

Avant-Gardism and the Histrionics of Gabe Otsemobor's *Madmen* vis-à-vis Homes as Sites of Madness

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Abstract

This study analysed the content of the performances of Gabe Otsemobor's Madmen within the ambience of Avant-gardism. It investigated the form of these performances using the theoretical paradigm of movements in the Avant-garde tradition. It appraised the political and economic contexts of the performances of this play. It also assessed the dynamics of revolution in them. This was with a view to establishing the relevance of an avant-garde reading of the performances. The performances relied on anti-realistic theories located in the realm of avant-gardism to realising these objectives. Primary and secondary sources of data were employed for this study. The primary source comprised a close viewing of the purposively selected performances of Gabe Otsemobor's Madmen. These performances were selected because they, in their forms and contents, lend themselves sufficiently to an avant-garde critique. The secondary source included books, journal articles and the Internet. The data collected were analysed using the theories of Avant-gardism. The results of the study showed that both in contents and forms, the selected performances of Gabe Otsemobor's Madmen were rich in avant-garde value. The results further showed that the selected performances were of avant-garde significance since they paid deliberate attention and consciously reacted to society's decay and reflected in their actions, a sense of worthlessness of the human life. More so, the histrionics and mise en scene of these performances, displayed remarkable and far-reaching assault on the conventional realistic theatre. The study concluded that the selected performances, both in contents and forms, sufficiently demonstrated artistic richness within an avant-garde context.

Key Words: Avant-gardism, Decay, Histrionics, Resistance, Worthlessness

1. Introduction

This paper shall attempt a critical analysis of form and content of the performances of Gabe Otsemobor's *Madmen* within the ambience of Avant-gardism and from the standpoint of an artistic director. It is, therefore, not an intention, overt or covert, to engage in mainstream theatrical and critical discourse. This owes mainly to the consideration of the exigency of space and time. The play *Madmen* has been performed several times in Nigeria and Ghana. However, special attention will be paid to the last two performances done at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in June of 2019. References, albeit very little, will also be made to the text, and the University of Ghana, Legon's performance, under the direction of Ebenezer Kwame Asime in March, 2013. This is because these performances have a special affinity to the play text, to the paradigmatic performance theories and, as well as to the spirit of the avant-garde tradition.

Over the years, there has always been cause to disagree with critics who place this play within the Absurdist realm. One such example is the argument with a post graduate student at the University of Ghana, Legon in 2013 at the Efua T. Sutherland theatre. On this occasion, he (the postgraduate student) argued vehemently and sensibly at the viva that took place after one of the performances; that the play *Madmen* belongs to the absurdist tradition. He, like most others who have ventured to toe this line of thought, is not in any way wrong. This is because the play has features of the absurd and the Theatre of the Absurd is one of the anti-realistic theatrical conventions. One of such features of the absurd is in the acting style. The play, like most absurd plays, takes the form of representational acting. Actors, in their acting in this play, present an illusion of reality. However, it should be noted that it does not adhere religiously, in content and form to Martin Esslin's description of Theatre of the Absurd. In this kind of theatre, Esslin noted that:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets ... if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed

dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings
(p.330)

This point shall be made clear presently in the course of analyzing the performances of this play. For now, suffice it to state that the performances borrow from several experimental performance theories. Hence the main theoretical focus, as earlier noted, is on the performances of the play and not the play text itself. These performances, like Esslin puts it, fall under the category that “pursue ends quite different from those of the conventional play and therefore use quite different methods” (p.330). Theories such as the symbolist theatre, the Poor Theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty and the Epic Theatre are subsumed in this study, in the umbrella of Avant-gardism. These theories, along with the Theatre of the Absurd are predominantly used in realizing the performances of *Madmen*.

2. Towards Understanding the Avant-garde Theatre

The study observes that a lot of performances have been done, both in the conventional and anti-conventional theatrical modes. These performances have been done within the Picture frame theatre and also as anti-theatre, breaking the fourth wall conventional practice. However, little work has been done on *Madmen*, especially from the milieu of avant-gardism. This study therefore, bridges this gap as it attempts a critical discourse on select performances of *Madmen with a view to showcasing its* impact on the society and its citizenry. Analyses of these select performances will enhance knowledge in the area of dramatic theory and criticism, providing a fresh additional study of Avant-gardism to the already existing corpus in dramatic theory and criticism. Furthermore, it will broaden understanding on critiquing the performances of Gabe Otsemobor's *Madmen* from the critical position of the anti-theatre tradition. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- ❖ analyse the content of the performances of Gabe Otsemobor's *Madmen* within the ambience of Avant-gardism
- ❖ investigate the form of these performances using the theoretical paradigm of movements in the Avant-garde tradition, and,

- ❖ appraise the political and economic contexts of the performances of this play.

This is with a view to establishing the relevance of an avant-garde reading of these performances that fall under the lens of the avant-garde theatre. Avant-gardism has a special relationship to the sense of decay or decadence. The avant-garde generally belongs to the continent of anti-art or anti-theatre and, it is this contradictory gesture to art or theatre that gives it its artistry and theatricalism as the case may be. Its form is anti-convention, and its content, a rousing call to return to the roots of art, theatre and indeed, life itself. A shattered world view and a sense of worthlessness of life lead to the Avant-garde Movement. The Avant-garde Movement by the way, refers to:

a kind of “pre-style” indicating and pointing the direction of a change which will triumph in the end, a change which will truly change everything. This amounts to saying that the avant-garde cannot generally be recognized until after the event, when they have succeeded, when they have founded ... a cultural style which is recognized and will conquer an age (Eugene Ionesco, p.310).

The performances of *Madmen* were basically anti-conventional, reacting against the well-made play. The performances go against the conventional ways of staging in the theatre. This anti-conventional staging style is used in all of the performances under study to help especially in achieving the desired objective of a protest against convention. This aptly toes the line of thought of one of the greatest of the symbolist poets and theorists, Stephane Mallarme, who opines that “In a society lacking stability, lacking unity, it is not possible to create definite art. From this imperfect social other, which in its turn is an expression of spiritual disquiet, is born the vague need for individuality of which present literary phenomena are the direct reflection” (Qtd. in Braun 1982: 38). As an avant-garde play, it becomes “apparently a rule breaking-activity” (Schechner, 2003:13) with a “mission” to “reconstruct theatrical styles and techniques while puncturing the pretensions of the bourgeoisie.”

(Schechner, 2003:135). Most importantly, it is meant to see how these performances, with their anti-conventional nature, can be used to prick the conscience of members of the audience. This is especially the case because rather than hypnotize its audience, it makes them active participants in the theatrical happenings on the theatrical space. This anti conventional theatrical style takes the audience away from the conventional practice of accepting with docility of maintaining status quo. Ionesco explains further when he wrote that:

The protestation of an avant-garde dramatist can be a reaction against Realism when that is the most prevalent and abused form of oppression in the theatre; it can be a protest against a certain symbolism when that symbolism has become abused, arbitrary, and no longer captures reality. (2008:311).

He further states that “a creative work of art is, by its very novelty, aggressive, spontaneously aggressive ... strikes out at the public, against the vast majority; ... rouses indignation by its nonconformity” (p.312).

Furthermore, one of the features of the Epic theatre as Walter Benjamin posits, is “The Quotable gesture”. According to him, “To quote a text involves the interruption of its context”, and this feature was effectively and predominantly deployed in the stagings of this play. He proceeds to define the Epic theatre as a “gestic theatre” where the more the interruptions, the “more gestures result” and that “By his controlled use of gesture the actor transforms the floor” (2008:225) into a variety of places. In *Madmen* the audience at a point became grass to be cleared, rabbits to be hunted as prey, students in a classroom listening to a poem recited by Abel etc. The audience, at different times, becomes Rope and at other times, becomes Abel in the cause of the performance. The stage itself, at different times, served as different venues: a graveyard, uncultivated grassland, street, Abel’s bedroom, Rope’s living room, prayer ground for Muslims and Christians respectively etc. The performance style is such that the epic alienation effect was adopted to get the people thinking all of the time about these situations. Brecht states it rather concisely:

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it ... That's not the way ... That's extraordinary, hardly believable ... It's got to stop ... The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are necessary ... That's great art: Nothing obvious in it ... I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (Qtd. Saint Gbilekaa, 1997: 43).

The experimental nature of the Pit Theatre of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, like that of the Efua T. Sutherland Theatre of the University of Ghana, Legon, makes it possible for realizing experimental plays. This is especially so because, both theatres do not have fixed seats and they are structured in such a way that the staging and audience areas can be anywhere and everywhere. This in itself is one of the hallmarks of the Poor theatre. Also, the bourgeois theatre is known for its richness in costume, set, lighting et al, but the Avant-garde theatre is chiefly characterized by the poverty or near absence of all the usual paraphernalia that make up the *mise-en-scene* of the bourgeois theatre. The concentration in this theatre is more on the actor-audience relationship. This is especially noticeable in the poor theatre. Grotowsky explains this succinctly when he wrote:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor – spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion. (2008:369)

The poor theatre allows the “infinite variation of performer-audience relations” (p.369). This theatrical poverty helps in no small measure in getting the audience completely involved in the action of the performances. It confirms, without any shade of doubt, at least, from the perspective of avant-gardism, the notion that the text “becomes theatre only through the actor's use of it” (Grotowski, Qtd. David Kransner, Ed. 2008:370). We have considered the fundamental features of the

experimental theories and a plot synoptic analysis of the last productions of *Madmen* will be discussed next.

3. Plot Synoptic Analysis of Performances

The performances are the same, form and content-wise. The only difference is that female actors were used to play the lead roles of Rope and Abel in the first night of performance at the Obafemi Awolowo University. The director, Kwame Ebenezer Asime, in the University of Ghana, Legon in performances of same play, was able to replicate and play out the mind of the dramatist. He, like the directed Nigerian version, made use of the same performance theories to achieving desired result. In this regard therefore, attempt shall be made on just a plot synopsis of these performances. The performance of *Madmen* starts with the entire cast on stage in a freeze and semi-circle position with three pairs of actors in the semi-circle, who are also in freeze positions like the others. An unseen narrator airs his personal view, amidst this stillness on stage on the subject of in/sanity in relation to the society. In this monologue, the voice juxtaposes sanity and insanity and concludes that the word sanity has been negatively redefined by the majority who see the morally upright in the society as insane. The happening then ends with the voice of the narrator personified in the entire cast on stage. The subsequent happening begins with a dirge by a group of actors preparing for a performance. The actors mourn the death of one of them. In a kind of extended flash back, we see the mourned in her healthy state, sick state and then, her death and burial. The actors display a reluctance to carry on with the rehearsals. The director comes in and charges them to put aside her death and prepare for the forthcoming performance. This charge leads to the next happening – the rehearsal for the performance. The rehearsal scene opens with a narrative dance that introduces the audience to the cause of the crisis – two families embroiled in a land dispute. Two vagrants contracted to clear the disputed land, arrived in the subsequent happening to begin work. However, after much argument, their bitter and horrendous past experiences amidst their troubled consciences, symbolized in the frequently heard voices are revealed. In the recollection of their past, a lady is delivered of a baby on the disputed land. They decide consequently, not to clear the piece of land and instead, formed a vigilante group. They subsequently used their lived

experiences to build a bridge of unity rather than a fence of disunity between the feuding families.

4. Homes as Sites of Sundry Despicable Happenings

Dupe's death throws the entire community of actors into a complete state of mourning and inactivity. None of the actors, but for the timely intervention of the director, was willing to go ahead with the rehearsals. They feel deeply saddened by her sudden death and resigned to fate. They, like Dupe, are all victims of the dreaded HIV. Dupe's case, however, developed into full blown AIDS, leading to her death when the play opens (pp.3-5). The very thing that unites them – HIV – is the very same thing that gives them cause for worry, fear and despair. They are neglected by the society that is supposed to be a home to them, for the simple reason that they are victims of the dreaded HIV. However, they are not deterred as they come together in solidarity to continue living in spite of their state of health. Dupe's death, however, shatters that dream and willpower, albeit, temporarily. The director propels them to action with his inspirational comments, making them realize that 'the man dies in everyman that loses the will to live' and goes on to remind them that 'the future can be better' and that 'each of us has a personal, moral responsibility to make it so' (p.5). He charges the actors to prove to the world that their state of health has not affected their ability to reason and contribute to the society's growth. He states: "we have a performance at hand. This is an opportunity to prove our relevance in the society through theatre ... Let's put in our very best and give the world something that would make them begin to use their brains instead of their brawns; something that would make them think" (p.6). They become determined to prove a point to the society that neglects them because of their state of health. The society depicted in the work becomes home as site for neglect and was almost going to be the source of ruin of these gifted youths but, for the timely intervention and wisdom of one of them.

The earth is home to human beings who by virtue of their sense of reasoning and education have sensibly differentiated themselves from other animals. It is however sad to note that, in spite of this attained level of education and civilization, human beings yet live like animals with actions of constant bickering.

This is reflected first in the actions of the neighbouring families. These families in the play have lived together, over the years in peace. However, they suddenly began to maim and kill one another over a piece of land. The cause of the feud is because one of the homes, for selfish political and economic reasons, decides to encroach on the other's portion of land. Consequently, there is bloodshed as a result of this act of trespass. Both families then decide, for lasting peace, to erect an electric fence to permanently separate them. Subsequently, they contract the services of Rope and Abel to clear the disputed land. This happening in the performance was achieved through the use of dance and mime.

The next happening presents one with Rope and Abel: the labourers contracted to clear the site for the erection of the electric fence. These vagrants, like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, do nothing but talk. However, they did not engage in meaningless prattle. In the process of their dialogue, an allegorical journey into their subconscious that exposes their bitter past experiences/unpleasant memories is made manifest to the audience: One gets to know for instance, that Rope was a soldier. He was demoted by his commanding officer (who probably was transferring his aggression on him) and left stranded on the high way for refusing to foolishly overtake another vehicle. One also gets to know why and how he beats and stabs wife to death and that he runs away from a psychiatric home to become a vagrant. He begs Abel to kill him several times as comeuppance for killing his own wife. Abel, on the other hand, is "a man more sinned against than he ever sinned" (Ola Rotimi, p.xi). In recalling his past, one gets to know that his wife once ran away with a young man whom he once accommodated in his home. She comes back two years later with her extended family members to beg for forgiveness. Abel forgives and accepts her back only for her to leave a second time to stay with Abel's friend and neighbour, Professor Morris. He was still trying to recover from his wife's atrocious and wayward attitude, when a friend from the North visits and dies in his home. The friend's death drives him insane and he later finds himself in a psychiatric home and escapes to the unnamed setting of the play as a tramp.

The above happening, which constitutes the bulk of the play, was achieved in the performance in the avant-garde manner and mostly with gestic actions not stated in the play text. These vagrants, in the course of recalling their past, made use of the

entire stage and auditorium. This in itself is an unconventional way of doing a performance and conforms with Ionesco's notion of the avant-garde that "the free work of art, by its individualistic character, despite its unusual appearance, alone springs from men's hearts, through a man's heart; it is the only thing which really expresses the people (p.313). One sees Rope and Abel, at varying times, move in and out of the auditorium and in and out of the stage; turning every area into a performance area and every member of the audience into an actor and or a prop to drive home its message. Attempt is made to make the audience part of the production. For example, at a point, Rope runs into the auditorium, which at that point is a grassy land, in pursuit of a fleeing rabbit. At another point, Abel does same and goes ahead to use a member of the audience's foot as the fleeing rabbit. At a point also, both of them run round the theatre in a hot chase. In yet another instance, Rope goes to sit in the auditorium which then becomes a class room, as one of Abel's students. Again, when both families are reunited, Rope and Abel sit at the apron centre; acting as a divide between the auditorium and the stage. They used the families on stage as illustration of the cockroach and chicken to the audience. The idea is that avant-garde basically tries to "overcome fragmentation by approaching performances as part of rather than apart from the community" (Kransner, Ed. 2008:155).

Rope and Abel begin this happening in the play with a dream motif. Rope tells Abel of a dream he had and in that dream, the chicken and the cockroach held a meeting and were able to stay together because of the presence of ants. Amidst their blather, they are frequently disturbed by voices in their head; this happens each time any of the vagabonds tries to lie or shy away from his past. This inner voice that speaks to and pricks the conscience of every individual for or against every action taken in life was constantly heard, of course, in their own imagination and at every state of mental agony to serve as a check against inhuman conduct and activity. Also, the voice or voices in their respective heads is symptomatic of the negative experiences in their past which constitute unpleasant memories that subsequently led each one to madness. However, these disturbing voices ceased to perturb each of them the moment they resolved to use their problem situations as learning situations to solving

societal problems. They become born anew and begin to function as human beings. The tail of the play also depicts the two feuding families as the chicken and the cockroach who are only able to stay together because of the presence of Rope and Abel, who are, also portrayed as ants in this instance. The tramps, therefore, become the revolutionary force in this play. They are able to use their unpleasant past to resist problems of the present for the benefit of all. They are firm in their resistance to retrogressive actions engaged in by humans; actions capable of constituting a wedge between and among human beings. The play becomes an anti theatre that pulls down the conventional structures of playing with a view to making progress. This is also in tandem with the view that:

The revolutionary struggle, in which drama and the theatre are expected to take an active part, involves the complete destruction of all the vestiges of the past which are still standing in the way of progress, all the monsters which are still defiling the present... (Utudjian, 1984:38.)

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to note that the radical change that is highly desired by all will only come about when one begins to see and do things differently. In a similar vein, Braun posits that "Artaud sees this as grounds neither for passive resignation nor for attempted rationalization, but rather for defiance and celebration" (184) of a supposed positive outcome of a collective struggle and solidarity.

Every violent, insane and insensitive action carried out by characters in this play – insatiable hunger to kill and willing to be killed; Rope's hot chase of Abel round the entire theatre with a cutlass; Abel's surrendering and squatting like a goat for Rope to behead and vice versa; Abel's attempt to behead an audience member; the spilling of blood and sundry other circumstances (see pictures at appendix) indicate the decay in human society and a reaction through the avant-garde against the absolute loss of value of the human life. It also brings into question the kind of values received at home - negative values such as violence between and among families along tribal, religious and racial divide. The ability of the vagrants to think through their madness and resist the planned fence is indicative of the wedge of

resistance by the proletariat against the madness of the bourgeoisie to unnecessarily and selfishly acquire resources even at the expense of human life. However, on a deeper level, the madness in the performance of *Madmen* is symbolic of that moment in one's life when one experiences any of pain, fear, tears, tedium, sadness, weakness, worry, fury, oppression, frustration, decay, worthlessness etc. It shows that everyone has that element of madness. Everyone is mad. The only difference, as noticed in the characters of Rope, Abel and the feuding families, is in the degree and duration of each one's madness and of course, how each one handles individual moments of madness. The play reflects the thin line of difference between madness and sanity and seems to state that madness, as reflected in the characters of Rope and Abel, can be positively deployed for the good of the society. It is also, as earlier posited, a reaction against, and a far-reaching assault on the hypnotic realm of the bourgeois theatre. In this sense, players and spectators "without pretence and on equal footing ..., together entered the playing-area, a large empty room: the ones to give and present, the others to receive and witness" (Braun, 196). Most important, the play is a retort against a world that has obviously gone berserk in its values for human lives and properties.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the select performances of *Madmen* clearly showed a rejection of Fourth Wall Convention; the idea that stage is framed by an imaginary edifice (the proscenium arch) separating audience and actor. The actors made use of every available space on stage and in the auditorium. Also, the performances made use of related theories to drive home their message of despair to hope; and to serve as a resistance and a needle to conventional theatrical and societal practices. The analysis of the performances further brought to the fore that both in contents and forms, the selected performances of *Madmen* were rich in avant-garde value. Also, the analysis showed that the selected performances are of avant-garde significance since they paid deliberate attention and consciously reacted to society's decay and reflected in their actions, a sense of worthlessness of the human life. More so, the histrionics and mise en scene of these performances, displayed remarkable and far-reaching

assault on the conventional realistic theatre and uncouth societal practices. The study concluded that the selected performances, both in contents and forms, sufficiently demonstrated artistic richness within an avant-garde context.

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Appendix

i. Abel's wife pleads for forgiveness



ii. Willing to kill and be killed



iii. Submitting self to be killed.



iv. Search for rabbits in the auditorium



v. Submitting self to be killed



vi. Chaotic scene of Islam and Christianity.



vii. Rope as student in class



viii. Spilled blood during child birth



ix. Abel with an audience member



x. Rope and Abel at Apron Centre