

EZEULU, A Nō Drama by Richard Taylor

(Based on *The Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe)

Waki: A Government Official
Waki Tsure: His Son
Shite: 1. A Village Elder
2. Ezeulu

(A stylised climbing-frame and pumpkin vine stand centre-stage and musicians are seated on folding stools upstage. Waki and Tsure enter, wearing richly coloured, damask agbadas and caps.)

Waki. The silent forests of the east *(Shidai)*
unnerve me.
They lead inexorably
towards an unfamiliar past.

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towards an unfamiliar past.

I am a government official on leave with my son, *(Nanori)*
visiting the scenes of my mother's youth.

The land is rich and fruitful, as *(Michi-yuki)*
wide and wild
as the images of her memory.

Tsure. The land is rich and fruitful, as
wide and wild
as the images of her memory.

Together. Giant trees and lush undergrowth
give way to farmland –
moist, fresh earth,
red walled compounds
with tall carved doors,
and deep-rooted pumpkin vines.

(They circle the stage.)

At the village centre,
the exposed roots of
the timeless ogbu tree,
seat of council
for generations of elders.
But, the sky is darkening
The stark and steady
lightning flickers.

from place to place.

Shite. The white man is the masked spirit of today. (Uta)
 People from other places control the great markets.
 We have no share in his offices.
 We have no share anywhere.
 We must leave off dancing and join in the race for the white man's money.
 Why should Ezeulu refuse the warrant?
 Why betray us?

With all their power and magic white men could not overrun us (Kuri)

Chorus. if we did not help them.
 The sacred yams went uneaten,
 Ezeulu refused to alter the ritual.
 Instead of harvest, famine stalked the land.

Shite. Customs can be changed when they work hardship on the people.

Chorus. Our fathers freed the children of widows from slavery.
 We no longer carve our faces like *ozo* doors.

Shite. Ezeulu would not relent. (Sashi)
 The harvest was still-born.
 His wrath was turned on the enemies of Ulu.
 Umuaro waited in shocked silence,
 expecting retribution;
 a hand stretched out against them.

Chorus. A puff-adder suffers every provocation before unlocking its seven fangs one by one. (Kuse)

(*Shite dances.*)

Obika, Ezeulu's son was suddenly struck dead.
 The flute and song of Umuaro which had supported the priest,

shaking the earth
 with a multitude of voices
 and the stamping of countless feet,
 died away altogether.
 Shaken and reeling
 Ezeulu retreated
 into the haughty splendour
 of a demented high priest.
 Old rituals and prayers
 often forced themselves out
 in eccentric spurts
 through the cracks in his mind.

Shite. I will not be anybody's
 Chief but Ulu's.

Chorus. O God, who protects and punishes,
 cleanse our household
 of all defilement
 spoken with my mouth,
 seen with my eyes,
 heard with my ears,
 stepped on with my foot,
 and the defilement of my children, my
 friends and kinsmen.
 Let it follow these leaves.

(Shite throws leaves to the ground.)

Shite. The man who brings home ant
 infested faggots *(Rongi)*

Chorus. cannot complain
 when he is visited by lizards.

Shite. He who uproots
 the pumpkin vine,

Chorus. destroys the homestead
 and leaves it deserted.

Shite. No man, however great,
 is greater than his people.

Chorus. No man ever wins judgement
 against his clan.

(The Shite exits and the climbing frame is removed from the stage. The Waki faces the audience.)

Waki. Liquid thunder rumbles, stark, *(Machi-utai)*
 sudden flashes of
 lightning follow.
 A man moves
 in the obscure darkness.

By the flickering light
 near the exposed roots
 of the ogbu tree,
 he recreates a ritual.
 It is an apparition,
 perhaps a vision,
 A figure
 out of former times.

(The Shite bursts on the scene, unmasked and in the vigour of his prime. He wears a rafia skirt and carries both a staff and a rattle. One half of his body is painted white and the other eye is similarly circled. He wears a leather headband with an eagle feather hanging from one side.)

Shite. The whole people assembled
 and chose me
 to carry their god.
 Who was I to carry
 fire on my bare head?

He who sends a child
 to catch a shrew
 will also give him water
 to wash his hands.

The *ogene* sounds again,
 the king of drums salutes me. (*Waka*)

(He dances.)

Chorus. He re-enacts
 the First Coming of Ulu
 and the obstacles
 in his way.
 The first day, Eke –
 strong men bite the earth.
 The second, Oye –
 who cooks before another
 and has more broken pots.
 The third, Afo –
 the great river
 that cannot be salted.
 The fourth, Nkwo,
 was overcome,
 not appeased,
 by Ezeulu –
 the hunchback,
 more terrible than a leper.

He breaks into a run, the (*Kiri*)
 women set up long, excited
 ululations,
 waving bunches of leaves
 round their heads,

flinging them after him.
Completing his circle,
He disappears into the shrine,
triumphant
over the sins of Umuaro,
burying them
deep in the earth.
The villagers too,
have run their circle.
The leaves, so green,
so lucent with life,
are crushed
and trodden into earth.

Crushed and trodden
into earth.