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The role of Professor in Wole Soyinka’s The Road is a taxing delight for the actor because it is demanding of both talent and training.

It is a complex role but the intrinsic beauty in it lies in the subtlety of changes which show the many sides of the character and the joy for the actor is in the ability to fuse the artistic and technical aspects of his training in bringing the complexities of the character into a credible realisation.

Our approach to the realisation of the role was two-pronged: physical and psycho-social. For the physical we considered gait, gestures, (facial, limb and body) and general comportment. For the psycho-social we took what is said about him by other characters in the play. But above all we let Professor’s own words propose and substantiate him on the stage.

Keeping in mind the specific physical descriptions given by the playwright, the vocal interpretation was of first consideration. Breathing exercises came first for both capacity of breath and also for breath control. This was followed by and combined with exercise for clarity of speech. For effective realisation of any role in any play these exercises are necessary but especially so in the case of Professor. The nature of his speeches demands it because of the particular arrangement of text.

For capacity and breath control we started with the basics in general relaxation exercises. However, as we progressed the exercises gained more details and particular attention was paid to the areas of the neck, shoulders and the thoracic cavity because of the anticipated special postures to be assumed in the physical realisation of the role.

For capacity and breath control, monologues from other plays were used. The prologue from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet’s advice to the actor, (Hamlet, Act 3 Sc 2); the opening chorus of Henry VIII; and the speeches of Elesin, Iyalaja and the Praise Singer in Part III of Wole Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman are a few of the excerpts used. These examples, apart from their inherent poetic diction have many polysyllabic words structured into long sentences linked with commas and semi-colons.

We are taught by books on ‘Acting’ to ask some question towards interpretation of characters. Such questions are:

What are the goals or aspirations of a character?

What are the obstacles to the successful achievement of such goals?

How does the character react to such obstacles?

However some characters do not easily or completely conform to such general rules. Professor is such a character because he lives in the privacy of a self-created world and when other characters dare to step on the edges of his consciousness his reactions are prompted by the contents of a fermented mind, the explosion of which could intoxicate with its mere odour. In this line of argument, let us consider his use of the word ‘cabalistic’ in, ‘There are the cabalistic signs again’ (p. 65) which shows the esoteric warp of Professor’s mind when ordinary Xs and Os on a football coupon are linked with the folklore and religion of the time of the biblical Moses. In his response to Samson’s description of Professor’s ‘new wonder’ as ‘an accident’, Prof replies;

You are afraid? There are dangers in the Quest.
I know, but the word may be found companion not to life, but Death. Three souls you know, fled up that tree. You would think, to see it that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. Oh there was such an angry buzz but the matter was beyond repair. They died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. (p. 11)

The last sentence here shows the profoundity of Professor’s Christian background even though he is no longer
a member of the church. Such are
the psychological nuances which
affect one’s interpretation
which has to be made believable
on stage.

We see professor as a
symbol 'of a poetic
vision', yet he is
also human in his
own way. His
hangers-on
behave in a human
pattern and he
responds and
relates to them in a
way not totally un-
human. He can
only be seen within
the context of the
play. To see him in
any other way is
to take him out of
the distorted and
narrow world built for him by the
playwright.

The structure of the play supports the
nature of this character of professor. The
role is not divided into formal acts and
scenes in the Aristotelian sense. It is a
series of symbolic architectonic units in
which the principal actors express
themselves about the tragedies of their
existence on the road of life, and also tell
us about the other characters who cross
their paths.

The Road is Professor's play. He is
more often than not, the topic of discussion.
When he is not, he is invited to listen, give
an opinion or simply provoked with
questions. Therefore the actualisation of
his role on stage rests largely on the actor’s
ability to carve out these architectonic
units and interpret them towards a
meaningful realisation of the whole play.

For the greater part of his time on
the stage Professor sits. The sitting position
is a defensive one yet he has to generate
a lot of aggressive action. This, therefore,
has to be done through the vocal, facial
and hand gestures. In doing this, a 'self
portrait' of the action must be avoided. It
could be tiring sitting upright for a long
time on a stool without a backrest, and
maintaining a relaxed posture without
slumping. This is where one’s training in
relaxation and posture is paramount.

'Victorian' is the playwright’s
description of Professor’s costume. Being
'Victorian' could also be a behavioural
attitude as well as a style of speech
delivery. It is quite noticeable that Professor
enjoys speaking in circumlocutions. He
loves polysyllabic words and archaic
colloquations. Quite a number of his
sentences demand a lungful of air as well
as precision in articulation to be able to
render them meaningfully. He says,

My bed is among the dead, and when
the road raises a victory cry to break
my sleep I hurry to a disgruntled swarm
of souls full of spite for their
rejected bodies. p. 11)

You say the lorry overtook you - good
(Writes.) Lorry was travelling at
excessive speed. You see, I can make
up a police statement that would dignify
the archives of any traffic division but
tell me - have I spent all these years
in dutiful search only to wind up my
last moments in meaningless
statements? What did you see friend, what did you
see? Show me the smear of blood on
your brain. (p. 56)

Apart from the length of the
sentences, the alliterations, assonance
and internal rhymes have to be said not
only for their oral beauty but also for their
relevance in meaning towards an
understanding of the mind of the speaker.
Where he uses short sentences, the words
are very crisp and sharp. His alliteration
often propel the tongue to such a giddy
vocal speed during which it could be quite
difficult to control the reins of the tongue.

One peculiarity which we thought could
be lent to the interpretation of the character
was to end his sentences by a slight
upward inflexion of the voice so that it
does not fall and yet does not quite rise to
the level of turning the sentences into
questions.

Sometimes, Professor’s humour, we
observe, could be very subtle and
vocal inflexion. Professor’s speech when he goes into a disquisition on the
fieryness of the word is an example of our interpretation of the role. The speech says:

Oh the Word is a terrible fire and
we burned them by the ear. Only
that was not the word you see, oh
no, it was not. And so for every
dwelling that fell ten more rose in its
place until they grew so bold that
one grew here, setting its laughter
against the very throat of the organ
pipes. Every evening, until thought,
until one day I thought, I have never
really known what lies beyond that
window. And one night, the wall fell
down, I heard the laughter of children
and the wall fell down in an uproar
of flesh and dust. And I left the Word
hanging in the coloured lights of
sainted windows… (Almost humbly).
As you will notice, I have made
certain alterations. That corner was
not there before. I have scraped the
walls. Installed an electric light. Red
neon. It is, I think, likely that I left
the church coffers much depleted… but
I remember little of this. Have you
heard anything. (pp. 68/69).

The music in the speech harmonises
with its logical structure. In actualising this
on stage one's tones undulated according
to the innuendos within the speech as it
flows and ebbs from one situation to the
other, first assertive and immediately
denying that assertiveness with a tone
which shows that Professor has progressed
(or moved away from his original focus) in
his search for the word. Then it becomes
patronising by laughing at himself and the
members of the congregation as he
compares the life inherent in human voice
with the sonorous weight of the sound of
the organ pipes. From that point, the tone
becomes reflective and winning as he
confesses his ignorance of what 'lies
beyond that window.' The word ‘lies’
could be translated as ‘is’ or ‘untruths
being told’. It then gets pompous coming
forth with an “uproar” of contagious
laughter at the words ‘flesh and dust’. A
tone of satisfaction follows in the next
sentence which is a description of the
church windows.

At the point the comas and full-stops
assumed more than their grammatical
values as they break the sentences into
bits making the cadence of every word
ring like the confessed tones of a mind
searching for a spiritual anchor.
The playwright must have scored the music
in his head as he wrote the speech (as
indeed all his other long speeches) because
the next stage instruction says “almost
humbly”. The seeming humility in
Professor’s tone carries him to the end of
the speech until the last sentence which
verbally asks a question but tonally pleads
to be understood.

The other part of our interpretation
in physical. The first thing we know about
Professor is that some of the layabouts
regard him as a madam (p. 4). He sleeps
‘in the churchyard with all that dead
body’ says Samson. (p. 5). He is also ‘too
clever’ (p. 5). Later Samson refers to him
as ‘an artist’ in recognition of his skill at
forging driving licenses. These serve as
auditory guides to the character of
Professor before he appears on stage.

The playwright describes him as ‘A
tall figure in Victorian outfit - tails, top-hat
etc.,. The bundles of newspapers, the
chairstick and the roadsign carried by
him on his first appearance are vivid,
visual, as well as subtle psychological
guides towards the realisation of his
character.

We put Professor's height at about
1.85 m (6 ft). Not being that tall I decided
to make up the deficiency in height by
using long strides, keeping a straight (but
not stiff) back and always looking straight
ahead with a slight upward tilt of the chin.
We also rehearsed cocking the head
slightly to assume an attitude of
condescension towards the drivers and
layabouts in Professor’s interaction with
them. We affected large gestures with the
hands. This, we did to fit in with the long
strides.

Samson says of Professor, ‘... he
get class, he get style’. (p. 15). We took
pains to bring out in our physical realisation
these two aspects of him. Both 'style' and
'class' were partially realised through the
costume and hand props, however these
were worked into his vocal gestures.
Special attention was paid to particular
facial movements, and hand gestures, as
in the holding of certain items of props.
The pen, pieces of paper, the pocket-
watch and other props were picked up or
attended to show a very finicking character.

The physical aspect of our
interpretation was not imposed or it would
have been an ill-fitting garment; rather it
was allowed to emerge from within in
order to achieve a synthesis of both the
physical and psychological parts. GR

Editor’s Note: All page reference
to Soyinka Wole, The Road, London,
Oxford University press, 1965. The
play was recently produced in
Ibadan, directed by Femi Osofisan,
with Fatoba playing the role of
'Professor.'