

STAND-UP COMEDY, SPOKEN WORDS, SOLO ACTING AND THE FESTIVAL OF SOLO PERFORMANCE IN AFRICA.

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Abstract

The creative industry in Nigeria continues to make giant strides in order to keep the industry vibrant and promote the arts; and the maiden edition of the festival of solo performance (Solo Africa) is one of such remarkable events. This paper aims to illuminate the performances of the main Stand-up Comedians, Solo Actors, Spoken Word artistes and other solo artistes at the event and portray them as the continuation of the storytelling tradition. The African folkist theory will be adopted in this research with the avantgardist theory of the theatre which allows ample room for experimentation. The Field Study approach is employed in this paper because it gives prominence to observations made de-emphasising numerical data; it is a descriptive qualitative method.

Findings in this paper reveal that the storytelling tradition that seems to be going into extinction has long been reborn in the performances of today's solo performers. This implies that the storyteller has been split into the different styles of modern solo performance but an adept storyteller can still manifest all these styles in his performance. This paper therefore recommends that research should not be left in the hands of only scholars and critics, performers should be encouraged to research their own performances and theorize about them, to engender a proper connect between theory and practice.

Keywords: Avantgarde, Folkism, Monodrama, Performance, Solo

Introduction

Storytelling has been one of the most valuable products of the theatre in Africa since the inception of theatre history; but with the invasion of colonization, civilization and technological inventions, the art of storytelling is being swallowed up in the burgeoning forms of solo performance which are a refinement of the storytelling tradition, that has been exported via especially the slave traders to the Americas, where a plethora of the auditory arts have gained full expression. Solo Acting/Monodrama, Stand-up Comedy, Spoken Word arts and pop-singing and dancing have become very popular in the theatrical scene of the United States of America and other parts of the globe. Even Africans are not aware that most of these modern pop-culture music, drama and dance traditions have been traced by scholars and critics to the period of storytelling or oral tradition in Africa. 'Solo Africa' aims to sell the art of African Storytelling to the rest of the entire world, while

reminding Africans about the need to keep, hone and promote this unique gift. In the maiden edition of Solo Africa, the first Festival of Solo Performance which held in Abuja, in April of 2019, the major performances where Monodrama, Stand-up Comedy, Spoken Word/Performance Poets, Solo Singers, Drum Soloist, Dance Soloist, Keyboard Soloist and Saxophone Soloist; all of them manifestly expressing features in their performances that are bold reflections of the storyteller in the African traditional theatre. The storyteller was one who told stories to an audience about myths and legends in the community, stories about man, his environment and his deities; stories that kept the people in check, that taught children and the younger ones how to live according to societal expectations for the peace, security and development of the society. Some of these story tellers were gifted in the art of music, drama and dance and they held their audience spell-bound for the duration of their performance. Some storytellers were very good at imitating, revealing, mimicking, interpreting and representing their characters: human, animal or divine, some were masters of comedy – good at evoking laughter, some were very creative with words – poetic, while others were outstanding when it comes to singing.

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Most importantly, they were all good at involving their audience, a very integral part of every storytelling performance. But an adept storyteller is able to act, dance, sing and evoke laughter in one session of storytelling. This paper will focus on the stand-up comedy, monodrama and spoken word performances during the event because they are obvious representatives of what can be described as 'folk or oral literature' in today's theatre. They represent what the folk use to say and how they use to say it, doing things with and to words, so that generation to generation will be preserved, protected and provided for. Storytellers now run around performing with different nomenclatures as their area of specialization describes; but a storyteller is a storyteller and the basic elements are represented in Jan Vansina's terse description of the storytelling mode: "The best known situation of performance is the telling of tales. A performer sits, often in the evening, surrounded by listeners and spins a tale" (34). It is not a mere recitation. He adds that:

The voice is raised or lowered, used as a means of dramatization. Nor does the story-teller just sit there. The tale is acted out with body gestures, even when the storyteller is sitting. Sometimes he or she may stand up, move around, and mime parts of the action narrated. In most cases the public is not just watching. The public is active. It interacts with the teller, and the teller provokes the interaction by asking questions, welcoming exclamations, and turning to a song sung by all at appropriate points of the action. The teller and the public are creating the tale together. The teller leads the event but responds readily to the public and leads his or her public to experience the tale. He or she tries to frighten, delight, worry, and put them on tenterhooks, in turn and skillfully builds on the passage which move the audience most, expanding the exciting parts and condensing or transforming the ones where the attention of the audience lags. (34-35)

The audience in every storytelling session plays a very important role and from the description of

Vansina above, what the stand-up comedian, the monodramatist and the spoken word artiste are doing today reveals the storyteller of yore. The fact that Solo Performances take place in high brow event centres like the Hilton and Sheraton Hotel in Abuja or the Eko Suites or Muson Centre in Lagos does not mean they cannot happen anywhere, in fact, storytelling or Solo Performance can take place anywhere including the compound or sitting room of the storyteller according to Gichingiri Ndigirigi:

The narrator (usually the mother) of an ogre story for example, might break off in the middle of a story to attend to the pot cooking the family's dinner, or to comment about the goat in the shed that never stops bleating. Or the neighbor might drop in to borrow salt, or snuff, as the children are left wondering what happened next. (4)

The smaller the stage space the more exclusive it is for a storyteller to perform. F.B.O. Akporobaro submits that, "The written word today is only an outcome of the "Oral Forms" which are man's earliest and original medium of self-expression and artistic creativity" (1). Akporobaro explains further, "an oral literary expression exists as a performance, as a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social conventions and the unique occasion in which it is performed" (3). Performances during the time of Oral Literature come mainly as riddles, proverbs, oral poetry and narratives, the definitions of the present sub-genres will further reveal the connection to the storyteller.

Definition of Terms

Scholars and critics in Nigeria have truly not done much in the area of Solo performance; a definition of the following terms will be a proper guide for this paper: Oral Literature, Stand-up comedy, Monodrama/Solo acting, Spoken word/Performance poetry, Solo Performance.

Oral Literature

Oral Literature has been described variously as traditional literature, orature, folklore, verbal art and folk literature. They refer to the time when Africans, as Ruth Finnegan posits in *The Oral And*

Beyond, were dexterous at 'doing things with words'. According to Finnegan, "It envisages words in the context of action. That is, it is more concerned with what people do with words than with language as an abstract, cognitive or somehow independent system" (2). She says of her book, "The volume's prime focus is on people doing things with words orally – spoken, vocalized, unwritten" (3). Vansina sees, "Oral tradition as verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. The definition specifies that the message must be oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only" (27). Finnegan confesses that, "Africa is celebrated above all for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts, and as home of oral literature, orature and orality, and the genesis and inspiration of the voiced tradition of the great diaspora" (1). Scholars, academics and critics have failed to take advantage of this confession and it is exactly one of the forces that propelled the organizers of Solo Africa to call for more attention in the area of conferences, researches and performances in solo performance to project the form. Furthermore, Isidore Okpewho's postulation clarifies the many nomenclature of Oral literature:

Orature is a recent but seldom used term that again emphasizes the oral character of the literature. *Traditional literature* puts emphasis on the fact that this form of literature comes from the past and is handed down (Latin *trado*) from one generation to another [...] *Folk literature* identifies the creators of this literature as the folk, by which was frequently meant the common, uneducated people mostly in villages or rural communities[...] The word *folklore* implies much more than literature and in some quarters underplays the literary aspect of what the folk do[...] (though by-the-by it is more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by the good Saxon compound, Folklore, - *the lore of the people*). (3-4)

And to buttress his point, Okpewho cites the definition of two East African scholars - Nandwa and Bukenya - where they affirm that, "Oral

literature may be defined as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression" (4-5). The folklore of a people Okpewho therefore adds, "consists essentially of two kinds of activity: what these people traditionally say (e.g., songs, proverbs, tales) and what they traditionally do (weaving, dance, rituals)" (5). Oral Literature according to Okpewho is made up of riddles, puns, tongue-twisters, proverbs, recitations, chants, songs, and stories and that they are a representation of only the verbal aspects of folklore. Akporobaro equally affirms that: "Oral literature or folk-literature refers to the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another" (33).

Stand-up Comedy

Michael Etherton defines 'comedy' as, "a form of drama in which matters work out well at the end of the play, proceeding to this conclusion by way of humour and wit" (13).

Richard Zoglin defines Stand-up Comedy as "comedy that generally is delivered by a solo performer speaking directly to the audience in some semblance of a spontaneous manner" (1). Stand-up Comedy is a performance by one person that is targeted at evoking continuous laughter from its audience. Agoma Awaritoma in his book *Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria* defines a 'stand-up comedian' as:

a person who tells stories – short or long – in a funny way in order to evoke laughter. He may employ music and occasional props, but must use a microphone in order to communicate effectively with his (large) audience. Because he is alone, he must learn to use masterfully body language, facial expression and voice control or manipulation to hold his audience attention. He is a very good actor. He is a soloist, who must sing, dance and act very well to remain on stage. He is a person who is funny naturally off the stage but deliberately and skillfully funny on stage.

(16)

The storyteller displays the skills and qualities of the present day stand-up comedian and could be referred to as one of the first practitioner of the art of stand-up comedy. Historically, the village “idiot” or “fool” or “drunk” has been known to possess some useful skills in comedy. This accounted for why, in most royal courts, these 'idiots, jesters or fools' were used to entertain important guests. Martin Grotjahn, M.D. claims that, “The clown is a one-man comedy;” and that, “the clown's history reaches back through the ages to the jester, the fool, and the dwarf of medieval days” (91). Most highly placed people or even great kings in history, used to keep 'court fools' for their own personal entertainment and more. Tony Allen in chapter 2 of his book *Attitude* discusses “the history of stand-up comedy,” and avers thus: “The traditional fool operates with a similar set of creative options to the traditional storyteller, except that with the fool there is no text being served because none exists” (3).

Oliver John Double in “An Approach to Traditions of British Stand—Up Comedy” states:

There are various definitive features of the form which can be identified: it is a spoken form; it is a solo form, involving only one performer; it involves direct communication with the audience; and perhaps most importantly, it is defined by the effect it has on its audience, by the fact that it provokes laughter. (3)

Colleen Frances Manwell explicates on what separates stand-up comedy from other solo performance, “Comedy is unique in that there is ultimately only one necessary outcome – laughter and without it stand-up comedy fails to be comedy” (19).

Monodrama/Solo Acting

In defining the term Monodrama/Solo Acting, we shall consider Greg Mbajiorgu's effort at differentiating it from other forms of solo performance as succinctly captured in his opening statement in “Dramatic essence of solo performing artistes in Post-Colonial Nigeria: 1966 – 2012.” He posits:

In carrying out this study, one has avoided using the term solo performance in its generic sense so as to exclude all the other forms of solo performances which are not the concern of this paper viz. solo performance of music (with Don Williams as one of its chief exponents), solo performance as stand-up comedy (exemplified by Ali Baba's brand of comedy), solo exhibition of visual arts and cultural artifacts (which has shot El Anatsui to international fame) and solo performance of comments and commentaries (Church Samson Akpan formally of University of Calabar, was an author of this kind of solo). For the purpose of clarity, this discourse will strictly focus on solo performance of drama by Nigerians, starting from the earliest record of it on the Nigerian stage to the present. (33)

Naturally, the roots of the Solo Actor/Monodramatists could be traced to the same storytellers, bards, griots and the shaman in African history like Patrice Pavis submits as cited by Mbajiorgu:

The oral storytelling performance is part of a long secular ancient tradition which has influenced western theatre practice by setting it against other pre-historic traditions such as Arab storytelling and African griot. Pavis traces the history of one-man-storytelling art to the ancient narrative tradition. It is very obvious that both the art of Western and African soloists of the late 20th and 21st centuries have been directly or indirectly influenced by prehistoric oral narrative traditions. This is undisputable because of the theatrical leaning of the ancient story telling format. Storytelling as Brian Crow would put it:[...] is a theatrical performance common to African cultural traditions which is closely related to drama and often contains dramatic elements.(33)

According to Louis Catron, “Monodramas you see

today have fresh styles and techniques that were established by the twentieth-century theatre artists who contributed new realism, truth, and artistic styles, making the one-person play an increasing popular, respected theatrical form” (222). Bruce Miller similarly affirms that:

A monologue situation is specialized and requires that the acting skills take on a different order of importance than in a play where characters are dealing with each other. Nonetheless, it is part of the actor's craft to be able to reach into his tool kit of technique and use those things that will best serve him at any particular time. (155)

Michael Kearns clarifies what this subgenre is all about and what it is not:

Performing solo should be designated as a singular performing art. It is not traditional acting (many highly trained and highly skilled actors struggle valiantly with solo performing). It is not stand-up. It's intended to look easy, relaxed, personal, and improvisational. It requires learning new skills and abandoning certain 'rules' of acting.

Most performers new to solo process view this art form as traditional theatre. It is not. In traditional theatre we watch a story unfold. In solo performing we are taken on a ride by a storyteller, the story unfolds, not in front of us but within our own individual imagination. (12)

Even with all these styles of solo performance, the storyteller still stands out displaying stand-up comedy, monodrama and spoken word features in his performance. Nevertheless, how an artiste sustains his act, maintains his connection with the audience and retains his place on stage as a performer is all dependent on his dexterity and talent. As Louis Catron opines:

One principal appeal for performers and audiences is the very fact that a monodrama is a solo, a tour de force. For actors, the monodrama is an artistic challenge with

more opportunities than multicharacter plays to display talents. For audiences, the soloist shows remarkable abilities, and we can conjecture that the novelty of a single actor also is appealing. For both, the virtuoso performance is one of the monodrama's more attractive qualities, rather like the difference between twelve people each juggling one ball versus one person juggling twelve balls. (10)

Louis Catron therefore posits:

Solo production illustrates the power of one – a solitary performer presenting a theatrical experience as richly vibrant and varied as multi-character plays...it may bring to life a historical or totally fictional character or even an autobiographical story; it may be drama or comedy and it may be a story of one person or it may involve a number of other characters that the actor evokes in the audience imagination – but there is only one actor. (1-2)

A monodrama is an improvised or memorized acting by one person in front of an audience aimed at entertaining, educating, enlightening or informing for society to be better; naked theatre by one person, with nowhere to hide and no one to help, withholding nothing and exhibiting or giving everything. Catron states: “The solo theatrical form is what some prefer to call the monodrama. But the form is so flexible that it is also called a monologue (sometimes prefaced by dramatic or theatrical), a solo play, or a one-person show.” (7)

Spoken Word/Performance Poetry

Spoken Word/Performance Poetry is defined by the Urban Dictionary as,

Poetry intended for onstage performance, rather than exclusively designed for the page. While often associated with hip-hop culture, it also has strong ties to storytelling, modern poetry, post-modern performance, and monologue theatre, as well as jazz, blues, and folk music. (1)

The performer also interacts directly with its audience and they deal with topical and current events and issues that their audience can identify with. For the spoken word artiste or poet performer, he prides himself in his ability to play with words; a kind of wordsmith; singing or reciting is his domain. There is an obvious effort not to distract his audience with action, gestures, body movement or facial expressions. His audience has come mainly to hear him (words) and not see him (gestures) acting. Edward Gordon Craig in “The Art of The Theatre” corroborates this point:

The poet's imagination finds voice in words, beautifully chosen, he then either recites or sings these words to us, and all is done. That poetry, sung or recited, is for our ears, and, through them, for our imagination. It will not help the matter if the poet shall add gesture to his recitation or to his song; in fact, it will spoil all. (30)

Furthermore, he believes drama is designed to be seen on stage, while dramatic poem is to be read. He posits, “Therefore gesture is a necessity to a drama, and it is useless to a dramatic poem. It is absurd to talk of these two things, gesture and poetry, as having anything to do with one another” (30). This is an extreme position because a well-trained actor could add action and gestures to a well memorized and rehearsed poem and the impact on the audience would be electrifying, it becomes more attractive rather than being a distraction; the theatre of today enjoys change, it continues to evolve in order to satisfy its audience. The spoken word artiste is a direct representative of the storyteller doing things with words. The *Urban Dictionary* re-affirms the African origin, “a spoken word is a revival of an ancient African art form” (4) to foreground its storytelling origin.

Solo Performance

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines '**Solo**' as: “a (part of) a piece of music (to be) played or sung by one person (2) a job or performance..., done by one person alone”. Also, to go solo, is seen as going “without a companion” as well as, “to perform alone” (1064).

'**Performance**' according to Richard Schechner “is

an extremely difficult concept to define” thus he looks at it from Ervin Goffman's point of view: “performing is a mode of behaviour that may characterize any activity. Thus, performance is a “quality” that can occur in any situation rather than a fenced-off genre” (22). Awaritoma Agoma in his PhD Thesis therefore opines that in the theatre, “performance is more all embracing than only 'acting', 'singing' and 'dancing', thus the choice of 'solo performance' could convey more theatrical activity” (14). Okumba Miruka says, “The word 'performance' is generally understood to mean the delivery or rendition of an item” (57). Furthermore, he avers:

The idea of performance nominally implies a demarcation between the performer and his audience. The performance is even guided by certain tacit regulations to which every participant subscribes. There is an orderly sequence of events and the context of performance is defined. For instance, narratives are traditionally told in the evening; there is one performer at a time.” Usually the evening narratives take place in very informal settings where the narrator is even at liberty to suspend his tale to attend to domestic issues and come back to continue. (57)

'**Solo performance**' unquestionably is any performance by one person in front of an audience. Solo performance is any activity that showcases the improvised or memorized exploits of a single individual (one person) on stage in order to entertain and enlighten as well as inform; in a bid to impacting his immediate audience positively. Greg Mbajiorgu, a major proponent of Solo Performance, in “The Art of Solo Performance: A Study of Funsho Alabi's Escape From Drugs” defines Solo performance as, “a play or drama by one actor who enacts or interprets the role of one or several characters alone on stage” (162). Solo Performers are usually individuals with some theatre training; this is what separates them from performers during the time of Oral Literature who relied mostly on their talents. Awaritoma Agoma in his PhD Thesis on Solo Performance further posits:

The solo performer needs to train and use every available skill in order to achieve his theatrical goal; whether he is acting, dancing or singing, or he is telling stories, playing a guitar or dancing to silent sounds or imaginative music, the fact remains that a single individual is standing or sitting or even lying down alone in front of an audience performing to their delight. The solo performer therefore needs to be very creative in order to capture, hold and sustain the interest and attention of his audience. (4)

Historically, Solo performances have also been traced to storytelling, Chennai Patrika in "The Actor On Stage: Solo Theatre" submits:

Solo performances are thought to have originated through the act of tribal storytelling and narration to convey a message or incident, hundreds of years ago. This has evolved and been honed to what we call a solo act on stage today. The history of one-man shows is hard to trace until the seventeenth century[....]An exciting feature of solo plays is the lack of the fourth wall thus encouraging audience interaction and bridging the gap between both sides of the stage. This not only excites and involves the audience but is also a creative tool for the actor to make sure the audience understands the persona and range of each character since one-man acts are unintentionally open to interpretation. (1)

Solo performance historically, is therefore a new but very old art form as John Cairney corroborates:

The burgeoning of the one-person performance in recent years might lead many to believe that this specialized theatrical genre is nothing more than another of its fashions, but this belies its much older origins. The one person theatrical show goes a long way back. Theater adapts itself to its own generation and fashions in performance change with it. (3)

Therefore, stand-up comedy, monodrama and spoken word/performance poetry are adaptations of storytelling as Jo Bonney opines:

At the most basic level, despite their limitless backgrounds and performance styles, all solo performers are storytellers. And if we assume that the very first performances in human history consisted of an individual telling stories in front of other members of his society/tribe, then the form is primal. (xiii)

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The **Avant-gardist Theory of the theatre** is the main anchor of this paper and it reached its height in the period of *modernism*. Edward E. Wright says the word 'avant-garde' is "from the French and it is a military term" (69) whose translation means 'vanguard' and they refer to leaders or pacesetters in a movement. They are people who seek to change the conventional "into something they have considered more vital and meaningful" (69) and that these avant-gardist do not believe "the older forms are capable of expressing reality." He affirms:

They present their substance by disregarding the accepted forms and by using a technique so foreign that the conventional players are often left in a state of amazed wonder. They are creating new principles, establishing new rules for the game, and this is as it should be. The theatre is a living and dynamic institution and as such it is in a constant state of change. Its only alternative is to perish. It is Stark Young who said: "The skillful playwright keeps the theatre alive, but the man of ideas makes it grow." These men of ideas are always in the minority as they seek out new methods or techniques to attain their goals. (69)

Solo performers are avant-gardist setting the pace for any one-man performer and as people of ideas, they are inspired to set new rules as they perform

because they realize that the two most important and compulsory elements in the theatre are the performer and the audience. Richard Schechner informs us that:

What rules are to games and sports, traditions are to ritual and conventions are to theatre, dance and music. If one finds a “better way” to perform, this better way must conform to the rules. The avant-garde is apparently a rule-breaking activity. But actually, experimentation in the arts has its own set of rules. (13)

Michael Kearns says to: “Keep in mind that one of the realities of solo is that you are a bit of a renegade. You break rules. Defy the so-called standards of success. Create and commit to your own standards and do not depend on the validation of others”(108). And Jo Bonny tells Alterman Glenn that, “Solo shows are a personality driven form. It's difficult to mention rules because it's so individual” (176). And Christopher Ashley also says to Alterman, “The thrill of writing a one-person show is that you get to invent a new kind of theatre for yourself. It's a great form for breaking the rules” (181). And Logan Murray believes, “There are no rules where creativity is concerned” (xxvii). While in Jordan R. Young's *Acting Solo* the following exchange gives more insight to the above issue,

“Someone said to me once, 'You're breaking new ground[...]you're creating a new theatrical form here.' I said, 'That's not true at all.' What we're really doing is going back to a very primitive form of theatre. Theatre started with someone saying to a group of people, 'I'm going to tell you a story.'

“We're also going back to – and this is what I find exciting – the power of the actor, to create just with words, and with his ability as an actor.” (187-188)

Frances Harding supports this view with, “the new themes or styles of performance arose from a combination of inspiration, re-generation of existing forms, intellectual decision and direct influences felt from a new source” (17). These are

commonplace with solo performance and are exemplified in the performances by the stand-up comedians, monodramatists and the spoken word artistes that featured during the Festival of Solo Performance – 'Solo Africa'; all of them are a re-generation of the existing storytelling form and experimenting with their unique styles of solo performance.

The second theory is that propounded by Sam Ukala – Folkism described in this paper as African folkism; and it simply refers to plays that reflect the “history, culture, and concerns of the folk” and they are composed and performed “in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale” (1). But it is common knowledge that, in times of oral traditions nothing was written down; therefore the said “African conventions for composing and performing folktale” (1) must have been communicated from generation to generation by word of mouth. And it is why, according to **Sunny Awhefeada in “Sam Ukala, the folklorist as dramatist, @ 70,”** “some of the plays by earlier Nigerian dramatists such as Soyinka, Rotimi and Osofisan appropriate some of the touchstones in folkism, but they did not reflect its full manifestation” (1) Even Sam Ukala's early plays did not reflect the full manifestations of the theory of folkism as he fully propounded it. Awhefeada posits that, “a reading of the plays of Sam Ukala often approximates a story telling session” (1). This is very integral to this study because it is the most important element that connects the stand-up comedian, monodramatist and spoken word artiste to the storyteller; it tries to portray traditional African performance in today's theatre. Folkist plays are plays that are grounded in the tradition, culture, values and mores of the African people. *The Slave Wife*, *Akpakaland* and *Iredi War* are some of Ukala's plays that are submersed with the folktale motif. The storytelling theatre is a quintessence of the procedure and techniques of the oral method of performance as exemplified in the different styles of solo performance in Solo Africa. As avant-gardist, their performance must not contain the eight laws of aesthetic response of folkism to make it a folkist performance as propounded by Ukala and articulated by Austin Anigala cited by Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah in “A Study of Neo-Folkist Aesthetics in Dramaturgy of Sam Ukala.” Their

performances may not reflect all the laws but the second and third laws (2. Joint performance law and 3. Creativity, free enactment and responsibility law) are very obvious. Again, the fact that they are storytelling forms, where words are wrestled with qualifies them to be folk-performances. Sam Ukala has called his published plays folkscript, in line with the storytelling theatre; but because most solo performers like stand-up comedians and monodramatists rely a lot on improvisation (without scripts), they could be referred to as folk-performers. Other trappings of folkism embodied in these folk-performances are proverbs, rhymes, singing and dancing which are commonplace with the storytelling theatre. Stand-up Comedians, Monodramatists, Spoken Word artistes and even Song Soloists may not manifest the entire eight laws of folkism but as folk-performers, they are very creative individuals who have realized that they must bond with their audience; it is a joint performance with their audience, the other character as far as they are concerned is the audience (the reason they are on stage) and they are solely responsible for their success or failures. Law one (law of opening) and law eight (law of closing) are also observed in these auditory styles of Solo Performance. Most importantly however, folk-performers realize that words, whether sung, recited, spoken or dramatized are the major tools for achieving folk-performances. As storytellers, they paint, carve, build, choreograph and perform with words. But a combination of their American designation: stand-up comedy, monodrama and spoken word and their African origin, produce in their performances this unique flavour that goes beyond African-American.

The Field Study Methodology was employed in this paper and it helped the researcher to observe closely the live performances of the major stand-up comedians, monodramatists and spoken word artistes as well as view the recorded video; and as a part of the organizers of Solo Africa there was an open line of communication especially towards the finalization of the PhD Thesis of this researcher entitled "Solo Performance in Modern Nigerian Theatre: A Study of Select Solo Actors." It is a descriptive approach and it is qualitative.

Solo Africa – the Festival of Solo Performance

(Maiden Edition)

Solo Africa – the Festival of Solo Performance was organized to promote and project this unique sub-genre of the theatre (solo performance) as one of Africa's contributions to the world; also to acknowledge and appreciate veteran contributors to the art of solo performance through its Award for Solo in Africa or Africa Solo Award (ASA), encourage burgeoning performers to consider solo performing as an entertaining, economical, impactful and profitable theatrical form through its 'Ultimate Solo Challenge' (USC) that preceded the main festival as well as educate students of theatre arts about this neglected aspect of theatre studies and draw the attention of researchers and critics to do more in this area. While theatre scholars are enjoined to deliberately add solo performance to their curriculum as a subject of study, the entire corporate world and other stakeholders are invited to continue to sponsor and support Solo Africa as an annual event in the creative industry.

The three major storytelling forms that have been established in this paper are stand-up comedy, monodrama and spoken word and they were well represented in the performances of Onome Da Saint (Abuja based), Chief Otota and De Don (both based in Lagos) three stand-up comedians with radio talk shows in Nigeria. The monodramatist include the pacesetters of Solo Performance in Nigeria: Tunji Sotimirin - actor/playwright/Lecturer and first person to perform a full solo play in Nigeria, Greg Mbajiorgu, actor/playwright/author/Lecturer and first Nigerian to publish a solo play, Benedict Binebai - solo playwright/Lecturer, Rachael Tuodonye – actress and first female to perform a full length solo play in sub-saharan Africa, Rudolf Kansese – Lecturer and reputable director of solo plays), Grace Okonkwo – actress and student of theatre arts. Distinguished theatre academics who were present to present the African Solo Award (ASA) to the recipients include Prof. Sunday Ododo, Prof. Daniel Omatsola and Prof. Mabel Evwierhoma (Represented by Engr. Evwierhoma her husband) amongst other academics at the event.

This study is not a detailed analysis of the performances, it will therefore mention a few of the outstanding and memorable performances relevant to it because of space; they are *Molue* by Tunji

Sotimirin performed by Tunji Sotimirin who first performed *Molue* exactly 30 years ago. *Karena's Cross* by Rachael Tuodonye written by Benedict Binebai as directed by Rudolf Kansese and *The Prime Minister's Daughter* an adaptation of Greg Mbajorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son* performed by Grace Okonkwo as written and directed by Greg Mbajorgu himself. De Don put up an amazing stand-up comedy performance that held the audience in delirious laughter for the entire duration of his performance. Emmanuel Ishaku and Michael Nwadiolor charmed their audience with the music of words in their spoken words pieces entitled "I am God" and "Caesar Owes Me" respectively. A summary of one from these sub-genres will further buttress our point: *Molue* as performed by Tunji Sotimirin, Stand-up Comedy as performed by De Don and "Caesar Owes me" – a Spoken Word Performance by Michael Nwadiolor.

Molue is an episodic and comedic monodrama; a satire depicting the Nigerian nation with all kinds of characters trying to make a living, people trying to out-wit others in their pursuit of survival. It is also a reflection of the transient nature of man; life is like a bus where people enter and exit when they reach their destination, after playing their part appropriately. The bus depicts over-congestion and fear in our society, corruption, craftiness, struggle for survival and the moral decadence of society. People go out every day looking for "wetin dem go chop".

But very outstanding is the dexterous use of body, voice and costume by Sotimirin (the Conductor or Small Pepper). It portrays an adept dramatist with a serious acting background. His excellent use of space, music, drama and dance (total theatre) puts his performance on a completely different pedestal. To crown his performance was an obvious use of vocal variation and language to differentiate the multiple characters embodied in *Molue*.

And the Spoken Word Artistes included Emmanuel Ishaku –actor and student of theatre arts and Michael Meremma Nwadiolor – winner of the second position in the Ultimate Solo Challenge (USC). Michael's piece entitled "Caesar owes me" was very rich in rhymes and very poetic. Michael Nwadiolor's performance was very musical and the message was topical. 'Caesar' is symbolic of the

present leadership whose actions and inactions has not only increased "our fears" but also "added to our tears" in this nation. It is a case of bad governance that is stifling the nation. A leadership that does not care if its citizens live or die and it is very nepotistic as the following lines reveal. "O Caesar, I will forget your name very soon/ For all you wish is that I die very soon/ You smile only to your closest kinsmen/ You are generous only to those who fanatically wish you well/ I curse the day we chose you to be our frontman/ I curse the day, for I feel we felt you will be our redeemer." The artiste held his audience attention by his use of voice modulation, pace and cadence. His ability to slow down and speed up the tempo was captivating. He stood on one spot for the duration of his performance; this is what makes it a Spoken word performance; because they do not want to distract from the flowery knitting together of words. His strength is in the beautiful combination of words. Drama is not his terrain; he does not want to lose his message to too much dramatization as is obtainable in monodrama.

The Stand-up Comedy performance by De Don was very impressive. There was continuous laughter from the beginning to the end. And the audience played a very active part during the performance. It was like a call and response session typical of traditional storytelling times. De Don started by thanking the audience for the opportunity giving to him to perform. Then he asked them what kind of jokes they preferred, after noticing the student population in the audience. With a lot of humour, he started advising the students about living a fake life, then he progressed into the Nigerian state which he described as being in a, "state of quagmire" and that, "we are passing through financial miasma that is a complete fiasco and catastrophic". He continued with the hunger in the land and how a lot of people can no longer eat three square meals. It was indeed like a discussion session done with a lot of humour, transiting from English to Pidgin English at will, with the audience laughing, applauding and screaming; interjecting appropriately. Until De Don said, "if you cannot afford to eat (one meal) at all, you have the license to commit suicide." From the response of some members of the audience he had to call up his comic license by quickly saying, "na joke I dey joke". This

is one of the exclusive preserve of Stand-up Comedy. Also exclusive to Stand-up Comedy is the fact that he did not introduce any topic or title to his performance like *Molue* (monodrama) or “Caesar owes me” (Spoken Word), rather what is obtainable is an introduction of the artiste – De Don. And the audience response most of the time dictated the direction of the performance and this speaks volumes about the presentness, currentness and liveness of stand-up comedy; what is referred to as “now-now-now-now” (na-na-na-na) in the theatre is most noticeable in De Don's performance – Stand-up Comedy. Again, Stand-up Comedians can talk about very many issues inside a twenty minutes performance as we observed with De Don: poverty, protest, inflation, university students – boys and girls, ajebutters and ajekpakos, beggars in America and beggars in Nigeria, Rich men and poor men, witches and poverty, the effect of igbo (marijuana/india hemp) on young people and so on. Most importantly however, is the laughter and applause that was consistently pouring out from the audience which means De Don did a very good job.

Conclusion

This paper has established the fact that Stand-up comedy, Monodrama and Spoken Words are a manifestation of the storytelling tradition of the African theatre and it is rooted in folkism. And because it is a one person performance, it comes under the canopy of solo performance. Each strand of storytelling has their area of strength for example; in the performance by De Don, from his first sentence to his last sentence the audience was laughing uncontrollably, thus the stand-up comedian is that storyteller who is very good at evoking laughter, his forte is comedy. While Sotimirin in *Molue* and Rachael in *Karena's Cross*; held the audience spell-bound with their mind blowing dramatization and embodiment of multiple characters in one person, they are storytellers that are good in drama. The spoken word pieces performed by Emmanuel Ishaku and Michael Nwadiakor stung the audience with rhymes, rhythms and pace, very musical combination of words without gestures or action as observed in stand-up comedy and monodrama. Undoubtedly, they are storytellers skillful in the use of words. Further evaluation unveils solo

performers as avant-gardist who continue to experiment with their performances on stage as long as their audience is satisfied. They realize that the theatre is constantly evolving seeking for new and exciting ways to keep increasing audience attendance without losing sight of the fact that the two most important elements for theatre to take place is the actor and the audience.

Greg Mbajorgu and Tunji Sotimirin like this researcher (a practicing stand-up comedian, performance poet, lecturer and the initiator and organizer of Solo Africa) are still performing apart from researching and writing with no deliberate encouragement from the academia. A great thinker once said until the philosopher king is king there will be no peace in the republic. Until performers are encouraged to research, analyse and evaluate their own performances and a reward system set up to encourage gifted artistes to continue to perform until they go down six feet; and also until, we begin to have “inaugural performances” just like we have “inaugural lectures” this meeting point between theory and practice may continue to be artificial or difficult to attain.

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