

Staging Civic Resistance: Protest, Performance, and Political Intervention in Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* occupies a central place within Nigerian protest theatre, mobilizing narrative, performance, and audience engagement to critique governance, social injustice, and civic apathy. While existing scholarship has predominantly approached the play through ideological, linguistic, and textual analysis, this study advances a performative reorientation by examining how Rotimi's staging strategies including chorus, ritualized enactment, multilingual performance, and direct audience address function as mechanisms of civic resistance and political intervention. The study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: performance studies and civic resistance theory, which together conceptualize theatre as an embodied, participatory practice capable of shaping political consciousness. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines close textual analysis with performance-oriented interpretation of dramaturgical structures, the study analyses how staging techniques generate civic meaning and audience engagement. The findings demonstrate that performance itself, rather than textual narrative alone, enacts civic resistance by transforming the theatrical space into a site of collective reflection and political critique. The study therefore highlights theatre's capacity as a material, participatory, and politically consequential form of cultural intervention in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Civic Resistance, Protest Theatre, Performance Studies, Ola Rotimi, Nigerian Drama, Political Intervention

INTRODUCTION

Theatre has long functioned as a critical site for political engagement, social critique, and the articulation of civic consciousness, particularly within postcolonial societies where conventional avenues for political dissent may be constrained or surveilled (Balme, 2017; Wa & Amkpa, 2004; Mishra, R. 2025). Across global traditions of politically engaged performance from Brechtian epic theatre to Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed scholars have demonstrated that theatre does not merely represent political realities but actively participates in their production, negotiation, and contestation (Demirdis, 2021; Al-Azraki, 2012; Anderson, 2020). Within this broader genealogy of protest and activist performance, African theatre has occupied a distinctive position, mobilising indigenous aesthetic forms, ritual practices, and collective modes of spectatorship to stage resistance, articulate social critique, and cultivate public political consciousness.

In Nigeria, Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* stands as a paradigmatic example of protest theatre, foregrounding issues of governance, marginalization, and collective responsibility. Existing scholarship has productively examined the play through ideological, Marxist, linguistic, and textual lenses, emphasizing its critique of class relations, social injustice, and political repression (Apalowo & Poetri, 2024; Oguntoyinbo & Ogungbesan, 2025; Bakare, 2022). While these studies have firmly established the play's significance within Nigerian and African dramatic traditions, they have largely approached *Hopes of the Living Dead* as a textual artefact a narrative of resistance rather than as a performative event in which resistance is enacted through staging, embodiment, and audience interaction.

Nigerian theatre has historically functioned as an important platform for socio-political commentary and public engagement. During periods of colonial administration and post-independence political instability, playwrights frequently employed dramatic performance to critique authority, question governance, and stimulate civic awareness. Within this context, protest theatre emerged as a vital cultural practice through which playwrights such as Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, and Femi Osofisan articulated public concerns about power, injustice, and collective responsibility. Situating *Hopes of the Living Dead* within this broader socio-political landscape highlights the play's relevance as both artistic expression and civic intervention.

This article advances a performative reorientation of Rotimi's play by arguing that *Hopes of the Living Dead* operates not only as a representation of protest but as a performative site of civic resistance. Drawing on performance studies and civic resistance theory, the study demonstrates how Rotimi's dramaturgical strategies including chorus, ritualized enactment, multilingual performance, and direct audience address transform the theatrical space into an arena of political intervention. In this framing, performance itself becomes a mode of civic action, mobilizing spectators not merely as viewers but as participants in a shared process of political reflection and ethical accountability.

By foregrounding the performative mechanisms through which civic resistance is staged and embodied, this article contributes to international debates on politically engaged theatre, protest performance, and cultural resistance. It positions Rotimi's work within global conversations on activist dramaturgy while also highlighting the distinctive ways in which African performance traditions articulate civic agency, collective memory, and participatory political consciousness. In doing so, the study extends existing scholarship beyond textual interpretation and reclaims theatre as a material, embodied practice of civic intervention in postcolonial contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POSITIONING THE STUDY

Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is widely recognized within Nigerian protest theatre for its political and social relevance, reflecting broader national struggles with governance, inequality, and civic responsibility. Existing scholarship has consistently emphasized the play's ideological and textual significance, highlighting its role in educating audiences about social injustice and political accountability. Apalowo and Poetri (2024), for example, interpret the play as a form of protest theatre that heightens public awareness of class inequalities and systemic oppression, underscoring its capacity to sensitize audiences to their rights and civic responsibilities. From a Marxist perspective, the play has also been read as a vehicle for revolutionary consciousness, illustrating how Rotimi deploys dramatic narrative to foster political awareness and agitation for social transformation (Apalowo & Poetri, 2024).

While these analyses provide important insights into the ideological orientation of the play, they remain largely textual and theoretical, focusing on what the play represents rather than how it performs protest. That is, *Hopes of the Living Dead* is frequently treated as a narrative of resistance rather than as a staged event in which resistance is enacted through embodied practice, spatial organization, and audience engagement. As performance studies scholars have long argued, the political force of theatre resides not only in narrative content but also in its performative modalities including rhythm, gesture, spatial dynamics, and modes of spectatorship (Sengupta, 2022; Allain & Harvie, 2024).

Other strands of scholarship have examined the linguistic and social strategies employed in the play. Oguntoyinbo and Ogungbesan (2025), for instance, analyze impoliteness strategies in the dialogue, demonstrating how language is used to critique social hierarchies, marginalization, and ableist attitudes. Similarly, studies of Rotimi's dramaturgy have highlighted his multilingual approach, showing how the integration of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages enhances accessibility, fosters audience inclusivity, and constructs political identity within the theatrical space (Bakare, 2022). While these contributions deepen understanding of the play's linguistic and cultural dimensions, they largely stop short of theorizing performance itself as a mechanism of civic intervention.

Broader research on Nigerian and Yoruba theatre further supports the political potential of performance, illustrating how dramaturgy can foster social critique and civic reflection (Shittu, 2021). However, these studies

do not specifically isolate Hopes of the Living Dead as a case in which performance strategies such as chorus, ritualized enactment, and audience address function as central techniques for staging civic resistance.

This study addresses this critical gap by foregrounding how Rotimi's staging techniques, embodied interactions, collective performative strategies, and direct engagement with the audience transform Hopes of the Living Dead from a text of ideological critique into a performative site of political intervention. By analyzing these strategies, the study demonstrates how the play not only represents social and political struggle but enacts civic resistance, positioning theatre itself as an instrument of awareness, participation, and potential social transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates performance studies and civic resistance theory to provide a comprehensive analytical framework. Performance studies scholars emphasize the embodied, temporal, and spatial dimensions of theatre, arguing that performance is not reducible to text but constitutes an active, participatory event capable of shaping audience perception and social consciousness (Schechner, 2017; Allain, 2024). From this perspective, theatre is conceptualized as a site of intervention, where staging, embodiment, and audience engagement function as mechanisms through which meaning is produced and political subjectivities are negotiated.

Civic resistance theory situates cultural and artistic practices as forms of political action, highlighting how symbolic, ritualistic, and participatory modes of engagement can contest oppressive structures and articulate counter-hegemonic narratives (Moralli et al., 2021; Lawan & Abubakar, 2018; Sanudo & Hernandez, 2024). Applying this framework to Rotimi's drama foregrounds how performance strategies including chorus, ritual enactment, and direct audience address operate as practices of civic resistance, transforming theatre into an arena for political dialogue and ethical contestation.

By combining these lenses, the study examines both the aesthetic mechanisms of Rotimi's performance and their political implications, demonstrating that Hopes of the Living Dead enacts civic resistance through embodied, performative practice rather than through textual representation alone.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, performance-oriented analytical approach that integrates close textual analysis, dramaturgical interpretation, and thematic analysis. Rather than treating Hopes of the Living Dead solely as a literary text, the analysis approaches the play as a performative construct, paying attention to how meaning emerges through staging potential, dialogue patterns, and performative cues embedded within the script.

First, close textual analysis is used to identify key dramaturgical structures including chorus sequences, ritualized performance elements, multilingual dialogue, and moments of direct audience address. Particular attention is given to stage directions, patterns of dialogue, and collective speech structures that suggest performative dynamics such as rhythm, movement, and spatial interaction.

Second, performance-oriented analysis is applied to interpret how these dramaturgical features function when translated into staged performance. Drawing on frameworks in performance studies (Schechner, 2017; Allain & Harvie, 2024), the analysis considers how elements such as choral speech, ritual gesture, and spatial arrangement shape audience perception and participation. Rather than examining specific historical productions, the study focuses on the performative possibilities embedded within the dramatic text.

Third, thematic analysis is used to examine how these performative strategies communicate broader themes of civic resistance, collective responsibility, and political accountability. Interpretations are guided by identifiable dramaturgical patterns including repetition, symbolic action, and audience address, which serve as analytical criteria for linking theatrical form with civic meaning.

Finally, the analysis is informed by civic resistance theory (Moralli et al., 2021), which conceptualizes artistic and cultural practices as symbolic forms of political engagement. This theoretical perspective enables the study

to interpret theatrical performance as a civic practice through which political critique, ethical reflection, and collective awareness are staged and enacted.

DISCUSSION

Chorus as Civic Conscience

The chorus in *Hopes of the Living Dead* functions as a collective civic voice, articulating societal norms, ethical concerns, and the consequences of political corruption. Rather than serving as a passive narrative device, the chorus directly addresses both characters and spectators, encouraging reflection on civic responsibility and moral accountability. This strategy exemplifies what Serafini, (2018); Stuart, (2023) describes as aesthetic responsiveness, in which audiences are invited to engage emotionally and intellectually with socio-political issues. The chorus thus operates as a performative embodiment of collective conscience, transforming theatrical narration into a mode of civic address.

Ritualized Conflict Enactment

Rotimi integrates ritualized forms including song, dance, and symbolic gesture to dramatize political struggle and communal resistance. These ritual practices foreground collective action and shared ethical frameworks, reinforcing the play's insistence that resistance is not merely individual but fundamentally social. By staging civic resistance through ritualized performance, the play situates protest within both cultural and political registers, linking indigenous performance traditions to contemporary struggles for justice and accountability.

Audience Address and Participatory Spectatorship

The play frequently disrupts conventional theatrical distance by breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging spectators in political discourse. Characters pose rhetorical questions, articulate moral challenges, and draw attention to societal failures, thereby transforming viewers from passive observers into participants in civic critique. This strategy aligns with (Walmsley, 2019) conception of resistance as both symbolic and participatory, illustrating how theatre can mobilise audiences to recognize, interrogate, and potentially contest systemic injustice.

Multilingualism and Civic Inclusivity

Rotimi's use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages reinforces accessibility while simultaneously exposing the sociopolitical hierarchies embedded in linguistic practice. By blending linguistic registers, the play ensures that its civic message reaches diverse audiences, fostering inclusivity and shared engagement in political discourse. Multilingual performance thus operates not only as a stylistic choice but as a political strategy that broadens participation and disrupts linguistic hierarchies within the theatrical space.

Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that *Hopes of the Living Dead* exceeds textual representation, operating as an embodied practice of civic resistance in which performance itself becomes a mode of political intervention. Through staging, ritual, language, and audience interaction, the play enacts resistance and stimulates social consciousness, positioning theatre as a material site of civic action.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that *Hopes of the Living Dead* functions not merely as a narrative of protest but as a performative site of civic resistance. By foregrounding Rotimi's use of chorus, ritualised enactment, multilingual performance, and direct audience address, the analysis demonstrates how performance itself becomes a mechanism of political intervention. In this framing, theatre is reclaimed as a material, embodied practice through which civic consciousness is cultivated and political agency is enacted.

By situating Rotimi's work within both African performance traditions and global debates on politically engaged theatre, the study extends existing scholarship beyond textual interpretation and highlights the distinctive

contribution of African dramaturgy to theories of protest performance and cultural resistance. The findings underscore the continued relevance of theatre as a site of civic engagement and ethical accountability in postcolonial contexts, affirming performance as a powerful medium for staging, embodying, and enacting political intervention.

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