

# Total Theatre Aesthetics and Directing in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Towards an African-Centred Performance Paradigm

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

Total Theatre has long been identified as a defining characteristic of African performance traditions; however, its systematic articulation within contemporary directing theory remains limited. While African theatre scholarship frequently acknowledges the integrative nature of indigenous performance, combining music, dance, ritual, spectacle, and communal participation as insufficient attention has been paid to how these elements are consciously organised through directing practices. This article reconceptualises Total Theatre aesthetics as an African-centred directing paradigm, rather than a descriptive cultural attribute. Drawing on recent African and global performance scholarship (2020–2025), the study synthesises Total Theatre theory, postcolonial performance aesthetics, ethno-dramatics, and contemporary directing theory to establish a coherent conceptual framework. It argues that contemporary Nigerian directing practices exemplify an alternative theatrical modernity grounded in holistic orchestration, ritual logic, and experiential design. By foregrounding Total Theatre as a methodological and theoretical framework for directing, the article contributes to emerging discourses on African-centred directing, performance ontology, and postcolonial theatrical modernities.

**Keywords:** Total Theatre, African aesthetics, directing theory, postcolonial performance, ethno-dramatics, Nigerian theatre.

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## Introduction

Theatre, as a multidimensional art form, has consistently pursued the integration of diverse expressive resources into unified aesthetic experiences. In Western modernist discourse, this impulse was theorised through Richard Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, which proposed the synthesis of music, drama, movement, and visual spectacle into a "total artwork." However, long before this theoretical articulation, African performance traditions had already institutionalised

holistic performance systems in which music, dance, ritual, storytelling, masquerade, and communal participation functioned as inseparable components of meaning-making.

Modern African theatre scholarship progressively identifies that what Euro-American address later conceptualised as Total Theatre has long operated as an indigenous aesthetic logic embedded within African performance epistemologies (Obasi, 2023; Ngobeni, 2024). In these traditions, performance is not conceived as representational mimesis but as a



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lived event that integrates cosmology, social relations, and embodied knowledge. Nevertheless, despite this recognition, theoretical engagement with Total Theatre within African directing discourse remains fragmented.

Much existing literature prioritises thematic interpretation, according to Sahu (2025), cultural symbolism, and postcolonial critique, often marginalising the directing strategies through which holistic performance systems are composed and sustained. Moreso, Nzewi (2025) also affirmed that directing is repeatedly examined in relation to adapted Eurocentric models rather than theorised as a culturally grounded practice rooted in indigenous performance logics (Innes, et al., 2025). Recent calls for African-centred directing paradigms underscore the urgency of reconceptualising directing as an autonomous epistemology rather than a derivative craft (Abdul-Quadir, 2025; Various Authors, 2023).

This article responds to that gap by advancing a theoretical synthesis that positions Total Theatre aesthetics as a modern African-centred directing standard. Using Nigerian theatre practice as a conceptual reference point, the study integrates Effiom & Abeebe (2025) position on Total Theatre theory, postcolonial performance aesthetics, ethno-dramatics, and contemporary directing theory to reframe African directing as holistic orchestration, ritual mediation, and experiential composition (Olatunji & Ojo, 2024).

### **Total Theatre as an Aesthetic Paradigm**

The perception of Total Theatre has undergone significant theoretical transformation (Fortier, 2024). Experimental modernist formulations are related to totality with artistic synthesis and formal unity, privileging aesthetic cohesion across media (Lehmann, 2023). Subsequent post dramatic and intermedial theories reconceptualised totality as simultaneity, hybridity, and affective co-presence, emphasising the interaction of sensory, corporeal, and symbolic registers in the production of meaning (Fischer-Lichte, 2021; Reason & Reynolds, 2024).

As contained by African performance traditions, Nzewi (2025) asserted however, that totality operates not as an experimental ambition but as an ontological principle. In the words of Kroulik (2025), ritualised performances generate meaning through cosmological coherence rather than linear narrative or representational realism. Sound, movement, costume, invocation, spatial procession, and audience participation function within sacred dramaturgies that collapse conventional distinctions between performer and spectator, art and life, and representation and presence (Ngobeni, 2024).

Obasi (2023) conceptualises African Total Theatre as an epistemic system in which performance serves as a medium for social knowledge transmission, moral instruction, and communal memory. Recent African scholarship further reframes Total Theatre aesthetics as a strategic framework for contemporary practice, identifying multimodality, ritualisation, spatial dynamism, and participatory spectatorship as its core principles (Mbede, 2024; Enang, 2024). These principles align closely with immersive performance paradigms and challenge text-centred dramaturgies that privilege literary authority over embodied experience.

### **Postcolonial Aesthetics and Performance Memory**

Postcolonial theatre aesthetics foreground hybridity, resistance, and the reconfiguration of cultural memory. African performance frequently articulates postcolonial subjectivity through ritual fragmentation, narrative circularity, symbolic embodiment, and non-linear temporality, thereby destabilising Eurocentric dramaturgical norms and historiographic assumptions (Lo & Gilbert, 2021; Balme, 2022).

In contemporary Nigerian theatre, postcolonial aesthetics are expressed through scenographic hybridity, linguistic code-switching, ritualised conflict structures, and multimedia integration that encode historical trauma, cultural negotiation, and socio-political critique (Udoiwang & Udoette, 2023; Enang, 2024). These strategies resonate

strongly with Total Theatre aesthetics by privileging simultaneity, multiplicity, and affective immersion.

Performance thus becomes a site of postcolonial re-memory in which ancestral presence, contemporary crisis, and future aspiration intersect. Within this context, Total Theatre functions not merely as an aesthetic strategy but as a political and epistemological intervention that re-centres African cosmologies within global theatrical discourse.

### **Ethno-Dramatics and Performance Studies Frameworks**

Ethno-dramatics provides a critical analytical framework for understanding African theatre as culturally embedded dramaturgy (Obasi, 2023). Integrating anthropology, ritual studies, and performance analysis, it foregrounds indigenous narrative logics, gestural codes, and symbolic systems as constitutive elements of theatrical meaning.

Performance studies further extend this perspective by conceptualising theatre as event, process, and embodied archive (Schechner, 2022). From this viewpoint, performance is not a fixed artefact but a dynamic system of transmission through which memory, identity, and social relations are enacted and renewed.

Together, these frameworks enable holistic analysis of ritual sequencing, corporeal memory, sonic polyphony, spatial dramaturgy, and participatory spectatorship. They provide methodological grounding for examining Total Theatre aesthetics as lived performance systems rather than abstract stylistic categories.

### **Directing as Holistic Orchestration in Nigerian Theatre**

Contemporary directing theory increasingly reconceptualises the director as an architect of performance systems rather than a mere interpreter of dramatic texts (Pavis, 2022; McAuley, 2023). Directing involves the orchestration of dramaturgy,

embodiment, scenography, sound, and spectatorship within coherent experiential frameworks.

African-centred directing paradigms extend this reconceptualisation by positioning directing as cultural mediation and ritual architectonics (Abdul-Quadir, 2025). Directorial authority is distributed across communal authorship, ritual sequencing, and embodied memory. Circular dramaturgies, call-and-response structures, polyphonic soundscapes, symbolic gesture, and spatial fluidity become central compositional tools.

Recent Nigerian directing practices illustrate hybrid negotiations between Stanislavskian realism, Brechtian estrangement, and indigenous performance strategies (Adumati, 2023; Enang, 2024). These practices exemplify Total Theatre directing, in which the orchestration of sensory, corporeal, and spatial elements supersedes textual primacy. Directing thus emerges as the composition of experiential ecologies rather than linear narrative control.

### **Towards an African-Centred Directing Paradigm**

Synthesising Total Theatre theory, postcolonial aesthetics, ethno-dramatics, and directing theory yields an African-centred directing paradigm grounded in holistic orchestration, ritual mediation, and experiential design. Within this paradigm, directing operates as the intentional composition of symbolic flows across sensory, corporeal, and spatial registers.

Total Theatre aesthetics function as methodological instruments for analysing African directing as creative knowledge production rather than derivative adaptation. By foregrounding indigenous performance strategies, Nigerian directors assert cultural sovereignty while negotiating technological mediation and global theatrical circulation.

This paradigm positions African directing as an alternative theatrical modernity rooted in communal ontology, ritual memory, and affective immersion, contributing to broader debates on performance ontology and postcolonial aesthetics.

## Conclusion

This article has reconceptualised Total Theatre aesthetics as a contemporary African-centred directing paradigm. By integrating theories of totality, postcolonial performance, ethno-dramatics, and directing, it demonstrates that contemporary Nigerian directing practices operate as holistic orchestration, ritual mediation, and experiential composition.

The framework offers critical tools for analysing African theatre beyond text-centred and Eurocentric models and contributes to ongoing debates on African directing styles, postcolonial theatrical modernities, and global performance theory. Future research may extend this framework through production-based case studies and comparative African performance analysis.

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