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Research Article

Theatrical Performance and Aesthetic Communication in *Darkest Night* Directed by Festus Dairo

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Abstract

The theatre functions as a platform for communication; however, the surge in audiences' level of media literacy and aesthetic taste caused by the exposure to media elements has warranted a review of the medium of communication to include a critical use of aesthetics in performance. Therefore, directors like Festus Dairo have identified the use of special effects make-up and mixed-media as currencies for creating contemporary performances with an aesthetic essence. This paper engages Ole Thyssen's aesthetic communication theory as a theoretical framework as it examines Dairo's art of aesthetic communication using special effects make-up and mixed-media techniques. It is a descriptive study that secured its data through participatory observation of the 2023 production of *Darkest Night* by the Zion Royal Theatre. As Dairo seeks to create an aesthetic theatre experience capable of sustaining audience attention through visual elements and media technology, he uses special effects of make-up to create mental images emanating from the visual adornment of characters through the use of special effects of make-up and a deliberate use of media elements which include pre-recorded dialogues and sound amplification, music, interactive lights and audio subtitling in connection with the ongoing live action. Hence, the use of special effects make-up and mixed-media techniques in the performance under study proves to be a viable method of aesthetic communication capable of enhancing interpretation, creating a robust theatre experience, and sustaining the overall contemporary theatre-going culture.

Keywords: Aesthetic communication, special effects make-up, mixed-media techniques, theatre directing, theatrical performance

Introduction

Significantly, the theatre functions as a platform and medium of communication between the audience and performers. However, between the accommodation of these

audiences into the theatre space and the commencement of the production is the question of communication. Though most actors, directors, designers and even theatre managers assume the job that ends at the admittance of large audiences and the success of the box office yet, it is important to identify the role of effective communication to get the audience immersed in the experience and the dramatic story, engage and sustain their interest in the ongoing production.

This study prioritizes audience attention and engagement in the theatre above mere attendance and identifies aesthetic communication as a solution to the age-long problem capable of achieving an immersive theatre experience and deriving undivided audience attention. It further places emphasis on the methods of achieving audience activity in the production right from the exposition of the story to the curtain call using elements of aesthetic communication. Tochuckwu Okeke captures that the contemporary theatre “takes in and utilizes elements of science and new technologies for its sustainability and viability” (52). Hence, to complete the cycle of communication, the specie of audiences that visit the contemporary theatre require beyond the mere staging of the play but a more deliberate approach to keep them active and interested in the ongoing dramatic action. Therefore, as Olalekan Olatunji stresses the importance of visual elements of the theatre which include “scenography, costume, special effects, props, colour, composition and picturization, and the entire mise-en-scene” (42), this study identifies the use of audio-visuals and aesthetic elements to be the optimum stratagem for contemporary audiences using special effects make-up and the incorporation of mixed-media.

Darkest Night as directed by Festus Dairo is an eschatological drama piece targeted at sounding a note of warning to Christians as touching the second coming of Jesus Christ as foretold by displaying the possible aftermaths of the end time and the persecutions awaiting those that would not debunk their faiths in Christ irrespective of the circumstance for momentary joy, and also displays the eternal agonies of those that defect to the other side for the fear of death and uncertainty. This study displays Dairo’s interpretation of the story through an exploration of his use of aesthetics as a tool for effective message communication using special effects make-up such as aging and blood effects, fantasy make-up, fireworks and pyrotechnics, coupled with the use of mixed-media techniques such as pre-recorded dialogues and sound amplification, music and interactive media which include lights and spontaneous lines subtitling. The paper identifies Dairo’s use of aesthetics in performance as a sustainable model for effective communication and audience attention which has been a challenge in contemporary theatre.

Fundamentally, the theatre functions as a platform of collaboration that allows several art forms –acting, dancing, design, directing and music among others to communicate in synchrony with each other through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. This collaboration makes it serve “as a melting-pot for all the arts” (Umukoro 20). However, more particularly, the theatre exists as a collaborative medium that engages several other arts in an ensemble to make statements. That is, the essence of any theatrical performance is to communicate to the live or mediated audience. Bernard Orji posits that “the beauty of theatre production is embedded in visual symbolism. This is creating images in their picturesqueness to enhance communicative propensities of a play” (404). His standpoint – which posits the beauty of theatre performance to lie in the ability to communicate using pictures, symbols and visual codes – presents the relevance of aesthetics in the theatre as an important element in the process of communication and enhancing audience understanding (or perception) of the message passed.

As communication is germane to theatrical performance; however, the effectiveness of the communication is tied to the medium of communication. To complement Orji's standpoint, Matthew Umukoro subscribes to the fact that "the theatre communicates better when it engages audio-visual elements and not mere visual codes as a smooth combination of the two could appeal to human senses especially the visual and the aural" (4). He posits further thus:

Drama and theatre, as collaborative arts, provide the artistic matrix in which poetry, music, and dance are welded into one *aesthetic pageant*; a huge audio-visual creation which occupies the summit of the legitimate arts of the stage, with latter-day extensions to the media of the radio, television, film and the video. While radio is purely audio, the *other products of communication technology are audio-visual in nature*. (15; emphasis added)

From the foregoing, Umukoro emphasizes the essence of audio-visual elements in aesthetic communication and the contribution of other audio-visual communication technologies as many as could be engaged in the performance. That is beyond the need to create phenomenal contemporary theatre performances, aesthetic communication, which is a result of the combination of verbal and non-verbal elements, becomes a prerequisite for effective communication with a contemporary audience. Hence, in the process of ensuring effective communication in performance; sustaining the attention of the contemporary audience and enhancing interpretation, aesthetics plays a pivotal role.

In the world today, audiences are faced with aesthetic elements daily and this ranges from their encounter with all sorts of high-quality graphic images, videos and audio on their mobile phones, social media pages, media technologies and other digital media platforms. Therefore, this exposure necessitates the theatre to scale up its process of communication to engage these elements to be at par with the intellectual and aesthetic level of the contemporary audience. Thus, aesthetic communication is a deliberate process of sending messages to the audience by first appealing to their sense of aesthetic taste and this becomes a need for performance interpretation in the contemporary world and "are said to have influenced the process of the 'gestation, construction and delivery of the live show" (Bonet and Schargorodsky 41). Hence, the use of special effects make-up – visual elements alongside mixed-media –audio-visual elements as exemplified in the performance under study proposes a template for the application of aesthetic elements for communication in performance.

Hence, this background into the expectations of the contemporary audiences and their high level of aesthetic taste necessitates a review of the use of aesthetic elements for communication and performance creation in contemporary performances as buttressed in this study. The study aims to influence the deliberate use of aesthetics as an effective tool of communication for contemporary audiences as engaged in Dairo's production of *Darkest Night*. It is a descriptive study that secured its data via a participant's observation of the 2023 production of *Darkest Night* by the Zion Royal Theatre coupled with a documentation of the director's approach to the variegated use of aesthetics for communication.

Definitions of Key Terms

Special Effects Make-up

The idea of using make-up is peculiar to cosmetic reasons and facial beautification. However, in the theatre, make-up functions more critically in the process of communication. Adakole Oklobia and Lillian Bakare posit that make-up in the theatre functions as a tool "to aid communication and to provide an audience with a visual idea of a character during a dramatic action" (108). That is, make-up in the theatre advances

from being a mere cosmetic tool to a tool for communication finding expression by means of the faces of the actors. Amali buttresses by classifying make-up into four major types to include 'straight make-up', which is the application of basic cosmetic elements to facial looks; 'paint make-up', which seeks to transform an individual or actor into another through the use of colours; 'solid make-up', which is applied to give a three-dimensional effect on the character to bring out certain features on the character; and the 'special effects make-up' which is usually a combination of all the other kinds of make-up towards the creation of an unusual effect or unique aesthetic experience (130-31). Therefore, special effects make-up is a stratagem for invoking phenomenal visual codes that are appealing to the audience's eyes and their sense of imagination. Hence, special effects make-up is a necessary tool to generate viewers' attraction and sustain their attention "by creating an altered but believable state of metamorphosis" (Bates 46).

Mixed-Media Theatre Directing

The idea of theatre directing in the contemporary world requires a necessary interaction with the media. This synchrony with the media is caused by the unrivaled exposure of the contemporary audience to media gadgets which culminated in a massive explosion in their level of media literacy and dependence on the media. Tochuckwu Okeke confirms this when he states that "theatre practice, in recent times, has adopted current trends in digital technology to withstand the challenges posed by advancements in the cinema and film" (52). Hence, the idea of incorporating media elements into live theatre performances became a yardstick for contemporary performances in the twenty-first century. He buttresses thus:

The theatre has strided [sic] into the age of digital technology through the employment of multimedia staging techniques in its practice in order to be abreast with the global trends in the world of show business...It entails the use of media equipment such as projectors and animated images most of which have been pre-recorded and these recorded actions and images are presented simultaneously to a theatre audience while a stage performance is on. (52)

Therefore, mixed-media elements, in this context, refer to every form of audio-visual element which includes pre-recorded audios and videos, sound amplifiers, digital images and scenery, mediation, and other external media forms used in connection with an ongoing stage dramatic action. For the basis of precision, the application of these media elements within the live show requires a technique (the mixed-media technique) that varies by directors to enhance interpretation, meet the demands of the media-savvy audience and create a robust theatre experience.

Aesthetic Communication

Communication is the basis for theatre performance. This explains that the theatre as an ensemble collaborates with other mediums to pass information through performance, and this could be done through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. While verbal communication depends on the use of vocal words as its message-passing medium, non-verbal communication creates alternate ways to communicate beyond the use of words. The non-verbal medium has been identified to be the most effective medium of communication due to the universality of the elements of communication. In the words of Pera, "Non-verbal communication is that form of communication where message transmission is achieved by other means other than word: facial expression, gaze, body posture, gestures, clothing, proximity, body contact. Therefore it is said that body language has now become a universal language" (327). However, aside from the four major areas of the non-verbal medium of communication

which include “proxemics, the use of personal space and distance; kinesics, body postures and movements; oculusics, communicative aspects of eye behaviour (gaze and movements); and vocalics or paralinguistic cues, such as vocal tone and intonation”, emphasis is being placed on the efficiency of communicating via aesthetic elements (Gabbott and Hogg 386). According to Yammiyavar et. al, this possibility leads to the coinage of the concept of ‘artifacts’ to concern the study of “how non-verbal messages can be passed via personal accessories, such as dress and fashion accessories worn by a person, symbols, and visual codes, audiovisual realities and every other element that contributes aesthetic satisfaction” (33). Hence, aesthetic communication in this context would refer to the deliberate method of harnessing aesthetics in performance using both verbal and nonverbal mediums of communication to make statements.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study engages the qualitative method of data gathering and is a descriptive study that obtains its data through participatory observation of the 2023 production of Mike Bamiloye’s *Darkest Night* as directed by Festus Dairo and produced by the Zion Royal Theatre, the stage production arm of the Mount Zion Institute of Christian Drama, Ile-Ife. The production was staged on a repertory basis at multiple locations, which include Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo; Redeemer’s University, Ede; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; University of Lagos and the University of Ibadan, between January and May 2023.

The study also secures in-depth interviews with the stage manager, Tobi Olumuyiwa, who stood as proxy for the director; team heads and a few lead actors, who contributed their perception in the application of the special effects make-up, coupled with their interaction with the mixed-media elements incorporated into the live production for aesthetics communication.

The production includes a series of preparation at pre-production, which includes drama rehearsal and recording sessions of songs and dialogues. The success of the preparatory stage provided the necessary intelligence to forestall possible challenges with live spontaneous action and also sustain the aesthetic communication process.

The study is based on Ole Thyssen’s aesthetic communication theory (2006) that creates a pedestal for the application of aesthetics as a medium for communication in performance. Since theatre audiences appreciate elements that appeal to their sense of aesthetic taste via senses other than the sense of hearing, and thus, the art of creating and communicating with aesthetics within becomes a necessary endeavor. Yesim Baltacioglu agrees with the essence of aesthetic communication in performance by establishing the degree of curiosity present in the minds of the audience from different levels which cannot be met only by verbal words “but through the creation of ‘a fictional world’ where the theatre communicates beyond words but through every other possible means capable of satisfying the critical minds and aesthetic taste of the media-savvy audience” (44). In the same vein, Thyssen reveals that “the differences that make an aesthetic difference are not the empirical themes, nor the practical rules of communication, not even the normative principles, but rather the mode of communicating” (1). From this perspective, the viability of aesthetic communication depends largely on the ability to develop new and efficient methods of communication rather than blindly following communication conventions.

From the foregoing, Thyssen causes an attention shift from the rules of communication to the medium of communication and also re-echoes the possibility that message information can be passed in several ways so long the goal is to foster understanding of the information. In his postulation, he identifies that it is “*not by what is*

said or written, but by how the message is delivered. We might accordingly define aesthetics as the suggestive power in a sensuous and cognitive pattern" (2; emphasis added). Here, the principal objective of aesthetic communication is to engage more means of communication that can appeal to the critical sense of the viewing audience by breaking the rigidity that comes with communication principles. Thus, aesthetic communication aims to capture, enchant and bind the attention of a receiver. Here, as in the words of Thyssen, "[I]n show business, you must show, not tell" (2), which emphasizes the need to engage more modes of telling the dramatic story, satisfying the audiences' sense of aesthetic taste and enhancing performer-audience communication during the performance.

Results and Discussion

Darkest Night directed by Festus Dairo is an eschatological Christian drama that exposes the insincerity and corruption hidden in the veins of Christians but exposed at the sight of persecution. It mirrors the lives of Christians in the contemporary society, who are caught in the web of renouncing their faith and belief in Jesus in exchange for hellish extra lives, while a few people, who remained true to their faith, are executed for staying resolute.

The story is situated in Agbamu, a small town that was raided by religious extremists under the guise of militants, who have been sent because of the new decree to wipe off those who believe in Jesus Christ as a matter of urgency, and spare only those that are ready to renounce their faith and lose their souls to the devil as an opportunity cost for living while others are being executed because of their devotion to the faith. Many believers fell for this trap while only a few remained resolute and were made to pay the price for staying committed to their salvation. Unfortunately, among many of those that renounced their faiths were religious leaders, who are mostly venerated as God's mouthpiece and shepherds of the flock but showed off their true colours as wolves under priestly garments.

The cycle of executing Christians by these militants continued until there was a great shift. One of the principal officers, Officer Gary, leading the operation began to feel restless and perturbed by the commitment of some Christians to their faith even at the expense of losing their lives. His restlessness was heightened by the curiosity to know where all those who confessed Jesus were eager to go; hence, he decided to join the league of the believers he was to execute by confessing Jesus as his Lord. This confession cost him his life as he was in turn executed by his superior, Officer Collins, based on flaunting the rules. Eventually, Officer Collins also found himself in the same dilemma having executed many sinless Christians. The sincerity of these devoted Christians to their faith drew him closer to believing that there must truly be something more dying for. Officer Collins switched sides by confessing Jesus as his Lord, was executed by his superior, the Commander, and the cycle continues.

Darkest Night is a prediction based on biblical facts about the corruption entering the contemporary world as well as the aftermaths of the ascension. The event takes place when people would have to pay heavily for choosing to stay devoted to their faith or have the choice to be given terminal lives on the provision of their allegiance to the devil after renouncing their faith.

As stated earlier, aesthetic communication depends on the use of any other medium beyond words to express a thought or make a statement. The several modes of aesthetic communication as employed in the production understudy shall be discussed below using the classification of special effects make-up and mixed-media elements.

Special Effects Make-up in Darkest Night

Make-up in *Darkest Night* played significant roles beyond the need for facial beautification for characters but functioned more importantly as a quintessential aesthetic element necessary for enhancing characterization and aiding the audiences' understanding of the dramatic story. In the same vein, special-effects as used in *Darkest Night* sought to provide glamour and increase the audiences' level of believability and understanding of the dramatic story by heightening the level of aesthetic quality provided in the production. These special effects, which were majorly non-verbal, were used strategically for message-passing purposes. The examples of cases where these special effects were used have been highlighted below.

According to Etherton cited in Adakole Amali, make-up can serve special functions when “an actor emphasizes or changes his or her facial features to look more like the audience concept of the character which he or she is playing” (130). On several occasions in the production, make-up was used to heighten believability, especially with the use of aging and blood effects. The graphic illustrations of both cases as used in this context has been displayed in Figure 1 and 2.

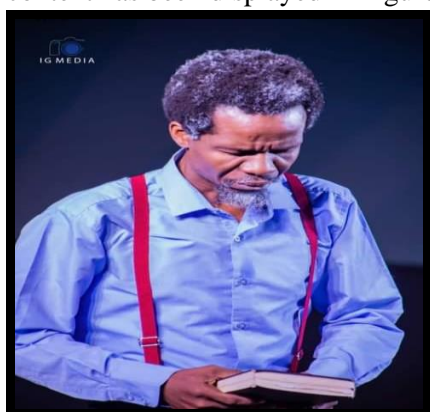


Fig. 1. Aging effect in *Darkest Nigh*



Fig. 2. Blood effect in *Darkest Night*

On both accounts, the target was to “make an assisting statement of an actor's characterization” (Oklobia and Bakare 107) and to strengthen the display of realism. A notable feedback received when the actors bearing these effects entered the stage and exposed their effects to the prying eyes of the audience, was loud cheers which suggest that the message intended was in perfect synchrony with their aesthetic taste and that aesthetic communication in both contexts could fulfill its enterprise.

Another successful use of special effects make-up was for the development of special characters using fantasy make-up. These characters were mystical and surrealistic and needed to be differentiated from the normal realistic characters. The appearance of these mystical beings was to bring the audience into a fictional world by imagining the existence and functionality of these beings. Yesim Baltacioglu affirms this perspective by agreeing that the “fictional world created on stage is expected to attract the audience and convey the persons, events within the frame of fiction” (44). Thus, this connects with the position that “fantasy makeup is any look designed to create an experience” (Sandeen), especially when the characters to be displayed are surrealistic and non-existing; hence, their believability is subjected to the audience's level of imagination. The production featured some of such characters just before the resolution to portray a spiritual activity with the use of face painting that signals their mysticity.

The underlying use of fireworks and pyrotechnics was to heighten dramatic effects and result in some sort of connection with the audiences' level of understanding. Fireworks were used majorly in the prologue to create the illusion of chaos in the town

as men and women ran on and off the stage in distress, and the use of fireworks was deliberate to suggest the sporadic gunshots responsible for the chaos in the town. The use of fireworks in this context proved successful as it could generate the expected reaction from the audience, who thought they were real gunshots, and it also aided the movements of the actors, who were reacting to the fireworks as though they were gunshots in that scenario.

On the other hand, the use of pyrotechnics was at the tail end to paint the picture of celebration when the souls of those who affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ were resuscitated back to life and rewarded with golden crowns. The pyrotechnic effect which broke out from the two sides of the stage created a beautiful scenario of celebration. Not only did it create a great aesthetic feeling, but it also successfully communicated the idea that there will be a glamorous welcome for all those who eventually make it to heaven having defied all odds and the communication medium amazed the audience.

Mixed-Media Techniques in Darkest Night

Festus Dairo's interpretation of Mike Bamiloje's *Darkest Night* engaged the use of media elements alongside the live production as a conscious effort to interact with the media-savvy audience. The media has proliferated the contemporary world through diverse means, therefore, the introduction of these media elements becomes a necessary entry point for proper communication to a media-oriented audience. As a result, "these constant modifications have conditioned the minds of users and boosted their demand for aesthetics due to their encounters with these media technologies. Hence, this has questioned what contents can be prepared, and how they should be prepared and also delivered" (Griffin 6). Therefore, by putting this into consideration, the artistic director, Festus Dairo, necessitates the use of media elements alongside the live dramatic action to communicate to the audience using the aesthetic elements they are exposed to daily.

The idea of pre-recorded dialogue is to engage actors in a studio session during the early stage of the preparatory phase. Each actor is to record his or her lines in a studio session as it is written in the script. An interview with the stage manager, Tobi Olumuyiwa, reveals the back story behind the idea of pre-recorded dialogue to be the sparse nature of actors and the short duration of rehearsals. Upon completion of the recording process, the actors rehearse with the recorded piece during rehearsal and also relish the privilege of listening to their scenes all over with their smartphones in the comfort of their homes to achieve a mastery of cues and synchronization in delivery. This technique has proved successful with the delivery of the live show as the actors only need to employ the use of mime and pantomimic dramatization in connection with the pre-recorded lines playing through the sound amplifiers.

Beyond the idea of pre-recording being an advantage, another significance it has the provision of an alternative to the challenges of projection during the live show; and signal interference using lapel or head microphones, which eventually causes distractions if not properly handled. Through the use of pre-recording, the audio, which has been recorded in high-quality plays via the speakers, reaches the audience distinctively; and remains undiluted at its best quality during post-production. Therefore, with this quality, the audiences' level of aesthetic taste is matched as though they were listening to an audio file in its best quality using their headset, phone speakers, or portable amplifiers.

Music, a non-verbal form of communication, is an integral part of aesthetic communication in performance. It becomes an effective technique in the process of aesthetic communication through the presence of the specific features of music which Matthew Umukoro highlights to include "euphony, rhythm, pace, cadence, tonality and emotional appeal" (5). The peculiarity of music is its ability to communicate feelings that

are based on the audience's perception of the other features. In this context, music sinks faster into the hearts of the audience since it has the advantage of spatiality alongside time because the music was inserted into the dramatic action and the audience is trapped within a particular space to actively enjoy and experience the music, something that could have been a passive exercise when detached from the performance space.

Hence, the application of music as aesthetic communication includes its use within the scenes, and as a transition at the end of each scene, thus making the production fully operatic with the interplay of several songs which have been pre-recorded to the accompaniment of musical instruments in the right rhythmic proportion. During scene transitions, instrumentals were played to provide a seamless connection.

According to D. Saltz, interactive media is a concept that refers to “the interaction between images, texts, videos, and sounds created on a computer in response to a live performer's actions” (107). The idea of interactive media is to create a seamless connection between the recorded or programmed media forms with the live performer's actions. There have been cases where LED lights are programmed to change colour or automatically toggle their brightness in connection with an actor's lines. This may also happen with videos, images, or sound where an actor will have to perform his/her enterprise in connection with those media elements as those elements are integrated into the performance rather than being isolated from the live dramatic action.

Saltz claims that a “theatre that incorporates interactive media has the potential to combine both live performances and media” (109). The following highlights the two major areas the production understudy engaged in the use of interactive media.

On several occasions, the LED lights as in Figure 3 were used during the production in a symbiotic relationship with the actors. First, the colour combination within scenes was strategic as the director, who was in charge of the digital dimmer board, created a smooth blend of the lights to create an aesthetic feel in response to the mood established. On a second note, the production also engaged in the use of fog lights to create a spectacular effect in the opening and closing scenes.



Fig. 3. Interactive lightning in *Darkest Night*

Subtitling is quite uncommon in stage productions as the audience is expected to be in sync with the lines as they are being delivered by the actors. However, there are cases where the lines delivered via the natural voice of actors are lost in transit due to natural circumstances or the unavailability of acoustics. Moreover, since the production leverages the use of sound gadgets to amplify the recorded lines of the actors, then there is a need for hybridization of the media elements. Hence, the director conceptualized the need to subtitle and display the pre-recorded lines via a projector screen as the scenes played on stage. With this strategy, the aesthetic taste of the audience is met through the

interplay of quality audio in connection with visual texts as they would when playing an audio file and viewing its lyrics displaying spontaneously side-by-side.

Discussion

Communication is the essence of every theatrical performance. However, this study places an emphasis on the method of communication other than the mere communication activity. Using Dairo's interpretation of Bamiloye's *Darkest Night*, this study exposes the director's conscious attempt to achieve effective communication between the script, the director and the audience; forestall distractions and sustain audience attention. Since the contemporary audience is naturally exposed to glamour, the director in the production under study engaged aesthetics as a viable tool in the communication process through the deliberate use of special effects and mixed-media as audio-visual elements.

The special effects make-up used in the production include aging and blood effects; fantasy make-up; fireworks and pyrotechnics, while the mixed-media elements used include prerecorded dialogue played through standard sound amplifiers; interactive lighting; recorded music; and spontaneous subtitling which provided the textual dialogues and music lyrics via a projector screen to supplement the audio being played.

The feedback generated from the audience reveals the success of the aesthetic communication approach in delivering the live show as the audience members were trapped in the world of the play from its exposition due to the concentrated use of audio-visual elements which satisfied their level of aesthetic taste, sustained their attention, lured them into the world of the performance and made the communication successful.

Conclusion

Communication remains a quintessential part of every theatrical performance. However, the surge in audiences' level of media literacy and aesthetic taste caused by their exposure to media elements necessitates a review of the medium of communication to include a critical use of aesthetics. As applied in Festus Dairo's directorial interpretation, the conscious use of special effects make-up and mixed-media techniques presents aesthetic communication as a viable medium of conveying messages to the contemporary audience by appealing to their degree of aesthetic perception using audio-visuals and elements of spectacle. Therefore, the essence of aesthetics in the process of communication is to serve as bait capable of preparing the audience's mind and luring them into accepting the several signals of communication littered across the performance.

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