

EZEULU: A NŌ PLAY

(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.

The rushing wind shakes its
flame.

The rushing wind shakes its
flame.

(Waki advances downstage.)

Waki. How can this be – broken walls, fallen roofs,
 the scattered ashes of long dead fires?

(Tsuki-zerifu)

(The Shite enters, wearing a yellow loincloth under a white, homespun 'toga' and a mask. On his head is a red ozo cap girdled with a leather band from which an eagle feather points slightly down. He picks a bunch of fresh pumpkin leaves from the vine on passing.)

Shite. I am a son of the soil,
 a man of Umuaro,
 whose greatness guttered
in the days of Ezeulu –
 we were divided and confused.
We were like the puppy
 who attempts to answer
two calls at once
 and breaks its jaw.

(Issei)

Ezeulu was a proud man.
 The most stubborn of men
was merely his messenger.
 Had he inherited
his mother's madness?
 He expected everyone –
wives, kinsmen, and friends –
 to think and act like himself.
Anyone who denied his will
 was an enemy.
But, he feared
 the wrath of his god.

(Sashi)

Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu; tall
 as an iroko tree white,
 like the sun.
One half of him, man; the
 other, spirit.

(Uta)

Like his fathers before him,
 he carried the chief god,
Ulu, more powerful than
 Idemili or Ogwugwu.
At first he feared,
 but the people sang support; the
flute man
 turned his head;

the god possessed him.
 Transformed into spirit,
 he stepped forward,
 compelling even the four
 days in the sky
 to give way to him.

Compelling the four days
 to give way to him.

Waki. My father, what are you saying?
 Why speak with such passion?
 When roof and walls fall in,
 the ceiling is not left standing. *(Mondo)*

Shite. Who was Ezeulu to tell the god
 how to fight against Idemili?
 He was no more than an arrow in
 the bow of his god.

Waki. I have heard of Ezeulu,
 who refused the white man's warrant, who
 spat out the morsel
 fortune placed in his mouth.

Shite. Because of that proud rejection
 Ezeulu was imprisoned.
 Two new moons came and went,
 The sacred yams were not consumed.

Waki. The six villages
 were locked in the old year.
 Under the earth the yams ripened
 to be devoured by sun and wind.

(A chorus of six or eight men enters, wearing deep-coloured 'togas' and carrying goatskins on which they seat themselves, stage-left.)

Shite. Ezeulu was confirmed
 in his own conceit;
 some of the others
 turned to a newer faith.

(The Waki and Tsure seat themselves on the ground, down-stage right.)

Chorus. 'Go, my son,
 be my eyes and ears
 among the white men.
 Master their knowledge until
 you can write it
 with your left hand.
 If there is something in it,
 bring back my share.'
 The world is a masquerade;
 to see it well
 you must move *(Sashi)*

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?

(Issei)

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
 women set up long, excited
 ululations,
 waving bunches of leaves
 round their heads,

(Kiri)

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.