



A Reading of Mohammed Ben Abdallah's *the Fall of Kumbi*: a Director's Approach

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Abstract: Directing a stage play is seen as a creative and interpretative art which takes its root from the script. The art of interpreting a script for a production has been generally an exclusive vocation of the theatre director. This engagement of interpretative exploration is normally done with critical analytical lenses to ensure the audience are served with the right product. Consequently, for a play to succeed or otherwise is heavily dependent on the directorial analysis and approach used by the director. The paper attempts to discuss directorial elements to be considered in the reading of Mohammed Ben Abdallah's *The Fall of Kumbi*. This work will further examine the elements through the use of textual analysis as a methodology. It was observed that the title, characterization, style, language and thoughts are crucial elements that the director must understand and craft an approach in staging a play.

1. INTRODUCTION

The significant role of the director in theatre production is one feature that cannot be compromised. The director's function in today's theatre keep expanding as his art keeps improving. In recent times, the emergence of new trends in the theatre have made directors adopt new approaches to productions. However, one significant task that has remained basically constant with the passage of time is the director's overarching goal and responsibility is interpretation. He or she interprets a playwright's text and vision and harmonizes the ideas of the other theatre personnel to bring out the main artistic theme and vision of the production. Directing is seen as an interpretative art which incorporates the harmonization of other creative artists such as actors and designers in achieving the set goal. Cohen (2003) asserted that "directing is not simply a craft; it is directing in the dictionary as well as the theatrical sense. It is to lead, to supervise, to instruct, to give shape" (p.492). The art of directing revolves around leading, organizing, teaching, supervising, instructing, shaping and forming with the ultimate aim of creatively fulfilling a needful goal.

The director is therefore seen as the personnel who holds the whole production together. He or she then becomes the designer who coordinates all the creative team and other staff of the production such as; costume design, lighting design, props, acting, set design, stage combat, and sound design for the production (Downs & Ramsey, 2012).

The director's primary focus to assist in working is the script. The script is the very spine of the production process hence, a director must be meticulous and critical of the chosen script to be able to break it down for easy absorption to the intended audience. For instance, if there are certain traditions and rituals that need to be researched into for deeper understanding, the director is inclined to oblige. It is crucial that due diligence to analysis of the script is done to ensure a successful production. Therefore, any good director should as a matter of need be in a position to illuminate the thought and vision of the script and the entire play making process as that will be the guiding principle to achieving the overriding theme and vision of the production. Owusu (2013) asserts that understanding and interpreting a script is a sure way to determine the shape of conceptualization which leads to the design and nature of blocking the play and the entire ingredients needed for the success of the production ensemble.

This work essentially aims at discussing the directorial analysis of the reading of Mohammed Ben Abdallah's *The Fall of Kumbi* through the spectrum of textual analysis. Elements such as style, characterization, title, language and thoughts will be discussed as some of the major conditions precedence for directing the plays in general hence, the play under study. It will also highlight the importance of understanding a script as a rudiment and essence for directing in the theatre.

2. PROFILE OF MOHAMMED BEN ABDALLAH

The playwright Mohammed Ben Abdallah was born in 1944 in Kumasi, Ghana to a Muslim parent. He traces his ancestry to a mixture of Mauritanian and Moroccan blood who settled in Ghana in the 1900's. The maternal side is of Guinean and Moroccan blood. He started life in Kumasi with two languages (Hausa and Twi). He grew up at a time when Muslims were suspicious of secular education as they thought it would sway their wards from their Islamic faith. But his father despite the pressure and ridicule by friends and relatives was undaunted.

He started his education in Kumasi which to him meant a great deal of work for Young Abdallah. He had to attend secular as well as the 'Makaranta' (the traditional Islamic school). The 'Makaranta' was a priority so far as his family was concerned. Thus, he memorized verses from the Holy Qur'an under the tutelage of an Islamic scholar from Timbuktu, Mali who had visited the family. The training was so rigorous that at 4:00 a.m the exercise starts till 5:00 am morning prayers before he is allowed to attend school.

However, the unexpected happened just two weeks after he wrote the Common Entrance that the father died. He then left Kumasi after the funeral with his uncle to live in Nima, Accra to continue his schooling. He was enrolled in St. John's Grammar School then at Kokomlemlé in Accra.

At age fifteen young Abdallah trekked on foot from Nima where he resides to St. John's Grammar School at Kokomlemlé every day. Life at St. John's Grammar school was unbearable, as his uncle could not afford to pay the tuition fees let alone the boarding fees. This made the young lad absented himself from school many times. However, there was a window of hope for the lad as at the same time, the drama troupe of the school was rehearsing one of Shakespeare's plays "Macbeth" to commemorate the school's Speech and Prize-giving Day.

He was playing the lead role as Macbeth with the director or instructor being Miss Urrei a Scottish teacher. She was his inspirer.

According to him the play went well that the Headmaster asked for the player of the character to step forward. He being so frightened stepped out still in his costume, was however, and applauded for the splendid performance he put up. He was then awarded full scholarship by the school. He was asked to go back to the house and pack, bag and baggage to the school as a border in form three.

After completing his secondary education, he pursued a course in Theatre Arts in the School of Music, Drama and Dance now the School of Performing Arts of the University of Ghana, Legon. He majored in costume and scenic designing. This he did because of the inspiration her teacher gave him and the scholarship received having put up a good performance as a lead character in no other play than Macbeth. So, he believed that it is the performing arts that will make him realize his dream.

In 1972, when he was in the final year that he wrote his first play, *Slaves* which was nominated for a competition in America. It won the contest and became the first play from Africa to achieve that feat. He was once again awarded a scholarship by the University of Ghana to pursue a post graduate course in Georgia in the United States. He later had his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin in U.S.A.

He has been a lecturer at the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana for many years where he was instrumental in the formation and establishment of "Abibigoro" the University's resident theatre company. He became the head of the Department of Theatre Arts of the School of Performing Arts briefly around 2003.

It must be noted that the doyen and the creator of Ghanaian theatre Efua Sutherland had a great influence on him as he and Sandy Arkhurst served as research fellows for her after his diploma studies. He is also a politician who emerged at a point when Ghana was in the revolutionary stage. He became the minister or secretary of education and culture. The national theatre of Ghana was built in his time.

Though Mohammed Ben Abdallah is retired from the University of Ghana, Legon, he assisted in the setting up of the University of Cape Coast Theatre Arts and Film Studies Department. He is also a part time senior lecturer at the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Education, Winneba.

To his credit, Abdallah has written several plays. Such as *The Verdict of the Cobra*, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, *The Alien King*, *The Slaves*, *The Fall of Kumbi*, *The Witch of Mopti*, *Song of Pharaoh*, *Ananse and the Golden Drum* and *Ananse and the Rain god*.

He is married to Akosua Amponsah Abdallah and they have four children.

3. THE DIRECTOR AND THE SCRIPT

The director is arguably considered as the interpreter of the script. And this has been the core mandate of the director in theatre. In the views of Wilson (2010), Brockett (2001) and Dean and Cara (1974), they see the director as a critic who understands what works or otherwise in a play in the production process. Cameron and Gillespie (1999) also opined that:

No matter what the orientation towards the text, the director must now work to analyse its part, reduce it to its simplest components, 'understand it' (to understand does not mean to 'turn the script into rational description of itself', it means rather to make the director capable of staging it). The job of interpretation has many aspects which are often explored simultaneously both before and during rehearsals (p.154).

It is the analysis that gives the director an in-depth understanding of the script which is the primary source document. Similarly, it is out of the script the development of the concepts, casting, rehearsals, blocking and budgeting are derived from for the final presentation. By implication, the manipulation and understanding of the varied directorial codes is fashioned out or determined by the director's depth of knowledge and understanding of the script.

Weston (1996), argued that "in order to understand the script, you need to be able to operate in the sub-world of these characters to believe in it, create in it and trust it" (p.162). This will enable the director in discovering the world of the play to aid understanding for the interpretation. It is out of the script that for instance, the director is able to find out who the characters are and what happens to them and devise a way of using the circumstances to become the tellers of their own story.

Accordingly, with the issue of analysis, it is imperative that, the director closely examines the text to ascertain whether the play is from the past or a new work that has not been produced. The analysis of the text then enables the director to understand the dramatic structure and purpose of the play. This is because, the director must understand the vision of the playwright in the text. By this the director will discover the meaning and structure of the play hence, express the intended message to the audience. The realization of the above is largely derived from the characters, genre of the play, language, style, and spectacle. These enable the director to develop a concept and approach for the production. In corroborating the directorial approach and concept, Emasealu (2010) asserted that:

The directorial art involves the ability to peruse a playwright's script thoroughly, discover the intended message for the audience and be able to communicate such message to the actors and actresses who, ultimately constitute the conduit between the text and the audience ... it is the task of the director to fashion the way of achieving expressive and communicative movements, gestures, appropriate verbal nuances, songs, dance, music, stage business...and effective use of eloquence silences (p.73).

To appropriate the right framework for the production process, it requires a distinction between the directorial concept and approach in directing. Basically, the director's concept is the intended matter or message for the audience while the approach is how the matter or message is interpreted and presented. It will be prudent for the director in interpreting the play, endeavour to employ the use of the presentational and representational approaches. Presentational approach is a non-realistic style in which the audience is forced into awareness that they are watching a play. The representational on the other hand incorporates a more realistic style. The audience is made to intellectually and emotionally buy into the 'reality' of the plot setting and characters. In these approaches the director creates that object or product of his imagination to the believability and admiration of its audience.

The success or otherwise of the production is tied to the script. Therefore, the script cannot be ignored since it is the soul of the production, one must understand the nature and dynamics in interpreting it for that purpose. It therefore becomes necessary to employ textual analysis by the director before the production conference with the cast and crew to express himself creatively.

3.1. Synopsis of *the Fall of Kumbi* by Mohammed Ben Abdallah

All is set for the historical grand wedding between Aklilu the prince of Audoghast and Zainata a Tuareg princess, but the heart of the bride is with another man, the prince of Kumbi Saleh the fabled city of gold. The morning of the wedding breaks and there is no bride! While Audoghast sleeps, Amu Diata, the prince of the land of wealth and power elopes with their princess.

Feeling betrayed by one of his own, prince Aklilu seeks counsel from Ibn Yacin and joins forces with the moors. This provides a fine opportunity for the Moor who hitherto has his eyes on Kumbi with the pretext for raiding Kumbi's riches. They invade Kumbi Saleh to kill, loot, enslave and give up many of their victims of war in servitude in distant land.

The unwarranted crudely gruesome incidence is visited on the people due to their reluctance to the warnings by the gods not to go into war with the peace loving merchants of Audoghast. Kumbi disregarded the advice and went to war to claim the wardrobe of an unfaithful woman. The Temple Attendant who is the matron of the temple virgins recounts this unwise decision by the leaders of Kumbi.

In a state of apprehension of the Marabouts attack, the High Priest summons the seven priests and priestesses of Kumbi. After an extended heightened tiresome ceremony of rituals and trances and praise singing, the High Priest admonishes them of the continual presence and protection of the gods in their journey to the rain forest of the south. However, with regards to the Golden Stool, he assures them of its safe keeping in the womb of the heavens and it will come forth when a new High Priest assumes its role. This reveals the thematic interest of Abdallah's rendezvous with history and culture of its community.

At the crux of their crunch meeting, Ibn Yacin and his soldiers saunter in. The two spiritual leaders gravely hurl out abuses at each other. The High Priest not able to bear the contempt has himself killed by Khunata the mad daughter of the Queen mother of Kumbi to thrust the dagger into his chest. The women together with Astimalinke and Khunata were sent into exile as slaves in the court of Ibn Yacin in Sijilmasa. Khunata through the permission of the Moor performed their last 'pagan' ritual. It was at this ritual that Khunata utter prophecies to her fellow captives assuring them of the rise of Kumbi and the fulfillment of the golden stool's re-emergence when a new High Priest is born. After these assurances of hope, she then admonishes them to be strong to endure the trials ahead. However, in the dreadful final initiation dance she follows the steps of the High Priest and commits suicide.

3.2. Directorial Analysis of Mohammed Ben Abdallah's *the Fall of Kumbi*

Directing *The Fall of Kumbi* demands an understanding of the overriding theme that guides the director's interpretation. It is essential that elements such as the title, style, characterisation, language and thought are given consideration. These elements are the key ingredients that determine a clear relationship with the content of the play. The director in an attempt to interpret the play hinged it on the framework of presumptuous pride and political arrogance as the directorial concept.

The title of the play naturally cast one's mind back to old Ghana empire in pre-historic era. It is believed that Kumbi was the capital city. However, drama basically deals with implied, connotative, derivative and metaphorical, it will be highly inappropriate for a director to just use the denotative. Thus, the director must be knowledgeable enough to capitalize on the history of the old Ghana empire to serve as a reference point for deeper illumination of the world of the play. It is said that drama is a re-enactment of life or a slice of life. In effect, drama takes its motif from the society. A clear knowledge of the history of the ancient empire will to a large extent help the director to understand and appreciate the cultural milieu of the defunct empire so as to relive it. For instance, illumination will be given to the setting, of the play, props, cultural practices and traditions, religion and faith practices among others. From the title, the history gathered on the lifestyle of the people, as highly religious people, trade, governance and accommodative people except their pride of wealth and arrogance that saw their fall.

Another directorial interpretation of *The Fall of Kumbi* is characterization. Characterization as defined by Owusu (2009) is "the method the author uses to acquaint the reader with his or her characters" (p.31). The characters are the playwright's images of human nature. Furthermore, characterization is a literary device used in a methodical manner to highlight and explain the details about a character in a story. In this paper, prominence is given to the playwright's explicit information about each character in a detailed description. Secondly, the implied information that allows the audience to make deductions for themselves about the characteristics of the character by observing their thought process, behaviour, speech, appearance and even the way they communicate with other characters and also by discerning the response of other characters. It is from the characters that the director is able to deduce that some of the character names suggest Aramaic origins and /or suggestive of the Akan lineage and culture. From the play, mention can be made of names such as *Zainata*, *Khunatta*, *Hawa*, *Hafsatu*, *IbnYacin* among others as Arabic names. Again, these names may have been acquired perhaps through trade, marriages and religious faith. Names such as *Oyoko*, *Bretuo*, *Ansa*, *Asona* also resonate clan names except *Ansa* among the Akan tribe. These names explicitly, aids in establishing the setting of the play. Generally, characterization in a play is expected to clearly establish the purpose of the play. In the play under study, directly establishes the sense at the early stages of the story. This is evident, in the lines of the First storyteller gives the hint about the cause of Kumbi's destruction.

First Storyteller: *Indeed you are right my sister! For in the desert city of Audoghast lives the cause of Kumbi's destruction (2010, p. 7)*

To make the cause of Kumbi's destruction more prominent is the **Temple Attendant**. She is described as the matron of the Temple Virgins and attendants. She intimates that;

*... There are many who think
That the fire which consumed Kumbisaleh
Started overnight but I am not one of those.
All this is as it should be
A few moons have come and gone
Since a Prince of Kumbi sneaked into the desert city of Audoghast
And snatched away a woman
A beautiful daughter of the Tuaregs! (2010, p. 33).*

It could be deduced that it was elopement that triggered Kumbi Saleh's destruction.

Again, the ascetic leader of the Marabout, *Ibn Yacin* reveals the directorial concept of presumptuous pride and arrogance as evidenced in the lines;

Ibn Yacin: *The Sultan of Morocco has had his eyes on Ghana for sometime now. It is only a matter of time. Kumbi Saleh, the so called City of Gold has grown too big, too rich and too powerful for its own good. (2010, p.24).*

The above text gives the audience the impression about *Ibn Yacin* as a man determined to prey on his spotted animals for his selfish gain.

The issue of language is another critical aspect that must be considered in the directorial readings of Abdallah's *The Fall of Kumbi*. The choice of language for his craft is the English Language. For it is the main medium through which every playwright is obliged to use to integrate clear descriptions of the characters, setting, mood, tone, atmosphere and the general presentation of the story. In the view of Mensah (2016);

Abdallah admits that there is a kind of restraint with the use of English Language as his medium of communication. But as he seeks for globalization of his works, he asserts that discarding the use of the European's language would not be appropriate (p.69).

The restraint he has with the English language however, has been to his advantage as he tries to domesticate the English language. He weaves the richness of the indigenous wise sayings, proverbs,

popular linguistic components in a manner to attract the attention of his audience. In effect, the director must ensure to sift out these sayings analyse and interpret it to the understanding of the performers and finally the audience. If the director is able to identify them and interpret them accordingly, it will spice up the production. For instance, in the report by the Temple Attendant, she utters some familiar proverbial quote among the Akans as;

Temple Attendant: *The elder who watches unconcerned*

While children kill and eat the sacred python

When the time comes for the head count of python eaters

He is counted among them (2010, p.32).

Transliteration is also a unique feature that the director must look out for during directorial analysis of the play. The aesthetic effect of these elements are awesome and carries the intended message to its audience. For example, the expression

Kumbi slapped Audoghast in the face

And demanded that they should not weep!

We went to shit in their courtyard

And we turned around and asked them

To wipe our arse for us! (2010, p.33).

The director must attempt to interpret them well to the understanding of both the performers and audience employing the right tone, projection, enunciation, inflections, accents, and pronunciation techniques.

A directorial reading of Abdallah's works especially the *The Fall of Kumbi* requires a critical look at music, dance and ritual as a major component in the story. Specifically, an Abdallah's play is tangent on these elements. Thus, there is no Abdallah's play without music, dance and ritual. Attention must be paid to its use of music and dance. They are not just for the entertainment but for the functionality of it. For instance, the welcome song *Akwaaba Dwom* (welcome song) by Ephraim Amu which opens the play has its inherent message that suggests the brevity of our ancestors to secure our future. Therefore, music was not used as a mere background, but a functional part of the story (Yirenkyi & Mensah 2016, Deandrea, 2002).

The issue of ritual is also a significant element that the director must consider in his directorial analysis of the play. Ritual serves as the catalyst for the total theatre experience because it involves dance, music and drama. It again provides an avenue for the regeneration of the society. It revives and provides that link to recall the significance of these rituals in the development of the society. Therefore, the director must identify the specific rituals and its associated props for the production.

Furthermore, the thought of the play is a crucial element in the directorial analysis of *The Fall of Kumbi*. In the play under study, the thought is motivated by the various religious xenophobia insurgence across the length and breadth of the African continent, political upheavals and its associated repercussions, social menace and more specifically for the establishment and the acceptance of the Theatre of Africa decent.

One of the thoughts gleaned from the play *The Fall of Kumbi* is to unearth the cancer that religious xenophobia carries on its wheels across Africa and especially in Ghana presently. The new Ghana juxtaposed to the Old Ghana is a nation culminated with different people with their respective beliefs, and way of doing things but co-habit and trade peacefully. However, with the emergence of other cultures and religions from both the east and the west had a magnanimous effect on the hitherto calm, peaceful traditions of the people and even its economic, social, spiritual and moral aspects. It is therefore with this inner conflict that the playwright wishes to raise concern about. Notwithstanding, the belief, faith or an ideology of the people, the good judge is God and not us mortals. That is why the playwright quotes a portion of the Holy Qur'an which says:

O you unbelievers

I worship not what you worship!

Nor do you worship what I worship!

Neither did I worship what you worshipped!

Nor did you worship what I worshipped!

Neither would I worship what you worship!

Nor will you worship what I worship!

To you your faith!

And to me mine!

I am a man of God, priest of infidels and I do not believe in your idols and witchcraft (2010, p.44)

Though he is a practicing Moslem, he is first an African and must be allowed to have that liberty to tolerate and associate with his people and family even if they do not believe in his faith. It is this inner implosion that has been the cancer eating him up and not him alone but many African with Ghana being the central focus. It is this xenophobia that has resulted in the many inter-tribal and ethnic conflicts with respect to the threatening of death, ex-communication, banishment and the likes from the society, breaking the communalism and the intimacy way of living among us as a people. So why would a mother reprimand the daughter from marrying the man she loves had it not been the hot metal of religious snitching on the minds of the convert? No wonder the outcome led to the fall of that beautiful city Kumbi hence the end of an emerging civilization.

The holocaust of slavery and colonization is also fore grounded in the play. The colonization of Africa is still a continuing act of violence. It takes place in the mind or the psyche. Though some rant that the evil of slavery is to the past, there is no way denying their assertion but indisputably, it still exists presently shrouded in mental slavery. This is evident in the play in the lines of the First Storyteller;

...That is how the mind of the slaver works. The slaver is not content to be the owner of just the physical body of his captive. He needs to own the entire slave... mind, body and soul! He intoxicates his captive with the wine of forgetfulness... and... (2010, p. 79).

In effect, the mind of the 'slaver' is to process your soul, body and mind so as to really manipulate their target as a tamed donkey. The only alternative is to dance to their tunes and continue to boot-lick for unequivocal assistance. The reason being that '*...The captives' identity is burned out of his tormented soul and replaced with a new name, a new language and a new religion... he then ...defends with his own life his master's right to be his owner(2010, p,57)*. How disappointing and sad to be emancipated captives. That is how the African is and it the observation of the playwright to arouse and conscientize its audience in breaking out from their enclaves and brace-up for a real emancipation of self.

Similarly, the play seeks to criticize the swanky attitudes of people in positions of trust in society especially politicians. They see themselves as lords without any concern for their subjects they are expected to serve. It is this swank of a lifestyle that has resulted in the many unwarranted political unrest throughout Africa not forgetting Ghana. All these political upheavals took the form of coups and state of emergencies that were paraded with bloody incidence and thick cloud of fear and panic on the citizenry. For instance, it was the pride, arrogance and selfishness of the leaders that saw some of these gory occurrences as evidenced in the play as *...they say Kumbi Saleh was really destroyed by the greed, the arrogance and the corruption of its own leaders. For the Ruling Family had grown fat with greed and the arrogance of power(2010, p.79)*. It is again, on this same premise that the citizenry forgets and apportion blame to their leaders for not delivering on their promises however forgetting that they once took the laws into their own hands and destroyed things out sheer rage. It is this and many other weird issues that cannot be readily ascertained that has its shackles on the development of the people in all frontiers of growth. A reaction to this is in the lines delivered by Khunata saying;

...we must remember!... the great revolt that almost wiped out the entire Royal Family of Kumbi Saleh! as the people were so determined 'to wipe out this dynasty that they went so far as to extract and destroy unborn babies from the wombs of women... (2010, p. 70).

Aside the playwright using the play to raise some social and moral issues prevalent in the society, he also had some strides he wants to use his kind of theatre *Abibigoro* to achieve. It is his restlessness and relentlessness to really place this form of theatre more prominently within the conceptual frame or design of *Abibigoro* to be more authentic and embraced as the form of African Theatre. He believes that as a people we have rich stories from our traditions. Abdallah furthers asserts that the ingredients for our kind of theatre is encapsulated in the priests, griots, medicine men, carvers, master drummer and dancers. This is the reason that has motivated him to also really depict and bring to bear what the people can as well identify with and appreciate. Thus, the kind of theatre and the plays he writes. Undoubtedly, it is all to the emancipation of the African from strait-jacket kind of writing and performances which has so assimilated into the soul and mind of the African.

Therefore, the director in creating his or her art must consider the thought as intimated and craft the working themes in the presentation of the play to its audience.

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding script analysis is a scenario-creating approach for directorial communication. It is indeed an intellectual engagement between the director and the selected script for the production. It must be understood that this engagement of analysis calls for discipline and entrance to the world of the play to unravel and decoding all the hidden life of the text for a better view of understanding and application to life of the stakeholders of the theatre.

The analysis of the play prepares the director in the creation and formation of concept or approach to the treatment of its characters, setting and even the style for the presentation of the creative work to the desired audience. Similarly, the analysis serves as an engagement to the understanding and realization of the content, form, theme or vision of the play. This then gives the director the confidence and knowledge base in the execution of the production. With this it is therefore imperative for due diligence done to script set for a production since it is the very fulcrum of the success or otherwise of the production.

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