

A PERFORMANCE CRITIQUE OF MADAM TINUBU: THE TERROR IN LAGOS STAGED AT THE FUOYE THEATRE AND MEDIA ARTS (TMA) FESTIVAL OF PLAYS 2025

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Abstract

This paper is a critical investigation of the production of *Madam Tinubu: The Terror in Lagos* by Akinwumi Isola, directed by Ireayomi Daniel Omokunga at the Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE) Theatre and Media Arts (TMA) theatre. As part of the FUOYE TMA 2025 Festival of Plays, the staged production ran between the 7th and 17th of April, 2025. Brechtian epic theatre and Rasaki Ojo Bakare's terms of performative idioms are utilised to read performance selections, aesthetic design, and cultural staging. By participant observation, close textual-performance interpretation, and comparative recourse to local work on theatre aesthetics, the paper contends that the staging effects significant cultural recovery and critical challenge whilst demonstrating persistent technical failings in work on accent, sound focus, and ensemble accuracy. In conclusion, the paper suggests the study's contribution towards discourses on African historicity in performance and provides practical recommendations towards staging historically informed drama in Nigerian university theatres.

Keywords: Madam Tinubu; Akinwumi Isola; Brecht; Verfremdungseffekt; performance aesthetics; cultural identity; FUOYE; Theatre and Media Arts (TMA).

Introduction

Akinwumi Isola's play, *Madam Tinubu: The Terror in Lagos*, characterises the life and political resilience of Efunroye Tinubu, the market leader and kingmaker in 19th-century Lagos, whose life has become a contested reference point in Nigerian history. In April 2025, the Department of Theatre and Media Arts (TMA) at the Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE) staged the play as part of its Festival of Plays. The department described the festival as a fortnight-long presentation, during which *Madam Tinubu* was staged alongside other canonical and contemporary works that matter in the repertoire. With this production, we have an educational context to investigate how university theatres in Nigeria deal with the interaction between history, aesthetics, and public education.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Studies relating to African theatre always underscore the intersectionality between politics, aesthetics, and identity. Brecht's formulation of epic theatre, particularly the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect, is useful in terms of examining performances aimed at educating as well as entertaining. Brecht's proposed methodologies foster critical distance among the spectators, allowing them to reflect on the dynamics of society as opposed to emotive consumption. Contemporary proponents of Brecht's work emphasise the use of interruptions, opaque staging plots, and structural features that avert the audience from becoming fully emotionally engaged.

Within the Nigerian scholarly landscape, considerable scholars from FUOYE have generated research that is intricately related to performance practice, stage design, and applied drama. The studies conducted by Taofiq Olaide Nasir on applied drama underscore the theatre's ability to communicate social issues effectively, often by creating the "emotional arousal" necessary for prompting intellectual or behavioural change. Michael A. Adeoye emphasises in his research on theatre design how visual codes present on stage influence audience reception. Rasaki Ojo Bakare's theoretical contributions and practical engagements with performative trinity and choreography enrich the understanding of how movement and spatial arrangements can signify social hierarchies and cultural memory. Furthermore, Oluwatosin Kooshima Tume's examination of storytelling and performance practice proves valuable for interpreting contemporary Nigerian stage aesthetics, particularly her work on danceturgy and cultural integration. These regional scholarly contributions offer methodological and aesthetic resources for the detailed analysis that follows.

Theoretical Framework

This study brings together two mutually completing frameworks. First, Brechtian epic theatre demands a theatre that stimulates commentary. Methods involve direct address, scene changes seen on stage, commentary singing, and gestures that inscribe social attitudes. These methods are helpful when a production is not attempting the romanticisation of a figure like Madam Tinubu but is attempting to politicise and historicise her.

Secondly, Bakare-informed performative aesthetics underscore the significance of choreography, ceremony, and community performance in the process of meaning construction within Rasaki Ojo Bakare's artistic practice. While Brecht prioritises critique via estrangement, Bakare highlights the role of embodied cultural knowledge and ritual as conduits for collective memory. Integrating these viewpoints enables a discernment of where the production accentuates critical distance and where it seeks to recover cultural continuity through the mediums of spectacle and dance.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, practice-based research project. Data consist of participant observation of the live show at FUOYE (2:00 pm and 4:00 pm runs during the week) and field notes written instantly after the show, as well as a close reading of the playtext. Text-performance comparison, informed by Brechtian categories (alienation devices, interruption and song, *gestus*) as well as by Bakare's choreography and compositional principles, serves as our comparative analytical approach. In suitable instances, we consulted appropriate secondary sources and FUOYE scholarship to provide context for design and pedagogical choices. No interviews were necessary for this review, though future research plans include systematic audience response and interviews with the director and the designers.

Summary of the Production

The staging of *Madam Tinubu* at the FUOYE TMA theatre is defined by its ambitious scope. The department utilised dynamic flats and modular furniture to depict different locations. Traditional Yoruba forms dominated the costume design. Alternating warm and stark colour schemes were used in the lighting design to illustrate communal life and interactions with colonial figures. An important Eyo masquerade dance was salient as a climactic event, intertwining Lagosian ritual practices with the text's historical claims. The blocking by the director frequently utilised levels to indicate hierarchy: the throne and elevated platforms signified monarchical power, whilst the lowered ground levels simulated day-to-day civic life. Such design choices supported the play's historical basis and assertive declaration of cultural authenticity.

Analysis

Thematic and Historicity The production supports three interrelated thematic arguments: the political activism of women, resistance to imperialism, and conservation of culture. Madam Tinubu is represented as a leading figure who navigates the spaces of commerce, kinship, and political power. The production resists reductionist, sentimental forms of characterisation. Instead, it frames her as a commercial leader and a prominent figure in high politics. Attention in the play to Yoruba sayings and chants serves to locate Tinubu in a cultural frame that is critical, challenging myths that dispense on reducing her to a caricature. This accords with an Afrocentric aesthetic that works at recovering collective memory through performance.

Performance and Characterisation The standout performance of Olowolade Misola Grace as Madam Tinubu was the production's strongest suit. Misola infused the character with a tonal richness that enabled Tinubu to embody charisma as much as strategy, displaying flashes of raw emotion and turbulence. Spatial control, forceful gesturing, and monologue vocal inflexion occasioned points of ethical and theatrical control. An example of a staging device that worked exceptionally well was the actor climbing onto a chair as she declaimed a passionate monologue. It directed the eye of the audience and made the rhetoric physically compelling. Such choices betokened a collaborative process between director and actor that values *gestus* as a socio-indicator, a process consonant with Brechtian gestural politics as well as Bakare's choreographic performance style. The leading actor's definition and focus on the stage veiled some ensemble variability.

Directorial Method and Brechtian Methods Director Ireayomi Daniel employed a self-conscious theatricality that is Brechtian in style. At significant points, actors spoke directly to spectators by breaking the fourth wall, and explicit scene changes served as a reminder that the story was being staged. Interruptions in the chant, with addresses directly to spectators, encouraged the audience to reflect on the social structures depicted, rather than becoming stuck on feelings of personal despair. It worked effectively as a prompt to critical engagement. There were, nonetheless, points at which the alienation effect lacked consistency. At times, the ensemble returned to naturalism in a way that opposed the desired effects of distance. The production,

therefore, balanced a productive tension between epic criticism and the immersive aspects of local ceremony.

Spectacle, Design, and Sound. The spectacle was highly effective in augmenting public appeal. Costumes and the Eyo dance routine emphatically depicted Lagosian cultural memory in rich detail. Lighting levels and sets were used to define hierarchy and create an atmosphere. A key technical shortfall was observed in sound mixing. On more than one occasion, the live music and drum groups overpowered the spoken words, especially when the emotional intensity was high. This diminution of clarity undermined the possibilities for rhetorical elegance. Theatre design scholars note the need for sound and text to coexist on stage without one overwhelming the other; Michael Adeoye notes this significance based on the interaction between the visual and the sonic on audience perception. In this play, balancing these elements will strengthen succeeding performances.

Language, Dialect, and Authenticity

An acting student portraying a British colonial officer attempted an English accent that obscured clarity. Trying too hard after Received Pronunciation led to a stiff performance, which deflated the character's implied authority. Given the constraints on university production, clarity should be the priority. In situations where training in accents is lacking, a properly restrained neutral presentation or a fastidiously trained accent that ensures clear articulations will be more effective in serving the text. This is counsel from a practical as well as an aesthetic perspective.

Ensemble and Timing

The show went on too long beyond optimal pacing. Certain deliberations at the palace lingered; some market and transitional scenes could be condensed. Stage lapses like missed lines and poorly timed exits were scarce but apparent. These issues are common in student productions that are put on under the time crunch of a festival. They do not nullify the show's successes, but they indicate areas for better rehearsal timing and stage management education.

Discussion: Aesthetics, Identity, and Pedagogy

The production served a dual purpose: it teaches the immediate audience something about a disputed historical figure, and it exemplifies a form of university theatre that presents history as cultural debate. Brechtian distancing and Bakarean choreography combined to provide a hybrid aesthetic that serves Nigerian pedagogy well. It enables students and audiences, on the one hand, to think critically about power, and on the other hand, to be partakers in cultural validation. This hybrid, however, demands continuous technical discipline. If the text is overridden by spectacle, the pedagogic intention devolves into mere entertainment. If distancing is exercised without a cultural referent, the play ends up appearing strange and unfamiliar to local audiences. FUOYE succeeded more often than not in navigating these conflicting imperatives.

Findings and Contributions to Knowledge

The play reveals that university theatre is capable of staging public history both as political criticism and cultural foundation. The hybrid adoption of Brechtian tactics and local performing traditions provides a working template for performing historical drama in the Nigerian university setting. It is recorded in this paper that this hybrid aesthetic is highly recommended and warrants further research.

The Gap Filled by the Study

Existing literature relating to live theatrical performances of the historical Yoruba, understood through the dual prisms of Brechtian and Bakarean modes, is surprisingly lacking. In attempting to fill this gap, the present paper provides a scrupulously detailed case study relating to the presentation of *Madam Tinubu* at FUOYE. It provides a template for future practice-based work and practical recommendations designed to augment the technical aspects of students' theatrical performances.

Recommendations

1. Make speech intelligibility a priority when mixing the sound. Rehearse technically with attention given to monologue clarity.

2. Offer brief, focused accent workshops on non-native speech requirements. Where comprehensive training is impractical, favour clear, unobtrusive diction.
3. Condense prolonged deliberative sequences to enhance pacing. Modify the script at the performance stage to preserve rhythm.
4. Employ formal methods of audience response, such as brief questionnaires after the performance, to note reception data for future studies.
5. Promote cross-training among students in stage management, sound, and lighting design to enhance technical dependability.

Conclusion

The FUOYE production of *Madam Tinubu: The Terror in Lagos* is a substantial success. It combines cultural credibility with a perceptive directorial approach. The starring performance was convincing, and the production was highly engaging as a whole. Despite technical issues with sound and small-scale ensemble errors, none undermines the production's accomplishment at recovering a significant historical narrative on behalf of today's audiences. The production serves as a priceless model for university theatres that wish to facilitate national awareness and civic education.

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Documented Pictures from Madam Tinubu's Performance at FUOYE TMA Theatre





