable for staging his plays, provided that there is interaction between the performers and the audience. As a director, he strives to break out from the one-dimensionality of an established modern theatre. Thus, the study comes to the conclusion that Etop Akwang's stylistic directing techniques have greatly improved Nigerian educational theatre. Therefore, the research made the following submissions:

- i. That there is the need for more studies in the area of directing, especially as it concerns the theatre director in Nigerian Universities.
- ii. That researchers should find the works of Etop Akwang who have contributed to directing, and document their works so that other scholars can appreciate their contributions to theatre practice.
- iii. That the government should support the funding of theatres in Nigerian institutions where theatre arts/performing arts as a discipline is being offered in order to encourage students to go into theatre directing.
- iv. That government should support and fund aquatic theatre productions especially in the riverine areas as it is a veritable tool for socio-cultural integration and tourism attraction.
- v. That students/departments that offer theatre arts should employ the use of the social media like: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, WhatsApp, Telegram, LinkedIn, and so on and popularize productions by making the public aware of what is going on in the theatres in their institutions.
- vi. Parents should be encouraged to watch plays directed by students in departments of theatre arts in institutions as it will encourage new directors to emerge.

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