

“The contemporary art in this country is flowing, but it needs direction.”

A conversation between performance artist, Jelili Atiku and former Director of the National Theatre of Nigeria, Ahmed Yerima

Jelili Atiku: Does this country actually need the National Theatre?

Ahmed Yerima: I think it does. We are culturally rich in terms of content, performance and I think we need that space we can call National Theatre, where we can go to and witness our rich cultural heritage in dances, poetry and songs. As a performing artist, what format do you think this space should take? Must it be limited to drama alone?

JA: Before I answer that, I would like to ask you what you think of theatre as a place.

AY: I think the theatre is a place where we mirror the society; where we bring the culture, feelings and thinking of the people and show it to them. It is a place where we remodel ourselves; where we feel the impulse of the society. It is also a place where we can live as human beings. We were taught in school that the theatre was the place and drama was the script. But the problem we have in Nigeria is that we see the theatre as the building; we refer to the theatre as a building for multipurpose events. I see it as a sacred place, as a place where you perform rituals. And I think that is why we don't know how to maintain the idea.

JA: I totally agree with you. A theatre must be a place where you feel renewed at every moment you step into the place. There must be part of you that feels you are contributing to the existence of humanity. Now, back to your question. Theatre is a place where we celebrate our cultural heritage in total. We have all we need when it comes to writers, visual artists, musicians, dancers and so on. The only thing that we lack is maintenance. If you were made the curator of the National Theatre, how would you go about that?

AY: The first thing I would research is the contemporary thinking. I would find a way to make art a part of us, because in Nigeria we don't take art as priority. Also, we need to let the government know the impact of art in the society. Art has really brought this country to limelight, considering the kind of performing artists we have, and the kind of works they come up with, which has exposed the potency of this country. The National Theatre is not supposed to be an object of decoration, but a place where a lot of projects are being carried out. So I would put this place into constant use, bringing in drama, musical performers and the rest of art.

JA: But what if you have these utopian dreams, a beautiful theatre, a whole lot of people showing interest in art, but no financial backup. How would you go about it?

AY: There are so many organisations that are prepared to support culture and art; we need to tap in to them. The support doesn't have to come from government alone.

JA: I still need you to convince me that this place will come alive and it will be vibrant and it will be like that forever, because all this is not possible without funds. So please convince me how you plan to go about it.

AY: We have a culture which is community-based in Nigeria. For example, if somebody loses a beloved one, the whole community comes together to mourn with him and also sew a uniform, which they call aso-ebi. I believe that this concept can be put into play. The responsibility of this place can be shared. Let the artists come and initiate ideas and explore the possibilities of getting funds for those ideas. Artists don't like to get involved in political discussions, yet, if they are more involved in they can be part of actually solving the problem.

Lagos is undergoing very fundamental changes, how would you fit this place into those fundamental changes, so that there will be inter-relativity, interaction and participation in the aesthetic joy of the place?

JA: There is no way we can achieve the mega-city without the input of the art. The artist must also be given a chance when it comes to designing a city, therefore, the art must be integrated into the planning of a mega-city. Being the social people that they are, Nigerians need a space where they can relax. The dialogue between the government and the artists must be there, it should not be that the government is operating one side and the artists at the other side.

AY: So how do you now bring these two sets of important people together?

JA: The curriculum of the school system, which is responsible for developing human resources for the society, is obsolete and must be changed. What do you think of the present contemporary art of this country?

AY: The contemporary art in this country is flowing, but it needs direction. What we need for contemporary art to move on is to have a kind of aesthetic flow that is able to identify it for what it is. I am finding a lot of copy, which is killing the originality. Whoever is the curator of theatre art should be able to guide contemporary art, to give it a direction. I'm hoping that a lot of workshops and conferences can be organised around here, so that students who come from different schools and artists with experience can come together and share.

JA: Your generation is a symbol to us. You have shown us the model to follow, which must be reinterpreted in our own contemporary ways.

AY: I am still laying emphasis on originality; the new National Theatre must guide the new artists towards realising themselves. After watching a play or seeing some other work of art, you should be inspired and your true self – your individuality and your creativity – must emerge from that inspiration.

JA: The first thing in art is originality. We really need to guide that, because it is the only way national identity can emerge. My worry is why the National Theatre has not been like that all this while?

AY: This is because Nigerians like big things, but there is no plan for maintenance. The printing press and the National Theatre share one thing in common, which is decay. The National Theatre was built for the wrong purpose, we wanted to show off. Interestingly, no other African country has been able to host FESTAC, because when they look at the taste of the Nigerian fest, they conclude that they cannot afford it. The problem started with the National Theatre after the festival. That is why I said it is important to plan right from the beginning for the sustenance, maintenance, development and program of this beautiful structure. Who we appoint to each post is always problematic also, because we always pick the wrong person. If we continue to see the theatre as just the building, then there is a problem. The management of a place like National Theatre should not be only about money.

JA: How can we create a link between the government and the people? Does art really connect?

AY: Art connects, but the Nigerian people have to stop seeing art as a very simple thing. Many people who are performing, especially in Nollywood, don't know anything about acting, they are just there and repeating the same thing over and over again. That is why I'm happy that we have institutions and a place like this [the National Theatre], which can also become an avenue for open theatre programs, in which young artists can come and showcase their talents. Young artists needed to be shown how to flow, and allowed to flow. That is my utopian idealistic dream for this place.

JA: You have hit the core point of this matter. I can remember watching a Nollywood film and noticing that the costumes were not portraying the time they were referring to in this film. I asked myself how can people be reeducated to know you are talking about three hundred years ago in your drama, then you should let them feel that really it is 300 years. Now going back to the position of a curator, I would organize a workshop where I can cook ideas and let participants know what the value of an idea is. Also, to let them know how I would research the content I'm bringing forward; how I would bring out the theme, the structures and other components that would make it look convincing. This would involve constant workshops and training and knowing the value of what to put in the society; and bringing facilitators from all over the world since we now live in a global village. This is how we could achieve our aim. Back to the issue of funding. How do we make the government to create this endowment fund?

AY: I remember that when I was in government, they wanted to put in place something called the national council for art and culture. Then I travelled to the US and came across a place they call endowment of the artsbuilding. I found out that this place has about six or eight floors, and each floor hosts a specific art, ranging from traditional music, contemporary music, modern music, folk music, to different kinds of dance. Then I asked myself, is that what they want to give to one department in Nigeria to handle? I travelled back to Nigeria immediately and went to Alhaji Sule, who was at the time the director, and I showed him the all the information on endowments from the US, and they stopped the project. Then new idea came, and they were considering something new to do. If an endowment for the arts is created and there is a fund given to them, everybody will benefit from it. This is the kind of support foreign organisations, such as the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Francaise and the rest of them, have been offering, but governments also need to play their own role too. The artists also need to be aware that the funds are not given to them to take care of their own personal needs, but to improve and promote their art work.

JA: If we have the endowment form and we have a centre that is in charge of it, then they can send out a call for participation, people can send in their projects, they can go through the process and choose the best and showcase it to the people.