

PROFESSIONALISM AS AN AID TO CHARACTER PROFILING IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS: RAMSEY NOUAH AND KENNETH OKONKWO IN FOCUS

¹Chibuike M. Abunike, and ²Somtoo Arinze-Umobi, PhD

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,
cm.abunike@unizik.edu.ng, s.arinze-umobi@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Poor acting has negatively affected some Nollywood films over the years because several actors-enthusiasts tend to jump into acting without first understanding the demands of the profession. The essence of acting is to re-create real-life situations believably and a combination of talent and training helps an actor to interpret a role efficiently. In other words, effective character portrayal in films is based on an actor's willingness to hone his skill through training. The paper focuses on Professionalism as a panacea for Character profiling in Nollywood films. The content analysis approach of the qualitative methodology was used to gather data for the study. Konstantin Stanislavski's *The Method Acting* formed the theoretical basis for the work. Two major characters in *Living in Bondage – Breaking Free* were analyzed to discuss the importance of character profiling in Nollywood films. The research recommends that there is a need for actors to engage in constant training to enhance their interpretative abilities.

Introduction

Whiting Frank has described Acting as ‘the most glamorous and fascinating’ art of the theatre (185). This is possible since the actor is almost an indispensable member of a production team due to the strategic position he occupies as the image maker in film production. One can say that the actor is a necessary tool used to send a message to viewers. Removing the actor or performer from a film production is like removing the head from the body of which

we know that the body cannot function without the head. As the “image maker” of film production, the actor needs to maximize his potential through training to ensure viewers willingly suspend their disbelief whenever he mounts the set.

Actors construct characters by using their bodies and voices. Michael Kirby notes that “to act means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate”. (3). From Kirby’s statement we can deduce that acting is an instinct because right from birth, children imitate and enact experiences around them. In line with the above, Barclays Ayakoroma posits that:

In life, man is seen as an actor naturally because we play various roles every day, you see that boss playing tough at the office, that lecturer trying to be very strict, going to the privacy of their homes, and their wives may be bossing them. The outsiders (the audience) only see the masks (the roles) they are playing. (46).

However, every day acting cannot be compared to professional acting. Although there have been some disputations regarding who a professional actor is, since acting is ideally “inborn” and need not necessarily be learnt, Bergman Blix’s opinion on professional acting paints a picture of what professionalism in acting supposedly is. According to her;

A professional actor has to learn new roles constantly, and her or his professional knowledge is not restricted to the roles she/he plays, but rather concerns role-playing as such, i.e., how to make new roles come to life...actors live the part of a role using their body, voice, imagination and feelings. They professionalise the acting we all do in everyday life; they control an ability we all have to some degree, but perhaps are not so aware of. (161)

In reporting an event, one may be short of words thus acting out the incident will be the only remedy. To successfully convince viewers or listeners to believe what is been said or postulated, the method of acting may be used. Acting gives a better understanding of what a preacher or teacher teaches thus a better way of passing a message. Nigerian actors unlike before have been accepted in society and they have become the cynosure of all eyes. The 21st-century Nollywood actor has successfully broken through international barriers. American, Chinese and Indian movies no longer dominate the world film industry. The Nigerian government is getting more interested in the industry and is likely to construct a film village for the industry. Effective character interpretation is the hallmark of a professional actor. In other words, the ability of an actor to efficiently interpret any role assigned contributes significantly to the artistic quality of a film. Many actors keep emerging in Nollywood but not all truly understand the demands of the profession. Most actors have emerged as stars in Nollywood owing to their distinctive proficiencies as far as role interpretation is concerned. This study focuses on two such Nollywood actors; Ramsey Nouah and Kenneth Okonkwo.

Theoretical Framework

Acting Method theory is similar to Classical Acting. Classical and Method Acting share the same goal: creating performances based on natural human behaviour and honesty. However, each technique builds off of a different foundation. Classical Acting relies on an actor's extensive training to create characters, while Method Acting relies on an actor's personal experience. Through the age and era of acting, acting style and techniques evolve. According to Duruaku, "technique is truly personal in the sense that every actor executes his notion or movement in such a way as to achieve certain distinctiveness" (47). Whiting further posits that:

No responsible person including Stanislavski would argue that the creative approach alone is enough. After all, acting is not life. There are obvious differences and these differences are commonly referred to as techniques of acting (207-208).

Duruaku adduces that an actor can executive his role without speaking but we can say the same of movement. The actor technique is the ability to stand, walk, sit and gesture, like someone else.

Nigeria Video Film Acting: A Brief History

The Nigerian movie industry popularly known as Nollywood over time has grown into a robust one, and its prospects continue to improve. The industry is currently the second largest and third position in terms of revenue in the world. The name Nollywood was coined to resemble the big shots in the industry that is Bollywood and Hollywood which are the Indian film industry and that of America respectively. Actors like Kenneth Okonkwo, Kanayo O Kanayo and Bod-Manuel Odogwu are the Nigerian version of die-hard actors. They made the first impression of what a film looks like, they starred alongside other selected Igbo casts in the earliest Nigerian home video – Living in Bondage, Produced by Kenneth Nebue when films were shot with VHS cameras and edited in television studios using a couple of (gone extinct) VCR machines.

The problem of quality in the industry has generated questions even from its viewers who are often found engrossed in discussions with the circle of critics of the fast-growing industry. Tracing the factors responsible for this poor quality, poor finance and lack of professionalism are identified as the greatest challenges faced by the industry. When one looks at the industry today, a question comes to mind; how many professionally trained hands are there in the industry? According to Jonathan Haynes, Nigerian

feature film production began in 1970, just a few years after the beginning of cinema in francophone countries; the distribution system continues to be largely closed to indigenous filmmakers. He further explained that one crucial difference between Nigerian and other West African cinema is the autonomy, or isolation, of Nigerian cinema. According to Alfred Opubor, Nwuneli and Ore; the first film to be exhibited in the country was at the Glover memorial hall, Lagos in August 1903 by a European merchant, Stanley Jones. The film shown then included scenes of the coronation of King Edward VII (2). Though film became a potent medium of mass communication in Nigeria, with the above development, it has been observed that it remained under imperialist control (Ayakoroma, 29). He adduces that it has been observed that the late Ogunde attempted to produce local films in 1945, but the improvement of Nigerians in the cinema industry was actually after independence. Though the late Chief Ogunde, the doyen of professional theatre practice in Nigeria, initiated moves in 1945 toward producing local films, Nigerians only became seriously involved in film production after independence; and this was at the time the feature film was gaining prominence.

Professionalism and Character Interpretation

Professionalism involves the display acquisition of knowledge and competence according to the ethics of a particular field or profession. Similarly, Eliot Freidson defines a profession as an occupation that controls its work, organized by a special set of institutions sustained in part by a particular ideology of expertise and service. I use the word ‘professionalism’ to refer to that ideology and a special set of institutions. (10) Furthermore, Laura Taylor quoting Hamilton states:

The years of deliberate practice required for expert performance not only help to perform artists master necessary skills but also help them cultivate high levels of discipline through sustained levels of hard work and the

frequent self-denial required to focus on a particular domain (6).

Professionalism in acting is interwoven with having expertise in role interpretation in any given circumstance being one with the character. It is pertinent to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge on the fundamentals of on-screen acting as this will help hone one's innate talent hence turning one into a professional. A professional actor is supposed to possess the ability to interpret scripts/characters and understand how humans behave and express emotions. Tony Noice and Helga Noice explain that:

The role acquisition process appears to take place in two distinct stages. First, the actors extract from the script the underlying intentions of the characters, a procedure that often calls for extensive analysis, because the intentions in well-written plays are rarely explicit or obvious. The deep processing involved calls upon such learning factors as perspective-taking, problem-solving, elaboration, causal attribution, distinctiveness, and over-learning. Following the analytical phase, actors rehearse and perform their roles by using an approach the authors call "active experiencing" which involves the activation of those cognitive-emotive-motor processes inherent in all genuine human transactions. (7)

Before the age of three, children recognize and spontaneously engage in a wide variety of pretences and role-play activities. However, "a professional actor differs from a child to the degree of perseverance and perfection the professional must manifest in the role he simulates" (Goffman 100). Proper role interpretation is the parameter for judging and distinguishing a professional actor from an amateur actor. It is indeed the criteria for knowing a well-trained actor. Successful role interpretation is achieved through meticulous character analysis and the entire

script. An Actor should not just understand but feel a character's emotional state while interpreting a role which is what Character Mood Intensity (CMI) supposedly suggests.

However, no matter how intensely an actor feels the emotions of a character he or/she is interpreting at any given moment, such feeling may be of little or no use if not given visible expression on set. Reaching an emotional understanding of a character is a prerequisite for finding adequate bodily expressions to make that character come alive. for the audience. Ayakoroma affirms that:

Acting, in a simple sense, is playing a role that is not your true character... Acting then means making an audience believes that what is not true is true, or what is not real is real. And of course, this is premised on the actor's belief in the role he is playing. The actor has the responsibility of making the audience believe in his actions. (45-46)

What the above assertion means is that acting is the art of wearing a temporary mask and portraying another character's life, thoughts and values. In the narrative style of Constantine Stanislavsky's acting book entitled "An Actor Prepares", he explains clearly how an actor is expected to analyse the script and interpret his role. According to him, as an actor;

You should, first of all, assimilate the model...you study it from the point of view of the epoch, the time, the country, conditions of life, background, literature, psychology, the soul, way of living, social position, and external appearance; moreover, you study character, such as custom, manner, movements, voice, speech, intonations. All this work on your material will help you to permeate it with your feelings. Without all this, you will have no art. (21).

He further adds that; ...the actor creates his model in his imagination, and then, just as does the painter, he takes every feature of it and transfers it, not onto canvas, but onto himself... (21). Based on Stanislavsky's view, an actor can be referred to as being professional after nurturing his talent, he can interpret any role he is assigned to effortlessly. However, it is unfortunate to note that the problem of poor acting has inadequately reduced the quality of product content of the Nigerian movie industry, and too many ambitious Nigerians jump into acting without understanding the needs and expertise in the art of acting but simply searching for fame and money. The poor quality of acting owns to the problem of incompetence and inadequacies on the part of untrained, but ambitious individuals who parade themselves as Actors.

Synopsis of *Living in Bondage – Breaking Free*

Living in Bondage: Breaking Free is a continuation of the story of cultist Andy Okeke from the 1992 production *Living in Bondage*. Andy's second wife has a son named Nnamdi Okeke. After the demise of his mother, Nnamdi grows up with his aunt and her family. Growing up as a smart ambitious man, Nnamdi wants all the good things in life. He is fascinated by good cars and a luxurious lifestyle. It is his quest for this good life that makes him start up his own advertising company called Infinite Media. In the process, joins a cult with politician Chief Omego and wealthy businessman Richard Williams.

Suddenly, he starts getting contracts from all corners, all from a one-room apartment. Nnamdi then becomes a man that moves with the high and mighty in the society, unknown to him, his benefactors belong to a cult. A blogger named Uzoma is trying to bring down this cult associated with numerous ritual killings. He then contacts Andy Okeke who is now a pastor. He needs the help of Andy for information as an ex-member of the cult so he can take down the brotherhood. This will also give Andy Okeke the chance

to save his son from this deadly cult which offers you power, influence, and wealth in exchange for your soul.

Character Portrayal in Nollywood Films

Ramsey Nouah is one actor who ‘knows his onions’ as far as acting is concerned. He took his experience in Nollywood to analyse and deliver his role in *Living in Bondage*, *Breaking Free* as the leader of The Six cult group. During an office presentation where Nnamdi pitches his campaign for an upcoming rail network, billionaire tycoon Richard Williams is impressed by his ingenuity. He mentors Nnamdi professionally, and the latter is catapulted into high society status, acquiring vast wealth and recognition, but his new life comes at a price.



Plate 1: Richard Williams (Ramsey Nuoah) at the initiation ceremony of Nnamdi Okeke. Source: Film screenshots

Unknown to Nnamdi, Richard is the new leader of The Six and is on a mission to lure him into their cult. Due to Andy's past, the Okeke lineage is eternally bound to the dark side.

A second aspect of the “Triad” for actor professionalism and expertise for proficient role interpretation is *Emotion*. The emotion is expressed through proper training of the physical. The emotions of the actors are observed in their duplicating the

breathing patterns that accompany six emotions, Researchers have carried out research on this by measuring actor's galvanic skin response, heart rate, respiration, blood chemistry, and so on. during participants' imagined situations of varied emotional valances. (Noice and Noice 13-14). As observed by Elly Konijn, saying:

Most film productions represent human interaction and human conflict. In principle, all the emotions of daily life can be touched in a theatre piece. Dramatic action is usually characterized by great diversity and high concentration of emotions, varying in quality and intensity...behaviour an actor exhibits on stage which, in the eyes of the audience, appears to be an expression of a real emotion...the living characters who the actors are on stage are measured with the same standards with which we judge people in daily life. A character's emotion is a representation of real emotion. (59-60)

Kenneth Okonkwo as Andy Okeke. It was interesting for example to see Kenneth Okonkwo acting as Andy Okeke in this sequel about 27 years after its first production in 1992. Due to Andy's past, the Okeke lineage is eternally bound to the dark side. Having experienced cultism himself, Andy attempts to warn his son after Uzoma informs him of Nnamdi's existence, and tries to save him from *The Six* before time runs out, but it was to no avail.



Plate 2: Andy Okeke (Kenneth Okonkwo), expressing shock at the appearance of the leader of The Six cult group. Source: Film screenshots

Kenneth Okonkwo's usage of lucid facial expressions can be said to aid in the story interpretation following the proper response in the scene in which he meets face to face with Richard Williams, who is the new leader of The Six cult group inside the church which explains his shock as everyone will react in everyday life. This expression shows an intense feeling of anxiety. Nnamdi Okeke, Andy's son's interpretation of his role in the film is quite empathic. His Igbo mannerisms and facial expressions show he internalized not just the lines but his role well.

Conclusion

To keep professionalism and Character Interpretation in Nollywood films, the Nigerian actor must be innovative and be ready to submit themselves to the ethos of acting training and techniques to be role models to upcoming artists who have a wrong notion of the acting career as simply a scheme for quick wealth and fame. The actors must constantly work on improving the quality of their actions and also clear erroneous perceptions some people have about Nollywood as a low-rating movie industry in terms of quality in the world.

Works Cited

- AyakoromaBarclays, "From The Stage To The Screen: The Exegesis of Adaptation in Acting". *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 1. 2009 (45-57)
- Blix, Bergman Stina. "Stage Actors and Emotions at Work". *International Journal of Work Organization and Emotion*,

Vol. 2, No. 2. Geneva: Inderscience Enterprises Ltd, 2007.
(161-172)

Duruaku, A. B. C. *Hand Book on Drama and Theatre*. Owerri:
Colon Concept Ltd. 1997.

Freidson, Eliot. *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy and
Policy*. UK: Cambridge, Polity Press, in association with
Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

Goffman, Erving. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of
Interaction*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company,
1961.

Kirby, Michael. *Acting and Not-Acting: A Formalist Theatre*.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987

Konijn, A. Elly. *Acting Emotions Shaping Emotions On Stage*.
Translated by Barbara Leach with David Chambers.
Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2000.

Living in Bondage: Breaking Free. Dir: Ramsey Nouah. Swanky
JKA, and David Jones, PlayNetwork Africa, 2020.

Okome, O and Jonathan Haynes, *Cinema and Social Change In
West Africa*. Jos: Nigeria Film Corporation, 1995.

Konstantine Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*. Transl. Elizabeth
Reynolds Hapgood. London: Eyre Methuen, 1917.

-----, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*. Transl. and Edit.
by Jean Benedetti. New York: Routledge Taylor and
Francis Group, 2008.

Taylor, E. Laura. *Acting Strengths: The Development of Resilience
and Character Strengths in Actors. Master of Applied
Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstones Project, 70*. The
University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons, 2014.

Whiting, Franks. *An Introduction to the Theatre. Third Edition*.
California: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954.