

Collaborative Design Practices in Nigerian Faith-Based and Academic Productions: Perspectives from Stage and Screen

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Abstract

Design in theatre and film flourishes through collaboration among creative professionals rather than in isolation. Positioned between vision and execution, designers partner with directors, writers, and actors to transform narrative ideas into visual and spatial forms. Despite growing scholarship on collaborative creativity, limited attention has been given to how designers operate within Nigerian faith-based and academic production contexts, particularly under resource constraints and culturally specific frameworks. This study, therefore, investigates the nature, dynamics, and implications of collaborative design practices within these contexts. The study examines how such teamwork shapes production outcomes within the Nigerian context, focusing on faith-based and academic stage productions. Case studies include Àbèjoyè by Mount Zion Film Productions, Zion Royal Theatre's Night of the Slumbers, and a student-directed staging of Death and the King's Horseman. Drawing on interviews with designers, directors, and actors, the research highlights the role of shared vision, iterative feedback, and script analysis in developing scenography, costumes, lighting, and sound design. The analysis is framed by Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Semiotics, which position designers as interpretive co-authors rather than technical contributors. Findings reveal that collaboration enhances narrative clarity, supports actor performance, and fosters cultural and spiritual expression, even in resource-limited contexts. Challenges such as time constraints, budgetary pressures, and interpretive differences were also identified, yet these often prompted adaptive creativity and strengthened teamwork. The study contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding culturally situated and practice-based insights into collaborative design, thereby extending dominant Euro-American models of performance collaboration. The study demonstrates that purposeful collaboration in design produces cohesive and engaging performances that combine aesthetic quality with cultural and spiritual resonance.

Keywords: Theatre Design, Collaborative Practice, Nigerian Film, Faith-Based Productions, Visual Storytelling.

Introduction

Design and conceptualisation are foundational to the success of any theatrical or cinematic production. They constitute both imaginative and technical processes through which narrative, theme, spatiality, and character are interpreted and rendered visible. In the context of film and stage, design extends far beyond mere ornamentation or aesthetic enhancement; it functions as a core storytelling instrument that brings coherence to the visual narrative, reinforces mood, and contributes significantly to audience interpretation

and engagement (Heidari-Shahreza, 2025, p. 15; Malloy, 2022, p. 182). The visual choices made through costume, lighting, set design, and sound not only complement performance but also embed subtext, symbolism, and temporal-spatial cues into the artistic experience. Design as a creative discipline does not exist in isolation. It evolves through a dynamic, iterative collaboration among various artists, including directors, screenwriters, dramaturgs, choreographers, composers, and actors. The success of a production's visual language relies on how well the designer's vision aligns with and is integrated into the broader interpretative aims of the team. This dialogic process fosters a shared understanding of the production's aesthetic and ideological goals. As Wibawa (2024, p. 5) observes, collaboration in performance allows for a unified artistic language by merging diverse creative perspectives. The partnership between designers and other creatives is not merely transactional or hierarchical but often involves negotiation, experimentation, and mutual respect. While directors may set the vision, it is through dialogues with designers that this vision develops spatial, chromatic, and symbolic richness. Actors also influence design by responding kinesthetically and emotionally to environments, costumes, and lighting, leading to iterative adjustments. This ongoing exchange often prompts re-evaluation of initial ideas, encouraging innovation and collective ownership of artistic choices (Proietti & Gepshtein, 2025, p. 10).

Furthermore, technological advancements and interdisciplinary approaches have broadened the scope of collaborative design. The integration of digital tools such as 3D modelling, virtual reality, and projection mapping requires close interaction between traditional designers and digital technicians or media artists. In such contexts, collaboration becomes a strategic and structural element of the production process rather than an incidental or secondary matter. As Nørgård and Holflod (2024, p. 119) argue, contemporary creative production increasingly demands convergence between distinct artistic disciplines, and the boundaries between roles are often fluid, necessitating flexible and open-ended approaches to collaboration. In the contexts of Africa and the Global South, especially in resource-limited environments, collaboration between designers and other creatives also holds socio-cultural and economic importance. Designers are often required to be adaptable, innovative, and responsive to local contexts, working closely with artisans, community members, or faith-based groups. The negotiation of cultural codes, symbolism, and material constraints frequently influences the aesthetic outcomes of such projects (Dagalp & Hartmann, 2021, p. 7). This emphasises the importance of understanding collaboration not merely as a technical or artistic necessity, but as a culturally rooted and contextually nuanced process.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, there remains a limited number of empirical studies that specifically examine how collaborative design practices are enacted within Nigerian faith-based and academic production contexts. Existing literature has largely concentrated on Euro-American production models or high-budget environments, often overlooking culturally embedded, resource-constrained, and spiritually oriented performance spaces where collaborative dynamics may operate differently. This gap

creates a need for context-specific investigation into how designers negotiate creative authority, interpret narrative meaning, and contribute to performance outcomes within these underrepresented settings.

Overall, the collaborative process in design highlights the interdependence of creative disciplines in performance-making. It challenges the idea of isolated artistic authorship and instead promotes the value of collective creativity, dialogue, and co-authorship in creating meaningful and emotionally resonant performance experiences. In response to the identified gap, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

- 1) to examine the nature and dynamics of collaboration between designers and other creative personnel in Nigerian faith-based and academic productions;
- 2) to analyse how collaborative processes influence design outcomes and narrative expression in both stage and film contexts;
- 3) to identify the challenges associated with collaborative design practices within resource-limited and culturally specific environments; and
- 4) to evaluate the contributions of collaborative design to audience engagement, cultural representation, and spiritual communication.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide a contextually grounded and practice-based contribution to existing scholarship on collaborative creativity in performance design.

Literature Review

Collaboration in creative production has garnered considerable scholarly attention, particularly in performance studies, where the emphasis has shifted from isolated authorship to collective artistry. In both theatre and film, designers play a central role in shaping the visual and sensory language of a production. They interpret the narrative and thematic elements of a script or directorial vision into physical, spatial, and auditory experiences. This translation combines technical precision with creative intuition, making designers indispensable to the artistic cohesion of a performance (González Cid, 2022, p. 150; von Rosen, 2021, p. 67).

Designers are usually classified according to their areas of specialisation, and each discipline contributes distinctively to a production. Scenic or set designers establish the spatial context in which action unfolds, creating environments that shape both tone and actor movement. Costume designers, as Olajide and Osazuwa (2023, p. 120) note, communicate characterisation, historical period, and socio-economic identity through apparel, while often negotiating functionality and authenticity with performers. Lighting designers manipulate shadow, colour, and focus to enhance mood, tension, and symbolism. As Badeji (2022, p. 30) argues, lighting operates not merely as visual enhancement but as a communicative tool that facilitates meaning-making, particularly in multimodal productions that integrate music, dance, and acting. Sound designers construct the auditory landscape of a production, shaping narrative rhythm and emotional tone through effects, ambient sound, and music. In cinematic contexts, the production designer oversees

these contributions to ensure aesthetic coherence across diverse scenes and settings (Malloy, 2022, p. 320).

These specialisations converge through a three-phase design process: conceptualisation, development, and execution. During conceptualisation, designers analyse scripts or screenplays and begin shaping a creative vision, often employing mood boards, preliminary sketches, or visual references (Ruiz-Arellano et al., 2022, p. 14). This stage is enriched by collaborative discussions with directors and dramaturgs concerning tone, genre, setting, and symbolism. The development stage refines initial ideas into technical plans such as scaled models, lighting plots, costume renderings, and sound cue lists. At this point collaboration becomes more intensive, as designers work closely with technical teams and artisans to align creative concepts with production logistics. The final execution stage takes place during rehearsals or filming, where designs are actualised and frequently adapted in response to practical realities or directorial feedback. In his analysis of *Queen Moremi the Musical*, Badeji (2022, p. 31) demonstrates how scenographic technologies such as technoscenery and intelligent lighting functioned as communicative modifiers, enriching performance meaning in ways that physical action alone could not achieve.

Scholars such as Vignati et al. (2022) and De Back et al. (2021) reinforce the notion that effective design arises from interdependent collaboration. Designers do not work in isolation but engage in constant dialogue with other creatives, ensuring that visual, spatial, and sonic elements are synchronised with narrative intentions. This collaboration often involves negotiation, mutual critique, and iterative experimentation. Stafler (2020, p. 120) extends this by suggesting that scenography constitutes a form of visual dramaturgy, capable of conveying thematic and emotional subtext.

In film, collaboration is often shaped by hierarchical and industrial structures, yet the necessity for visual coherence requires sustained interaction among creative personnel. Fagbure (2016, p. 118) emphasise the importance of alignment between production designers, art directors, cinematographers, and directors to establish a unified visual language. However, Dinur (2023, p. 99) cautions that the compartmentalised nature of film production can obscure the collaborative contributions of designers, attributing aesthetic coherence solely to directorial vision.

The literature also identifies key enablers and barriers to collaboration. Flood et al. (2021, p. 640) highlights trust, mutual respect, and interdisciplinary openness as prerequisites for successful collaboration. Conversely, communication breakdowns and rigid hierarchies can marginalise certain roles, diminishing creative potential. The shift towards technologically mediated performance further complicates traditional collaborative structures. Del Favero et al. (2021, p. 86) argue that digital scenography and interactive media require new forms of collaboration between designers and digital specialists. These developments demand fluidity in roles and call for new literacies in technological co-authorship.

Notably, there is an increasing call for greater attention to culturally situated practices of collaboration. Okafor (2020) examines how African theatre designers often work under resource constraints, drawing on local aesthetics, materials, and symbolic codes. Such

conditions demand adaptability and deepen the collaborative nature of production by involving community members, artisans, and faith-based contributors.

Ojo and Olatunji's (2023, p. 79) study of Nigerian faith-based productions supports this perspective, showing how scenographic technologies aid in expressing spiritual and cultural messages that dialogue or gesture alone cannot fully convey. In these contexts, a character's visual transformation may mirror their spiritual journey, with costume, lighting, and sound reinforcing the arc of redemption or transformation.

Despite the growing body of literature on collaborative practices in performance production, significant gaps remain. Much existing scholarship is still grounded in Euro-American paradigms, with relatively little attention to indigenous, African, or non-Western contexts where collaborative dynamics may follow culturally distinct logics. Moreover, there is a paucity of empirical research that captures the lived experiences of designers within rehearsal spaces or production environments. Many studies focus on theoretical models or high-budget productions, thereby neglecting the adaptive strategies employed in informal creative economies, particularly those shaped by religious, communal, or culturally embedded imperatives.

As Ojo and Olatunji (2023, p. 80) argue, designers working within African and faith-based performance traditions often contend with limited resources, improvisational aesthetics, and non-hierarchical modes of collaboration that require both technical ingenuity and cultural fluency. However, these practices remain under-theorised.

This study therefore contributes to the literature by foregrounding the perspectives of designers operating in Nigerian stage and film contexts, especially those involved in faith-driven or pedagogically anchored productions. It examines how collaborative design unfolds in practice, how designers negotiate creative authority within complex cultural frameworks, and how visual storytelling functions as both a narrative and spiritual vehicle in performance environments characterised by hybridity, constraint, and conviction.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in case study analysis approaches. The aim is to provide an in-depth exploration of collaborative dynamics between designers and other creatives in selected stage and film productions, particularly within Nigerian faith-based contexts. Qualitative methods are especially suited to this investigation due to their emphasis on meaning-making, interpretive nuance, and contextual specificity (Lim, 2025, p. 200). By drawing on real-world cases, the research illuminates the intricacies of collaborative design practice as it unfolds in situ, shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional cultures, and artistic objectives.

The primary data sources for this study include documented case studies, performance reviews, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners such as designers, directors, and actors. The selected productions *Àbèjoyè* (Mount Zion Film Productions), *Night of the Slumbers* (Zion Royal Theatre), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (Redeemer's University in Collaboration with Mount Zion Institute of Christian Drama), were chosen for their strong

emphasis on visual storytelling and their reputations for excellence in collaborative production processes. These productions also span a range of performance modalities (stage and screen) and offer varied thematic content, from spiritual transformation to postcolonial resistance. This breadth enhances the comparative value of the findings.

Data were collected through interviews with key creative personnel directly involved in the selected productions. These interviews were conducted via phone and in person, and allowed for reflection on design concepts, collaborative dynamics, production challenges, and creative problem-solving strategies. The use of semi-structured interview protocols ensured a consistent thematic focus across conversations while allowing flexibility for practitioners to expand on context-specific experiences and insights. In addition, performance artefacts such as design renderings, rehearsal photographs, and recorded performances were analysed to triangulate perspectives and validate interpretations.

Secondary sources, including academic literature on scenography, performance theory, and collaborative practice, were consulted to situate the findings within broader disciplinary conversations. Particular attention was given to scholarship on Nigerian theatre and Christian film, as these provide culturally specific insights that inform the practices under review.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Semiotics, two frameworks that together illuminate both the relational and representational dimensions of design collaboration in stage and film.

Collaborative Creativity Theory, developed by John-Steiner (2000) and later applied in theatre by Sawyer (2003), emphasises that artistic innovation emerges from co-constructed processes rather than solitary genius. Five key features of the theory guide this analysis.

1. Shared ideation: Creativity arises from collective brainstorming and dialogue, which is evident in how designers, directors, and writers co-develop concepts.
2. Dialogic interaction: Collaboration is not linear but iterative, with feedback loops that refine designs through rehearsals and script analysis.
3. Distributed authorship: Creative ownership is shared across participants, which aligns with the study's focus on designers as co-authors of meaning rather than mere technical contributors.

Complementing this is Performance Semiotics, particularly Keir Elam's (2002) articulation of theatre as a system of signs. This framework highlights how design elements themselves function as texts within performance. Two features are especially relevant here.

1. Multiplicity of sign systems: Costume, lighting, sound, and spatial arrangement communicate meaning independently of dialogue, allowing for layered interpretation of themes such as redemption or conflict.
2. Audience interpretation: The semiotic approach underscores how visual and spatial choices shape perception, guiding how audiences decode emotional and cultural messages.

The intersection of these frameworks provides a dual lens: Collaborative Creativity Theory foregrounds process (the social dynamics of making), while Performance Semiotics foregrounds product (the symbolic and aesthetic outcomes). Together, they support an evaluative approach that situates designers not merely as technical artisans but as interpretive co-authors in the construction of meaning.

Discussions

Dynamics of Collaboration with Directors

At the heart of every successful theatre or film production is a strong partnership between the director and the designer. While the director is typically seen as the creative lead who articulates the overarching vision of the piece, it is the designer who translates that vision into tangible forms through visual, spatial, and atmospheric elements. The synergy between these two roles is critical, as it shapes not only the aesthetic coherence of the production, but also its emotional and thematic impact on the audience.

From the perspective of Collaborative Creativity Theory, this dynamic reflects three central features: shared ideation, dialogic interaction, and distributed authorship. Shared ideation occurs when the director and designer pool creative insights in the pre-production phase, while dialogic interaction is sustained through iterative conversations that refine ideas, and distributed authorship emerges as responsibility for meaning-making is shared across collaborators.

The collaborative process between directors and designers usually begins in the pre-production phase, where both parties engage in extensive conversations about the script, the characters, the mood, and the intended audience response. These discussions often include a careful reading of the text, the sharing of visual references, historical research, and brainstorming sessions. As scenic designer Bamise Akinpelu puts it in an interview, "A good director doesn't impose; he inspires. What we create must arise out of shared vision, not just instructions" (Personal interview, 2025). This statement exemplifies the principle of dialogic interaction, where vision emerges from mutual dialogue rather than unilateral instruction.

In theatre, this collaborative approach is highly evident in the partnership between Director Festus Dairo and scenic designer Bamise Akinpelu for Zion Royal Theatre's acclaimed stage production *Night of the Slumbers*. Akinpelu recalls that their design meetings were characterised by mutual respect and open dialogue. "Director Festus had a very specific spiritual mood he wanted the audience to feel, and not just see. My role was to interpret that mood through space and texture. We explored earth tones, wooden structures, and layered platforms to give the altar both height and spiritual symbolism" (Personal interview, 2025). Here, the theory's emphasis on shared ideation is evident, as mood and texture were not dictated but jointly explored.

During the early design phase, designers often present design pitches, including concept boards, renderings, or 3D models, to communicate how their ideas align with the director's vision. These pitches are rarely final; they form the basis for iterative feedback loops where

the design is revised and refined. In the theatre context, these changes may arise due to blocking adjustments, thematic shifts, or even cast interpretation. As Akinpelu notes, "What looked good on paper had to evolve once rehearsals began. Director Festus and I constantly revisited the design, ensuring it enhanced, rather than limited, the actors' movements". This iterative process illustrates distributed authorship, where neither the director nor the designer holds absolute control, but both adjust to serve the production's needs.

In film, collaboration between director and designer requires a more technical and logistically intricate relationship, given the added layers of camera movement, framing, and location management. An illustrative example is the partnership between Mike Bamiloye, the director of the *Àbèjoyè* film series of Mount Zion Film Productions, and Babatola Johnson, the production designer responsible for the set and environment.

According to Babatola, the collaboration was deeply rooted in shared spiritual purpose as well as artistic vision. "Daddy Mike didn't just give me a script, but he shared the burden of the message," Babatola remarked in an interview. "He described *Àbèjoyè*'s journey as one of spiritual exile and return. We decided that the sets must reflect cultural displacement through the clash between African tradition and Western culture. That's why we used two contrasting palettes: one for the Nigerian village scenes and another for the American sequences" (Personal interview, 2025). Performance Semiotics helps to illuminate this choice, as the contrasting palettes function as sign systems that visually symbolise displacement, exile, and return.

The design for *Àbèjoyè*'s American home was deliberately minimal and angular, echoing the protagonist's disconnection from his roots. In contrast, the Nigerian village scenes incorporated woven textures, red earth tones, and ancestral motifs to visually narrate the pull of tradition. According to Babatola, "Daddy Mike would sometimes walk through the set and pray. He saw the space not only as visual narrative but spiritual territory. That challenged me to design not only for the camera, but for impact" (Personal interview, 2025). This reflects the semiotic principle that design elements convey meaning independently of dialogue, shaping both performance and audience interpretation.

This level of collaboration also entails a willingness to compromise and adapt. Sometimes, budget constraints, location restrictions, or unforeseen technical issues can affect the original design plan. However, a collaborative director–designer relationship ensures that such challenges become opportunities for creative solutions. As Babatola adds, "We had planned a large traditional masquerade scene for *Àbèjoyè* III, but due to location limits, we had to imply grandeur through lighting, angles, and props. Daddy Mike was open to adjusting the script to suit the design reality. That's trust." Such adaptation underscores the resilience of collaborative creativity, where limitations foster innovative problem-solving rather than stifle artistic vision.

In both theatre and film, the director–designer dynamic is marked not by hierarchy, but by mutual dependence. The director relies on the designer to materialise abstract concepts, while the designer depends on the director to clarify vision and purpose. Their collaboration

shapes the atmosphere, the spatial logic, and the visual metaphors that guide the audience's experience. As these examples illustrate, when directors and designers collaborate effectively, the result is a production that is not only visually compelling but also emotionally and thematically resonant. Viewed through Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Semiotics, their partnership emerges not as a decorative function but as a co-narrative process in which shared ideation, dialogic interaction, distributed authorship, and semiotic richness collectively ensure that design becomes integral to storytelling.

Working with Writers and Script Analysis

The script is the foundational text from which all creative decisions emerge in both theatre and film. For designers, the process of engaging with the script goes beyond surface reading. It involves an in-depth exploration of the themes, historical period, genre, and symbolism embedded within the text. By interpreting these elements accurately, designers ensure that their visual contributions align with the story's core intentions and emotional trajectory.

The first step in the designer's process is often a careful script analysis. Designers examine the temporal and geographical setting, the socio-political background, and the psychological dimensions of the characters. This textual engagement informs everything from costume choices and scenic motifs to colour palettes and props. From the standpoint of Collaborative Creativity Theory, this phase reflects shared ideation, as designers and writers co-develop meanings from the text, and dialogic interaction, since interpretations are refined through discussion and negotiation. When writers are available for consultation, designers may collaborate with them directly to clarify ambiguities and align visual decisions with the writer's intended message. This level of collaboration is particularly important when dealing with culturally or historically loaded texts.

A practical example of such collaboration occurred during the first semester 2025 stage production of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, produced by 300 Level Theatre Arts students of Redeemer's University in collaboration with the Mount Zion Institute of Christian Drama. This production demanded a high level of historical and cultural sensitivity, especially in terms of costume design, which was handled by Dorcas Ajibade, a respected costume designer and instructor at the time.

In a phone interview, Ajibade explained that her work on the production was deeply rooted in script analysis. "I read the play several times not just to understand the characters but to feel their world. Soyinka's work is layered with Yoruba metaphysics and colonial tensions. The costumes needed to reflect both cultural dignity and historical conflict," she noted (Personal interview, 2025). Ajibade collaborated closely with the directing team and script supervisors, marking key passages that highlighted transitional moments in character development. "For Elesin, his costume had to evolve from a confident regalia at the start to a humbler, subdued attire as the story climaxed. That arc had to be seen, not just spoken," she explained. These visual transitions were informed by Soyinka's rich language and stage

directions, which called for bold representation of Yoruba royalty, contrasted with British colonial uniforms.

Script-based collaboration also extended to practical annotations and concept alignment meetings. Ajibade described how design meetings often turned into interpretive sessions: “We sat down with the director and dramaturg. Everyone brought their annotated scripts. If a character was described as ‘wearing red’, we had to ask, what kind of red? What does it symbolise in Yoruba cosmology? Is it power, blood, or sacrifice?” Here, Performance Semiotics is particularly relevant, since colours, costumes, and symbols are treated as sign systems that communicate meaning beyond dialogue, enabling design to carry narrative weight.

This level of intentionality exemplifies how designers contribute to narrative development, not merely by decorating scenes, but by visually interpreting and enriching the story’s deeper meanings. In theoretical terms, this demonstrates distributed authorship, as the writer’s text and the designer’s visual interpretation together generate meaning. Designers often bridge the gap between the abstract language of the script and the material language of the stage or screen. In the case of *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Ajibade’s work helped shape audience perception of the narrative’s tension between tradition and intrusion. The use of flowing, hand-dyed fabrics, natural fibres, and culturally appropriate adornments ensured that the production resonated with both aesthetic authenticity and symbolic depth.

Furthermore, such collaborations reinforce the script as a living document, not a static blueprint. As Ajibade insightfully remarked, “Designers sometimes see what writers did not see. We can magnify a theme or reveal a subtext through texture and silhouette. That is why our presence in the creative process must be early and intentional.” This resonates with Performance Semiotics, which highlights that visual and material elements—such as fabric, silhouette, or texture—can function as narrative signs, extending and sometimes even surpassing the expressive capacity of dialogue.

Therefore, collaboration with writers and script analysts enables designers to engage deeply with the subtextual and symbolic layers of a performance. It transforms the designer from a technical contributor into a co-narrator, whose choices influence audience interpretation and emotional resonance. Seen through Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Semiotics, this process demonstrates that script analysis is not only interpretive but also co-creative, ensuring that design choices function as integral sign systems that anchor both meaning and audience experience. Whether in historical dramas or contemporary faith-based plays, this kind of integrated collaboration is essential for compelling and contextually grounded design.

Interaction with Actors and Performance Needs

An essential yet often underappreciated aspect of design in theatre and film is its interaction with the actor’s body, voice, and movement. While designers create for visual impact and symbolic resonance, they must also ensure that their work supports the actor’s

performance needs, both functionally and aesthetically. A costume that is visually stunning but restricts movement, or a set that is artistically composed but spatially confining, can hinder dramatic expression and audience engagement. Collaborative Creativity Theory underscores this dynamic through the principle of dialogic interaction, since actors' embodied feedback directly shapes how costumes, props, and spaces are modified to serve performance.

Designers therefore collaborate closely with actors to ensure that the costumes, props, and stage environments allow for fluid performance, character embodiment, and physical safety. This process often begins with fittings, rehearsals, and feedback loops, where actors respond to how their movements and expressions are affected by the design elements. Performance Semiotics adds that these design elements such as fabric textures, prop materials, or spatial configurations—function as sign systems that shape how actors embody meaning, enabling audiences to read character development through visual and kinetic cues.

A compelling example of this design-actor synergy is evident in the faith-based theatre productions of Zion Royal Theatre, where costume and scenic design are tailored to enhance expressive movement, particularly in spiritual or symbolic scenes. In one of their productions, titled *Night of the Slumbers*, actors portraying demonic and angelic figures were required to move dynamically across the stage in choreographed sequences. The costume designer, aware of this demand, created flowing garments with lightweight, stretchable fabrics to ensure dramatic flare without hindrance. The design process was iterative, with actors testing costumes during rehearsals and providing feedback that led to subtle yet crucial alterations. This process highlights the theory's principle of distributed authorship, as actors contribute as co-creators of design effectiveness through embodied trial and adjustment.

This collaborative spirit was echoed in an interview with Kayode Babalola, one of the lead actors in *Àbèjoyè*, a popular Christian film by Mount Zion Film Productions. Babalola played the role of Ògánwó, a fierce youth leader whose character undergoes spiritual transformation. Reflecting on the role of design in supporting his performance, he stated, "My costume helped me enter Ògánwó's mind. In the first scenes, I wore rugged, layered fabrics that reflected his chaos and anger. But in the later scenes, after meeting Christ, I was dressed in simpler, cleaner lines. It wasn't just visual, it changed how I moved and spoke" (Personal interview, 2025). This illustrates Performance Semiotics at work: the costumes acted as visual signs of spiritual rebirth, shaping not only audience perception but also the actor's embodiment of transformation.

Babalola also spoke about the set design, noting how it influenced his performance style. "The scene where Ògánwó encounters Baba Àbèjoyè was shot in a humble living room. The simplicity of the space made me slow down, and sit deeper into the moment. It shaped my energy." These observations highlight how space, costume, and props serve as emotional and behavioural cues for the actor, shaping everything from posture and gesture to vocal tone. From a theoretical perspective, this interaction demonstrates how design choices

operate as semiotic triggers, guiding both actor expression and audience interpretation through embodied symbolism.

From a practical perspective, designers also take into account comfort and safety. For instance, actors may require reinforced shoes for long scenes, or breathable costumes for open-air productions. Designers frequently return to fittings or walk-throughs to adjust for unforeseen issues, ensuring that performance is never sacrificed for appearance. This dialogue between actor and designer is ongoing, and it plays a key role in refining the final presentation.

Thus, collaboration with actors ensures that design choices are not static or ornamental, but kinetic and responsive. The success of a production often lies in this delicate balance between form and function where the design not only looks appropriate but also feels right for the actor, enabling them to inhabit their roles with authenticity and ease. Through the lens of Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Semiotics, such interactions highlight how design is not merely supportive but co-creative, producing a fusion of form, function, and signification that strengthens performance authenticity and narrative depth.

Challenges in Collaborative Design

While collaboration in design is essential to successful theatre and film production, it is not without its challenges. The process of harmonising multiple creative visions often leads to disagreements, logistical constraints, and miscommunication, all of which must be navigated with sensitivity, patience, and adaptability. These challenges can hinder the design process and, if not properly managed, compromise the artistic and technical quality of a production.

One of the most common difficulties in collaborative design is the presence of creative disagreements. Directors, designers, writers, and actors may hold differing interpretations of a script, theme, or character arc. While such tension can stimulate innovation, it may also lead to delays or compromise. According to Bamise Akinpelu, scenic designer for Zion Royal Theatre, "There was a production where the director wanted an abstract set, but the writer insisted on cultural realism. We had to meet halfway using symbolic props in a realistic frame. It wasn't easy, but the tension pushed us to think more creatively" (Personal interview, 2025).

Negotiation of ideas becomes a delicate balancing act, where the designer must both assert their professional judgment and respect the collective vision. In some cases, the power dynamics in the production team may pressure the designer to abandon well-considered concepts, especially when timelines are tight or when the director's voice is overly dominant.

Budget constraints are another significant limitation, particularly in Nigerian Christian film productions, where many companies operate with limited financial support. In an interview, Babatola Johnson, production designer for Àbèjoyè, noted: "We had big ideas for some of the village scenes in Àbèjoyè, including extended compound builds and special props. But the budget just couldn't support it. So we used smart camera angles and lighting to create

a sense of scale. It wasn't what we imagined, but it worked" (Personal interview, 2025). Such constraints affect not only the set but also costumes, lighting equipment, and post-production enhancements. Designers are often required to improvise with available materials, borrow items, or reuse elements from previous productions. While this demands creativity and resourcefulness, it can limit the depth and authenticity of the visual design, especially when aiming to portray historically or culturally rich environments.

Timeline pressures are another common issue, especially in productions with limited rehearsal periods or accelerated filming schedules. In some cases, designers are brought into the process too late, leaving insufficient time for conceptualisation or experimentation. Dorcas Ajibade, costume designer for *Death and the King's Horseman*, reflected on this in her interview: "I joined the team late, and the first fitting was only days before opening night. That meant we had to rush through adjustments. I knew the work could have been finer with more time" (Personal interview, 2025).

Moreover, communication gaps can lead to inconsistent or fragmented design outcomes. In cross-disciplinary teams, assumptions and terminology differences may obscure understanding. The absence of structured communication such as regular design meetings or shared concept documents, can result in misaligned efforts. Despite these challenges, experienced designers learn to adapt, compromise, and problem-solve collaboratively. As Kayode Babalola wisely put it, "Even when things don't go as planned, a united team can find beauty in simplicity. It's not always about grandeur, but about coherence" (Personal interview, 2025). This perspective reinforces the idea that challenges, though inevitable, can be the catalyst for inventive and resilient design practice.

Benefits and Outcomes of Effective Collaboration

When designers and other creatives such as directors, writers, and actors collaborate effectively, the result is a production that is not only visually cohesive but also emotionally powerful and thematically rich. Effective collaboration transforms design from an isolated aesthetic task into an integral part of storytelling. It allows the visual elements of a production to speak in harmony with the narrative, enhancing both meaning and impact.

One of the most notable outcomes of such synergy is unified visual storytelling. When all design components such as costume, set, lighting, and sound, are coordinated with the director's vision and the writer's themes, the audience experiences a coherent world that supports the dramatic action. This unity prevents jarring inconsistencies and ensures that each creative decision contributes to the same narrative arc. According to Udris-Borodavko et al., (2023, p. 34), effective collaboration fosters what they term "a shared aesthetic language", where all creatives are aligned in purpose and expression.

Another significant benefit is enhanced emotional and thematic resonance. When designers understand and interpret the symbolic undercurrents of a script in dialogue with the director and writer, they are better positioned to craft design elements that evoke the intended emotional responses. For example, subtle shifts in colour palette, costume texture, or spatial arrangement can communicate character development, tension, or

transformation without the need for dialogue. This amplifies the script's subtext and supports the performance from a sensory perspective. Effective collaboration also results in stronger audience engagement and, in many cases, critical acclaim. Audiences may not always consciously analyse design, but they respond instinctively to its clarity, consistency, and impact. A well-designed production invites the viewer into its world, allowing them to suspend disbelief and engage deeply with the story being told.

A strong illustration of these benefits is found in the 2023 release of *Enoch: The Biopic of Pastor E.A. Adeboye*, a collaborative production between Mount Zion Film Productions and Solid Rock Foundation. The film's success was due in large part to its collaborative visual identity, which married costume, set design, makeup, and cinematography to reflect the spiritual, cultural, and historical journey of Pastor Adeboye. The production team worked together closely to ensure that every visual decision reflected the tone of each life stage, from his humble beginnings to his rise as a global spiritual leader.

Costumes in *Enoch* carefully matched each decade portrayed, with fabric choices, patterns, and tailoring styles that were historically accurate and regionally specific. Sets were designed to authentically reflect rural life, university culture, and urban church environments across different eras. Lighting was used expressively to distinguish moments of personal revelation from scenes of hardship or opposition. The production's unity in design and direction drew praise from critics and audiences alike, with many viewers noting how the visual language powerfully communicated the themes of calling, sacrifice, and divine guidance.

As reported in audience feedback, one viewer commented: "Even without the dialogue, you could feel his journey just by how the world around him changed." This observation underscores the power of collaborative design in storytelling. By working together with clarity and purpose, designers and their creative partners elevate the entire production, ensuring that the story is not only told but felt.

Conclusion

This study has examined the collaborative processes between designers and other creatives such as directors, writers, and actors in film and stage production, with a particular emphasis on Nigerian and faith-based contexts. It has demonstrated that effective design is not a solitary endeavour but a co-creative practice grounded in dialogue, mutual respect, and shared vision. From conceptualisation to execution, the designer's role is both interpretive and strategic, contributing not only to the aesthetic dimensions of performance but also to its thematic and emotional coherence. The case studies analysed reveal how collaborative design enhances narrative clarity, supports actor embodiment, and facilitates cultural and spiritual expression, especially in productions operating within resource-limited environments. While challenges such as budget constraints, time pressures, and hierarchical structures persist, they are often mitigated through adaptive creativity and relational trust.

The study affirms that designers are integral to the storytelling process, functioning as visual dramaturgs and cultural mediators. By centring their experiences, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of collaborative creativity in performance and calls for further exploration of design practices in underrepresented cultural settings.

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