

## “We should take out that word ‘national’ and reconstruct that word ‘theatre’. It could become a play house or an artist city.”

A conversation between Jude Anogwih and Ayodele Arigbabu

**Jude Anogwih:** I find it interesting how the idea of the National Theatre as an institutional organisation just sits there in a wide open space. It’s a bit embarrassing, but it is also exciting, because if you are to imagine that land mass ... imagine that as an artist village, and the kind of activity that would be going on there. The nature of our products, the nature of intellectual context, the creative energy that would really be evolving there. It would be like some sort of a high-tension power space.

**Ayodele Arigbabu:** Haawww, well, that’s if wishes were horses, as they say, but then, there is an artist village there, isn’t there? On the fringes...

**JA:** That’s just a bit of the entire land mass, you know? I’m looking at the entire space; so...

**AA:** So you are looking at scale?

**JA:** Well, if you may use that term...

**AA:** Because what you are talking about exists in some form, especially when you are looking at this scale, excluding that activity to a scale that will fit to the size of the National Theatre, not just its physical size, but also the emotional and symbolic image and baggage that the structure carries. So I suppose what you’re looking at is scale, exploding all those activities. But what’s missing, what’s preventing that scale currently, in your opinion?

**JA:** I’m also looking at another aspect, which is more like reactivation. I know quite a lot exists already, you have the national galleries there, you have the artist village there, the workshop for creating sculpture... you also have the National Theatre, and then you have very relaxing spaces. But I’m looking at how we can reactivate these energies. Currently, they are playing their role in a most minimal way, but how do we get them to bring out the best of what they can offer, within a wider perspective, possibly as an international space for artistic collaboration and intervention. I think my emphasis is more on how to reactivate the space.

**AA:** Yea, that's what's missing, why? Because some of the things that you are suggesting, I agree should be happening there, and some of those things are happening but at a very small scale. I mean there is a National Gallery there, but I don't know how many people visit that place. You have the artist village and the other cultural things happening around there. So, my question is, if that huge building is there, that land is there, and that intention to have these things happen is still there, and is evidence in the fact that people are still there trying to do this thing, then what we are complaining about is not being done at the right scale? What's missing, what's needed for that reactivation? To make it happen at the scale?

**JA:** Why don't we look at cross-collaboration of ideas and practice? Maybe we look at some synergy that can come out from the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), working collaboratively with the artists' workshop or working with the National Theatre staff; each person drawing resource and information from the others and possibly seeing how these collaborations can come into some hybrid forms. But let me come back to my earlier word, reactivate. I didn't say its not active, but more about building up its capacity to maximize the output and possibly make it more vibrant and attractive to people and to draw on the the existing ideas and activities already going on there.

**AA:** Ok, but let me ask a question, you've been in practice for a couple of decades at least?

**JA:** Definitely!

**AA:** Of what use has the National Theatre been to your career as an artist, especially in the last 10 years? How central has it been to your practice?

**JA:** That's an interesting question. As a kid I remember watching the broadcast of the FESTAC 77 activities in the National Theatre. The dance, the music, it was so amazing and it was one of the things that nourished my intent, my desire to be an artist. And then all through my schooling, we always encountered the National Theatre one way or the other, especially when it comes to African culture and arts. And this was also another amazing time for me, I mean learning about the Ghanaian culture, learning about southern dance and activities from Tanzania, from Morocco, from all over, you know? I think at every moment I am inspired by the physical structure of the National Theatre, the beauty of the landscape and the diversity of interest. Aside from all this, one can have a bottle of beer at the corner with pepper soup and hang out with friends and get some fresh air. So for me there has always been a very interesting inspiration that I draw from this structure, either from its activities or from the physical content of the place, and also within the visual of work within.

**AA:** So, the National Theatre has provided you with essence of nostalgia: But I have not seen it impacting directly on your career, beyond the services provided in giving you a connection with what happened during FESTAC, that historical concept. It seems that the National Theatre is becoming nothing but a shell, it's just the building: if its about *abe igi* (under the tree) where people drink beer, there are lots of spots in Lagos where people drink beer. If it's about the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), they have space at Freedom Park. Indeed, there are other venues that are taking care of some of these things that might have occurred or been housed within the National Theatre. For me, this makes the NT redundant, a space that has outgrown its use. So why don't we just advise the government to create a performative event, in which the National Theatre is rigged with explosives, and its blown up, and the explosion is recorded as video art, so that at least the building can be put to some use and its demise becomes a huge event at a monumental scale compare to FESTAC, and then we can clear the debris away and build an estate from that land. And then we can all go to sleep and stop worrying about this terrible building that has not achieved anything for us in the past few decades.

**JA:** You know, I wouldn't buy that idea of blowing up the National Theatre. I rather buy the idea of reformation. As an artist, and in line with my practice, my work is never finished – after 10, 20 years I could go add some elements, I could take out or totally dismantle the whole piece and rearrange it. So I'm rather looking at the idea of reconstructing the National Theatre. I'm very careful about this word we call structure. I know to somebody like you, an architect, it would mean bringing in new material, taking away or possibly erasing the entire structure and having a better place and then you would have another dimension take form there. For myself, I think its about bringing in certain things that will change the original perspective or the original functions of this building. It's an amazing building, it's something that should be kept as a symbol of national pride. Now, if it's not meeting our expectations, what do we do? How do we reactivate it, how do we reconstruct it? How do we reposition? You see it's a very beautiful space in the sense that you can imagine that space being run as a residency space for artists, as a home for artists. Ok, and then we can make more spaces for theatre, for an art school... imagine a whole lot of activities going on there, all building on the history of the structure, building on the original or initial intent of that structure. It was built to unite the Africans culturally, which is still a very utopian idea, because I don't think there is any need for us to talk about Panafricanism, when we know we can all grow individually, independently and also meet the expectations of others. So I'm looking at the idea of reconstruction. I wouldn't blow up the National Theatre; I would only rescale it, give it new functions and take away certain elements, keep others for historical purposes. A place that takes its history from something that happened in the past, from a lesson we might have learnt from the misappropriation and misuse of resources. It could even break ground for intellectual research on corruption, on the misappropriation of funds, on bad governance, on maladministration, and then invite artists to create works on these topics.

**AA:** Don't you think you are indulging in wishing for utopia? I mean that in two ways: First there is the economy behind the whole idea of cultural production and managing the cultural space. And if you look at the global scene, funding for culture is not doing very well. If government has not been able to manage power generation, which is very very central to the existence of nation; if government could not run a telephone service and has to rely on private entities to manage these basic ...

**JA:** I'm sorry my friend, if the private sector can reactivate the telecom, what makes you think that the private sector is not interested in reactivating the culture industry, with special emphasis on the National Theatre? Government wants to sell off the structure...

**AA:** Then let them do it, because I hate the idea of everything depending on the government. But don't you think if the government sells it to private interest, then you are putting your heart in the hands of capitalists who care all about profits. They might be able to make more profits if they put up malls, and maybe cinemas and just forget about live theatre.

**JA:** Super scary, but I remember earlier, I made mention of capitalists. I think it doesn't have to be sold to capitalists, but governments could create a fund or an independent organisation, that requires private influence. The government can also see that these people have all power to make the best use of that space, not really turning it into a money-making environment. I'm not a fan of government selling it to Mr Money Bag. Im not interested in that because I know it's going to turn into some kind of hotel, into some kind of pure water factory, just because he needs to make his profit. But I am interested in a group of people or minds taking up that structure and running it on behalf of the nation. If they abuse the opportunity, basically we get rid of them and they suffer the consequences of their actions, but they have every power to determine what position or how that space is used.

AA: Yea, but what if they are not able to run it and keep it afloat, in terms of recovering the money used in such a huge facility, and even for creating all this programming that we are talking about, which, you must agree, is hardly ever break even? So, if at the end of the day, they can't win that war against commerce, then what's the point if they are just going to do less than what the government could have done. Now the other perspective that I want to talk about in terms of my question about this utopia of the National Theatre that is blossoming with activities... In the first place, is there enough of a national consciousness and zeal in the people to sell it? Is there enough demand for the kind of culture that we produce? That's the other thing required to support such a huge facility. Is our dream for that space not a bit unrealistic, both economically and in terms of existing demands. Are our dreams not as huge as the dreams of the military government that was flushed with oil money at that point in time they thought the next thing to do was to build a massive structure, which was fine for FESTAC, but immediately after FESTAC, it became too much to handle. So maybe if they had even built the National Theatre in such a way that it could have been scaled down immediately after FESTAC? I think they did that with the aquatic center for the Olympics in London. It was designed so that during the Olympics they have it at the full scales, because of course they were going to have a large turn out of people and after the Olympics, it was designed so that they could take away some part of it, and it would be suitable for the immediate local community after the Olympics, not too big for the community to handle. So I'm just doing a reality check here, I love the National Theatre – just in case people are wondering who is this idiot who is suggesting we blow up such a building. I am emotionally attached to that building, but let's do a reality check, are we not trying to fit a utopian dream into a space that is not ready, that does not have the capacity to accommodate it?

JA: Let's go back a little, like you said, how many people are aware of the cultural activities going on in this country? I think with a bit more research, we would find that the cultural industry in this country has generated more funds both local and international over the years than any other sector. The only problem is that most of these are not properly documented. We don't have the record of number of people who are coming to Nigeria or travelling within in to attend cultural activities. And let's not forget our artists who are moving into the world. How many contacts are being made? What ideas are they bringing back and how are these integrated to sustain their interest and profession? I think a little research would reveal that this country is hungry, people of this country are hungry especially for good things, especially for cultural things. People don't just want to drive out and listen to music, they want more than music, they want a live performance and they want to sit with the actors and the musicians and the performers and the artists and get an understanding about what sustains them, and why they do what they do.

AA: I've been trying to sell theatre tickets for a few years in this town [Lagos], they don't necessarily get sold out just like that.

JA: I know, the reason is that these days most cultural activities are illusive. It's only the rich, the people who are well-travelled and enlightened who are considered consumers of culture. But consider an example: we were at Bariga, on the street corner, I remember, in December 2009, and we had a street intervention programme and we had projections and performances, we engaged the the entire street, fish sellers.... everyone stopped at a moment to refresh and enjoy themselves before going back to their homes or work.

AA: Oh yes, but they didn't pay for it

JA: They never paid for it

AA: Ha! Ha!

**JA:** Ok, but I am coming to how the resources had to be generated. And it brings me again to the idea of exaggerated things. We exaggerate things in this country, we exaggerate the price, we exaggerate the idea, so much so that we have lost the meaning of cultural exchange: people – artists and community – coming together to produce something that their reciprocal interest can sustain. So I think we really need to reason carefully, you know, so much is bloated in this country which is not good for us, especially in the creative industry. Look at Nollywood! Nollywood is so locked up in the space that they don't want to collaborate with anyone else, or when they see you coming, they think you are coming to take a whole chunk of the cake or whatever they are enjoying, you understand?

**AA:** I find that strange, because Nollywood is...

**JA:** I am putting more emphasis on collaborative ideas, and the flexibility to bring them to fruition. Why don't we key into basic things like festivals and art fairs and see how we can grow them, move them forward a little. It doesn't take much, I'm sorry, I'm always optimistic about doing things in the right ways, with the right people and we shouldn't exaggerate the way we publicise things. These guys pay billions of naira to publicise/advertise on Third Mainland Bridge and then they transfer the cost on you and me. And for Gods sake, if you are over-taxed or if something is overpaid for, you do that once, you wouldn't want to do it a second time. You lose total interest and then you seek alternative places to get your message across, and you just realise you have to go to that beer parlour under a tree and listen to the sound coming from the speakers... it gives you almost the same feeling as if you were listening to a live performance in any other place. Fela made it very beautiful for everybody, the ordinary man could go to the shrine and watch Fela perform live, have his drinks, interact extensively and go away inspired.

**AA:** Yeah, but Fela's shrine still exists in some form, as the shrine run right now by Femi Kuti, it was and is still is providing music. So why then are we looking for the National Theatre if there are already other spaces doing these things?

**JA:** Maybe we should take out that word "national", I hate it with passion because that is what causes the confusion in this whole structure.

**AA:** So when you remove "national", it becomes theatre

**JA:** We can also reconstruct that word "theatre", it could become like a play house or like an artist city.

**AA:** That is a more interesting idea to me...when you say an artist city, then you are describing Lagos to me, because Lagos is an artist city, because there is a performance every second on the street of Lagos. If you go out there, the conductor on that bus is ready to give you a performance.

**JA:** There is a difference between a spontaneous and well articulated program, creative program and what happens on the street ok? Lagos is a huge super active eccentric space and it inspires me.

**AA:** You are going to dangerous ground now because when you are trying to separate the heart of the conductor from the orchestrated heart of the actor... You are going to a dangerous ground.

**JA:** No, no, I still come back to the idea of linking each form, but careful linking, done with very intelligent and worthy perspective. I can't just take a bus conductor who needs to shout, demonstrate and do other things to earn a living and then tell him, 'leave that bus that's going to Iyana Ipaja, come here, come and shout, demonstrate and earn nothing'. But I can take my crew, get into the bus, tell the bus driver 'shout, scream, do your business, earn your money and then we do our documentation', and we also make you happier, you know by promoting what you do and also encourage you. And the next time the bus driver is off duty, he's going to come see what he did last time with those guys that came with camera in the bus.

**AA:** Perfect, perfect, you have solved the problem for me, we have deconstructed the idea of National Theatre. We have taken the national and thrown it in the dust bin. We have taken theatre and we have turned it around and it has gone beyond even the idea of a play house and to an artist city, which Lagos actually is. Thank you, so can we now forget about the National Theatre and talk about something else. If the entire city is an art space, and the entire city is designated as such and it's in the DNA of the city to create and promote art ... if that sort of thing continues and it expands, that might also be part of why the National Theatre is not working, because the arts have diffused across the entire city, so is there a need for the National Theatre?

**JA:** Remember we have already thrown that word away, and we have reconstructed the second, which means there is no need for a National Theatre. Good, look, it could be just a space like every other space, where interest comes into that place, interest chooses to create dimension out of that place, interests choose to replace it or move it around. It's a free working table – for example, my work as an artist entails making drawing on any surface; those drawing can at a point become sculptural, I call them all out and they become three dimension pieces that can form an installation. But it is still all about working with a space.

**AA:** Don't you think its counter-productive to try to graft or force energy into the space?

**JA:** Look, creativity is the most beautiful thing in life. I think of an idea, I don't bother myself about the material or medium, because I know, that creative force or idea is going to direct me to the kind of material that will help to bring it out in its best form. It will also direct me to other multiple materials that can also give it multiple dimensions and meanings. So we have to be flexible with this dynamic structure of creativity. You can't force something into an idea. You can't force an idea into an individual. You can't force energy into a space, but you can, with careful insight, observe how that energy migrates into any space or any part of that space. And then when that happens, you see you get excited and you either begin to create dimension out of it, or you begin to articulate it in more defined ways, or you begin to make sketches or scans that might guide you towards redirecting that energy – like channelling a river to where you want it to be more functional. But remember, energy is like a river, it never forgets its root and it will take you back to the source, and that means there is a lucrative practice at all times and you can enjoy moving your idea, situating your idea, interacting with your idea, sharing your idea as a form of collaborative content. And this will give you new inspiration and content. You have created a mark or network of creative channel, and you can't exhaust it, unless someone somewhere says 'I don't want to do this' or 'I just want to refresh and build into something like an hybrid form'. This is what I'm looking at. It's not complex.

**AA:** So what is our agreement? We have agreed that we don't need the National Theatre. Also to make the space available to other lucrative energy and see how that guides and protects the space. If we are left with this place, what can you do with it?

**JA:** This place is hungry for a whole lot of creative activity. I know this place used to be a printing press. So as a writer, I know what this place meant for the work that I do. So, I would bring it back to its original form. There would be all sorts of machines, with designers, and also a small space for the writer, where he can think and receive more inspiration for his work. I would make it an outlet where everyone comes together, learns from one another and inspires one another. We have to find a way of pushing out this creative energy, so it will meet the needs of the people.

**AA:** It all boils down to capital. The energy is out there, although it might be scattered, with people doing their different things, but if you want to bring that together to form a critical mass, it all boils down to question of capital. I mean the solid cash.

**JA:** Do you know that if you have a very wonderful idea, there are capitalists out there, who are ready to give you the financial support you need?

AA: But it is things like Big Brother, Project Fame and Idol that get the biggest support these days. Does it mean that no-one has ever come up with a very good theatre idea?

JA: What I'm suggesting is that people need to create more platforms, to think a little bit more, to be positive in their aspirations. I am an addict of positivity; I believe everything can actually work out.

AA: I would like to see a program with a strong emphasis on digital communication in literature, publishing films, visual and video art in the practical and not theoretical sense. Also live performances that rely heavily on digital should not be left out. Just like a festival in UK, called Time Wave, which is all about digital media. People now use digital like never before. By taking the notion of National Theatre beyond something archival, it will make it something like a time capsule. It would really be interesting to have such a festival whereby we showcase our culture as Africans, but stretch out the point that technology is not strange or alien to us. Part of why the country is the way it is, is because we don't engage sufficiently with the future.

JA: It's a shame that we don't go to the schools and universities where we have these young minds. If we could encourage and support these young minds, it would really make a whole lot of difference. We should come together and think about how we can create something like a miniature of what we want in the future.