

JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH (JESBER)

2026, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 196–208

Published by Faculty of Environmental Sciences, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Print ISSN: 3141-5547 | OPEN ACCESS



Review article

FROM STAGE TO STREET: A SEMIOTIC-DIRECTORIAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACTING AND CARNIVAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a semiotic-directorial framework that brings theatre directing, actor training and carnival performance into one coherent field of practice. It responds to a persistent divide in Nigerian performance scholarship: stage directing is often discussed as textual interpretation, acting as an independent technique and carnival as tourism or spectacle. An integrative critical review was undertaken across recent studies supported by selected foundational works in theatre semiotics, actor training, carnivalesque theory and African performance. The analysis was organised around dramaturgy, embodiment, sign systems, processional space, spectatorship and cultural accountability. The study proposes the Carnival-Semiotic Directing Framework, which positions the director as an orchestrator of embodied signs across stage and street. Its six domains are thematic encoding, actor-score construction, kinesemiotic movement, multisensory sign orchestration, processional audience relations and reflective cultural accountability. This study provides an important foundation for the model. The framework is further tested through the aesthetic logic of Carnival Calabar, where costume, colour, choreography, music, floats, routes and spectators jointly produce meaning. The article concludes that acting and carnival performance should not be treated as decorative additions to directorial interpretation. They are central dramaturgical systems through which Nigerian performance communicates identity, memory, conflict and collective aspiration. Practical implications are offered for rehearsal, actor training, carnival band management, theatre criticism and performance documentation.

KEYWORDS

Acting, carnival performance, directing, embodied signs, Nigerian theatre, performance aesthetics, semiotics, spectatorship.

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INTRODUCTION

A theatre director works with more than a script. The director arranges bodies, voices, distances, colours, objects, rhythms, silences and spectators into a temporary system of meaning. This proposition becomes even more important when performance leaves the enclosed auditorium and enters the carnival route. On the street, meaning is not delivered from a stable stage to a seated audience. It travels through moving bodies, competing soundscapes, monumental costumes, floats, branded surfaces, public architecture and spectators who continually alter the event. Directing in this environment requires a language broad enough to connect theatre direction, acting, semiotics and carnival performance.

These fields are frequently treated as separate specialisations. Directing is commonly framed as the interpretation and staging of dramatic literature. Acting is discussed through psychological, physical or vocal techniques. Semiotics is often confined to criticism after the performance has occurred. Carnival studies, meanwhile, may be dominated by questions of tourism, economic impact, cultural identity or event management. Each approach produces useful knowledge, but the separation obscures how performance is actually made. A carnival band requires thematic interpretation, casting, actor-performer training, choreographic precision, visual composition, spatial planning and audience management. Likewise, a stage production frequently depends on carnivalesque energy, processional movement, collective embodiment and an expanded field of signs.

Effiom's scholarship offers a productive point of departure. In her study of Ogonna Agu's *Dawn in the Academy*, Effiom (2020) argues that the director must structure and control the potentially excessive

signs carried by speech, costume, movement, music, sound and objects. Her comparison of Stanislavski and Brecht rejects rigid allegiance to a single directorial school and instead supports informed methodological selection (Effiom, 2021a). Her analysis of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* further demonstrates that performance can contest inherited historical narratives and re-authorise marginalised perspectives (Effiom, 2021b). Together, these works position the director as a maker of signs, an organiser of acting processes and an interpreter of cultural memory.

Carnival performance intensifies this responsibility because it is at once artistic, civic, touristic, commercial and political. Carnival Calabar, for example, uses competitive bands, dance, music, scenic structures, colour identities, costumes and thematic interpretation to transform the city into a performance environment. Recent studies describe the carnival as a major site of visual culture, street authenticity, community pride and tourism development (Balogun & Nkebem, 2021; Carlson & Micots, 2022; Udo, 2022). Yet a performance-centred account must go further. It must explain how a theme becomes an actor's gesture, how costume reorganises movement, how music regulates collective timing, how a route produces dramaturgy and how spectators complete or disrupt intended meanings (Eneyo & Archibong, 2024; Effiom, 2014; Obong et al., 2012).

This article therefore asks: How can theatre directing, acting, semiotics and carnival performance be integrated into a practical framework for contemporary Nigerian performance? It has four objectives. First, it clarifies the relationship among directing, acting and sign production. Second, it examines carnival as an expanded dramaturgical and spatial system rather than a decorative parade. Third, it proposes a Carnival-Semiotic Directing Framework that can guide rehearsal and production from stage to street. Finally, it identifies implications for actor training, carnival band practice, criticism, research and cultural policy.

The article does not claim that every Nigerian carnival or theatrical tradition operates in the same way. Nigeria's performance cultures differ in language, cosmology, history and social function. The framework is therefore not a national style or a fixed formula. It is a set of directorial responsibilities that can be adapted to the cultural specificity of a production. Its central argument is that performance gains coherence when the actor's body, the director's concept, the signifying environment and the spectator's experience are developed as one connected composition.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

THEATRE DIRECTING AS THE ORCHESTRATION OF SIGNS

Theatre semiotics begins from the understanding that performance communicates through interacting sign systems. Spoken language is only one mode among many. Gesture, posture, spatial distance, costume, light, sound, properties and architectural arrangement contribute to what an audience perceives and interprets. Elam's (2002) account of theatrical communication remains foundational because it identifies the stage as a dense field in which signs are produced simultaneously and transformed by context. More recent materialist approaches have strengthened this insight by relating theatrical meaning to labour, institutions, space and conditions of reception (Banerji, 2020).

For the director, semiotics is not merely an analytical vocabulary used after opening night. It is a compositional discipline. Effiom (2020) demonstrates this through the directorial manipulation of linguistic, visual, kinesic, vestimentary and aural signs. Her argument is especially important because it links sign theory to rehearsal choices. A costume is not meaningful only because it is beautiful or culturally recognisable. It becomes meaningful through its colour, texture, silhouette, movement potential, repetition, contrast and relationship to the performer who wears it. Similarly, music does not simply create atmosphere; it can announce authority, interrupt dialogue, contradict a visual image or shift the spectator's emotional reading.

Directorial coherence consequently depends on hierarchy. When every sign demands maximum attention, the spectator receives noise rather than complexity. The director must determine which sign leads a moment, which signs support it and which remain latent. This does not require a single fixed interpretation. Rather, it creates a legible arrangement within which ambiguity can become purposeful. The practical

question is not whether a performance contains many signs, but whether their relationships are controlled well enough to produce an intelligible and affective experience.

ACTING AS EMBODIED SIGN PRODUCTION

Acting is often described through the language of character, emotion, motivation and truth. These concerns remain valuable, particularly in text-based drama. However, a semiotic-directorial approach also treats the actor as a moving sign system. The actor's body presents age, status, gender, energy, rhythm, tension, direction and cultural inscription before a word is spoken. Voice adds pitch, resonance, tempo, accent and breath. Costume and properties extend the body's scale and alter its movement. Acting therefore occurs at the intersection of inner impulse, trained technique and public readability.

Contemporary actor training increasingly supports methodological plurality. Effiom (2021a) reads Stanislavski and Brecht as systems that may be used comparatively rather than dogmatically. The actor can pursue credible objectives and emotional specificity while also maintaining awareness of social position, audience address and historical critique. Hutchinson's (2021) collection on Chekhov and Meisner similarly demonstrates that apparently different acting methods can create productive bridges when training is organised around the needs of the performer and the production. Chibás (2021) broadens this field through mythic imagination, archetypal work and the body-text connection, tools that are particularly relevant to symbolic and festival performance.

Carnival performers require this expanded understanding of acting. They may not sustain psychologically detailed characters across a conventional plot, but they embody identities, forces, professions, histories, animals, technologies or political ideas. Their performance depends on repeatable energy, precise rhythm, visual clarity, ensemble awareness and the ability to remain responsive to an unstable public environment. Maiorani's (2021) concept of kinesemiotics is useful here because it treats movement as motivated communication in meaningful space. A lifted arm, lowered centre, forward thrust or spiralling pathway becomes readable through its relation to music, costume, formation and cultural code.

The actor in carnival is consequently neither a mannequin for costume nor a dancer executing isolated steps. The performer is the point at which theme, body, object, rhythm and spectator meet. Directing must therefore include actor preparation, not only choreographic drilling. Performers need to understand the thematic proposition, the identity they embody, the emotional or political quality of their movement and the way their individual score supports the collective image.

CARNIVAL AS EXPANDED DRAMATURGY

Carnival is frequently associated with reversal, excess, laughter, masking and the temporary reorganisation of social relations. Bakhtin's (1984) account of the carnivalesque remains influential because it explains how festive performance can suspend ordinary hierarchy and produce a collective body. Nevertheless, contemporary carnivals also operate within organised competition, tourism, corporate sponsorship, security regulation and media circulation. They combine popular participation with institutional control. A useful theory must therefore recognise both carnival freedom and carnival management.

African carnival scholarship has increasingly addressed this complexity. Carlson and Micots (2022) position African carnivals within local histories of masquerade, colonial contact, urban modernity and global circulation. Udo (2022) reads Carnival Calabar through cultural authenticity and the paradigm of the street, drawing attention to the way public space becomes a contested visual field. Apeh (2020) focuses on dance presentation and band performance, while Balogun and Nkebem (2021) show that host-community perceptions are shaped by heritage pride, unity, employment and the distribution of benefits. Orfega (2024) further associates festival performance with identity and social stability (Eneyo & Archibong, 2023; Eneyo et al., 2023).

For directing, the central insight is that a carnival route functions as dramaturgy. It has an opening, progression, intensification, pauses, judged zones, transitions and a conclusion. The route controls duration, visibility and fatigue. It also changes the performance's meaning as bands pass through different neighbourhoods, official stands, commercial zones and dense spectator clusters. Space is not a neutral

container. It is an active signifying resource that the director must score (Eneyo, 2026d; Eneyo & Ekpenyong, 2018).

Carnival also creates a dispersed form of spectatorship. Some spectators see only a fragment; others follow the route; cameras select and rebroadcast particular images; judges evaluate prepared sequences; and digital audiences encounter edited clips. The production therefore has multiple versions. Directorial planning must establish recurrent motifs, strong visual summaries and portable performance units that remain intelligible even when the audience cannot witness the whole event.

Table 1: Relationship among the four fields of specialisation

Field	Primary concern	Contribution to performance composition	Risk when isolated
Theatre directing	Interpretation, organisation and leadership	Creates the governing concept, score, rhythm and audience relationship	Can become text-centred or authoritarian
Acting	Embodiment, presence, voice and action	Makes themes visible through trained, repeatable human behaviour	Can become technique without cultural or visual context
Semiotics	Production and interpretation of signs	Clarifies how movement, sound, costume, space and objects communicate	Can remain descriptive rather than practice-based
Carnival studies/performance	Festivity, processional space, identity and public participation	Expands directing into the street, the crowd, tourism, media and civic spectacle	Can be reduced to economics, tourism or decorative spectacle

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an integrative critical review design. This approach is appropriate for a conceptual article that seeks to connect bodies of scholarship that are usually treated separately and to translate them into a practice-oriented framework. The review was structured in line with the emphasis of Paul and Criado (2020) on a clearly defined problem, transparent thematic organisation and synthesis that generates new conceptual value rather than merely summarising sources.

The core literature was drawn from scholarship published mainly between 2020 and 2024. Searches and source selection focused on theatre directing, actor training, theatre semiotics, embodied communication, African theatre, carnival performance, Carnival Calabar, spectatorship, collaborative creation and performance space. Foundational texts were retained where their concepts remain indispensable, particularly for theatrical semiotics, performativity and the carnivalesque. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books and chapters with direct relevance to Nigerian or African performance.

The analytical procedure involved four stages. First, the literature was read for recurring claims about the director's authority, the actor's body, the organisation of signs and the structure of carnival space. Second, these claims were coded under six categories: thematic encoding, embodied score, movement and rhythm, multisensory design, spatial-spectatorial relations and ethical accountability. Third, the categories were compared with Affiong Fred Effiom's published research and with recent scholarship on Carnival Calabar. Fourth, the categories were converted into a directorial framework and a practical production sequence.

The article is interpretive and does not report a new audience survey, performance experiment or ethnographic field study. Carnival Calabar is used as an illustrative performance environment because its band structure, themed competition, visual identity and street route make the interaction among directing, acting and semiotics especially visible. The proposed framework should therefore be tested through future rehearsal observation, performance documentation, interviews and audience research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FINDING 1: THE DIRECTOR IS A DESIGNER OF RELATIONS, NOT A COLLECTOR OF EFFECTS

The review indicates that the most persistent weakness in both stage and carnival production is the accumulation of effects without a governing relationship. A production may contain impressive costume,

energetic dance, powerful music and elaborate scenic structures, yet fail to communicate a coherent argument. In semiotic terms, the signs are present but their hierarchy is unstable. In directorial terms, the production lacks a clear score of attention.

Effiom's (2020) warning against the bombardment of the spectator's sensibilities is therefore central. The director's task is not to maximise every element but to compose differences in emphasis. During one sequence, the actor's stillness may lead while music recedes. In another, costume scale may dominate and reduce the performer to a moving architectural form. Elsewhere, a repeated colour may link separate images across the route. Meaning is created through relation, transition and recurrence.

This finding also changes the understanding of directorial concept. A concept is not a slogan attached to a production. It is a practical rule governing how signs behave. If a carnival theme concerns environmental recovery, for instance, the concept should determine material choice, movement quality, musical progression, colour transformation, actor identities and the spatial journey from damage to renewal. The theme becomes visible because each system develops a related but not identical version of the same proposition.

FINDING 2: ACTING PROVIDES THE HUMAN GRAMMAR OF SPECTACLE

The analysis further shows that large-scale visual production depends on acting more than is usually acknowledged. Spectacle can enlarge the body, multiply it or surround it, but an audience still reads intention through human behaviour. A performer who carries an enormous costume without a defined physical score produces movement but not necessarily meaning. By contrast, controlled weight, gaze, tempo, gesture and direction can make the costume appear regal, threatened, mechanical, wounded or triumphant.

The actor's score should therefore include five linked dimensions: physical centre, movement quality, vocal or rhythmic identity, relational focus and transformation. Physical centre identifies where energy appears to originate. Movement quality defines whether action is sustained, percussive, floating, bound, expansive or compressed. Vocal or rhythmic identity connects the performer to chant, speech, breath or musical pulse. Relational focus establishes whom or what the performer addresses. Transformation clarifies how the embodiment changes over the course of the scene or route.

This approach does not require all carnival performers to become conventional dramatic actors. It requires them to perform with intentionality and repeatable form. Actor training can be scaled to the production through short laboratories in image, rhythm, ensemble response, object manipulation and audience awareness. The resulting performance becomes more durable because it is grounded in a score that can survive noise, fatigue and changing spectator proximity.

Table 2: The actor-performer as a semiotic score

Dimension	Directorial question	Rehearsal task	Meaning produced
Physical centre	Where does the character or image appear to generate power?	Walk, pause and turn from different bodily centres	Status, age, species, force or vulnerability
Movement quality	What texture governs action?	Repeat the same phrase as bound, fluid, percussive or suspended	Emotional tone and thematic atmosphere
Rhythmic identity	How does the performer inhabit music, chant or silence?	Score breath, steps and gesture against the musical structure	Cohesion, tension, anticipation and release
Relational focus	Who or what receives the action?	Shift focus among partner, object, judge, camera and crowd	Intention, address and audience inclusion
Transformation	What changes in the embodiment?	Develop beginning, transition and final physical images	Narrative progression and memorability

Source: Authors' conceptualisation informed by Effiom (2020, 2021a), Chibás (2021) and Maiorani (2021).

FINDING 3: CARNIVAL SPACE IS PROCESSIONAL DRAMATURGY

A third finding is that carnival directing must be temporal and geographical at the same time. The director does not compose only what spectators see, but when and where they see it. A long route introduces practical pressures absent from a conventional stage: uneven ground, distance between sections, delayed music, crowd intrusion, changing light, weather, exhaustion and the fragmentation of attention. These conditions are not external problems to be solved after choreography. They are part of the dramaturgy.

The route should therefore be divided into performance zones. Transition zones prioritise stamina, spacing and the preservation of visual identity. Activation zones introduce short, repeatable motifs that engage general spectators. Media zones favour strong frontal or diagonal images suitable for cameras. Judging zones present the most complex thematic sequence. Recovery zones allow regrouping without visibly abandoning character. This zonal score recognises that not every section of a route requires the same intensity.

Udo's (2022) account of the street as a site of authenticity is valuable here, but authenticity should not be understood as the absence of organisation. The street becomes theatrically powerful when the production works with its unpredictability while retaining a recognisable score. The tension between planned image and public interruption is part of carnival's meaning. Spectators shout, imitate, photograph, obstruct, applaud or walk alongside performers. Their actions can intensify the event, but they can also compete with carefully designed signs. Directing must create flexible boundaries rather than assume complete control.

This relational approach also acknowledges digital spectatorship. A costume or movement phrase may be experienced live, through a television frame, in a vertical social-media clip or as a still photograph. Each medium selects different features. Directors and designers should therefore create images with both duration and instant recognisability: a strong silhouette, recurrent gesture, legible colour contrast and a thematic emblem that remains meaningful when separated from the full sequence.

FINDING 4: COSTUME, COLOUR, MUSIC AND OBJECTS OPERATE AS SIGN CLUSTERS

Carnival design does not communicate through isolated signs. It uses sign clusters. Costume, body paint, headdress, float, music, text, brand mark and movement may combine to create a single identity. The cluster becomes readable through repetition and contrast. If its elements carry incompatible meanings, the production becomes visually dense but conceptually weak.

Costume is especially influential because it both represents and regulates the body. Scale may produce monumentality but restrict speed. Weight may suggest power while reducing endurance. Repetition can establish collective identity, whereas variation can distinguish hierarchy or subgroups. Udo (2022) shows that visual authenticity in Carnival Calabar is negotiated rather than given; it emerges through choices about indigenous reference, global carnival aesthetics and the street. The director must therefore ask not only whether a design is attractive, but what cultural claim it makes and how the actor can inhabit it.

Colour should likewise be treated as dramaturgy. A band colour creates immediate recognition, but thematic colour progression can also structure the narrative. Saturation may increase as conflict intensifies; polluted tones may give way to regenerative colours; opposing groups may converge visually at the conclusion. Music performs a parallel function in time. It establishes pace, signals transition, supports ensemble synchronisation and carries cultural reference. Effiom (2020) notes that music can operate as indicator or counterpoint. In carnival, a celebratory rhythm may deliberately accompany an image of exploitation, producing productive contradiction rather than simple illustration.

Floats and properties extend the performance beyond the human scale. They should not be conceived as moving backgrounds. Their surfaces, levels, openings and mechanical actions can generate entrances, reveal transformations and organise focus. When integrated from the beginning of rehearsal, the float becomes a partner in acting and choreography. When introduced late, it often interrupts spacing and reduces performers to attendants of an object they have not learned to use.

FINDING 5: SPECTATORS COMPLETE THE PERFORMANCE BUT DO NOT GUARANTEE ITS MEANING

Performance meaning is neither dictated entirely by the director nor created freely by the audience. It emerges through an encounter between structured signs and situated spectators. Fischer-Lichte's (2008) concept of the autopoietic feedback loop remains relevant because performers and audiences continually affect one another. Carnival intensifies this loop by reducing physical distance and permitting direct response.

However, audience participation should not be romanticised. Spectators bring different languages, cultural knowledge, political commitments and levels of attention. A symbol legible to one community may

be misunderstood by another. Corporate branding may redirect attention from cultural content. Cameras may privilege spectacular fragments over subtle acting. The director should therefore build several levels of access into the work: immediate visual impact, repeated thematic motifs, spoken or written cues where appropriate and deeper references for culturally informed viewers (Eneyo et al., 2022).

The host community is also more than an audience. Balogun and Nkebem (2021) show that perceptions of Carnival Calabar are shaped by heritage pride, unity, employment and the unequal experience of benefits. Cultural accountability must therefore enter the directorial process. A production that represents a community should involve knowledgeable collaborators, acknowledge sources and avoid converting restricted or sacred forms into generic entertainment. The public value of carnival depends not only on visibility, but on the quality of representation and participation (Obong et al., 2012; Eneyo et al., 2026; Comfort et al., 2026).

THE CARNIVAL-SEMIOTIC DIRECTING FRAMEWORK

The synthesis produced six interconnected domains. Together they form the Carnival-Semiotic Directing Framework. The framework can be applied to a scripted stage production, a site-specific event, a carnival band or a hybrid performance. Its purpose is to ensure that concept, acting, movement, design, space and spectatorship are developed as one system.

The first domain is thematic encoding. The director translates the central theme into a precise proposition and identifies its key oppositions, transformations and recurrent images. The second is actor-score construction, through which performers develop physical, vocal, rhythmic and relational identities. The third is kinesemiotic movement, which organises choreography as meaningful action in space rather than decorative motion. The fourth is multisensory sign orchestration, which controls the interaction of costume, colour, sound, objects, light and media. The fifth is processional audience relations, which scores routes, zones, cameras, judges and public participation. The sixth is reflective cultural accountability, which tests sources, permissions, representation and community impact.

The domains are circular rather than linear. A costume test may reveal that the actor's score is impossible; a route rehearsal may require shorter sequences; consultation may expose a problematic symbol; audience feedback may show that the theme is unclear. The director returns to the relevant domain and revises the composition. This iterative structure aligns with collaborative and devised practice, in which material is generated, tested and refined collectively (Arendell, 2024).

Table 3: Carnival-Semiotic Directing Framework

Domain	Core action	Key output	Validation question
1. Thematic encoding	Convert theme into conflicts, images, transformations and recurring motifs	Directorial proposition and image map	Can every major element be linked to the proposition?
2. Actor-score construction	Develop body, voice, rhythm, focus and transformation	Repeatable performer scores	Can performers communicate without relying on costume alone?
3. Kinesemiotic movement	Compose motivated movement in formations, pathways and levels	Choreographic grammar	Does movement carry meaning as well as energy?
4. Multisensory orchestration	Coordinate costume, colour, music, objects, text, light and media	Hierarchy of signs and transition score	Which sign leads each moment, and why?
5. Processional audience relations	Plan zones, route timing, crowd interaction, judges and cameras	Spatial-spectatorial score	Does the performance remain legible in fragments?
6. Cultural accountability	Research sources, consult knowledge holders and review representation	Ethical record and revision notes	Is the production responsible to the culture it represents?

OPERATIONAL SEQUENCE FOR REHEARSAL AND PRODUCTION

The framework can be operationalised through seven stages. Stage one is cultural and contextual research. The team identifies the theme's historical, social and cultural sources, the communities represented and the conditions of the venue or route. Stage two is the directorial proposition. The director states what the

production is arguing, what transformation the audience should witness and which sign systems will carry the argument.

Stage three is the actor laboratory. Performers explore centres, qualities, rhythms, images, relationships and audience address before choreography is fixed. Stage four is movement and spatial composition. The director and choreographer develop formations, transitions and route-specific units from the actor material. Stage five is design integration. Costumes, floats, properties, music and media are tested with bodies in motion rather than approved only through sketches or recordings.

Stage six is zonal rehearsal. The full work is adapted to the actual spatial conditions, including activation, judging, media, transition and recovery zones. Timing, spacing, contingencies and safety are refined. Stage seven is reflective validation. The team evaluates semiotic clarity, actor sustainability, cultural responsibility and audience legibility. Informed previews, video review and consultation can support revision.

This sequence protects the actor from becoming the last element added to an already completed design. It also protects design from becoming an afterthought to choreography. Most importantly, it gives the director a practical method for connecting specialisations that are often separated in academic curricula and production structures.

Table 4: Practical evaluation matrix for stage and carnival production

Area	Strong evidence	Warning sign	Corrective action
Directorial concept	Theme appears through several connected systems	Theme is stated verbally but not embodied	Create an image-and-action map for each sequence
Acting	Performers sustain intentional body, rhythm and focus	Energy is high but behaviour is generic	Rebuild short repeatable actor scores
Movement	Formations and gestures produce readable relations	Choreography fills time without advancing meaning	Assign a function to every movement phrase
Design	Costume and objects extend the performer's identity	Design restricts movement or overwhelms the body	Test scale, weight and mobility in rehearsal
Sound	Music structures pace, contrast and transformation	Continuous volume flattens dramatic emphasis	Score silence, counterpoint and dynamic change
Space	Route or venue supports progression and audience access	Judging sequence is simply repeated everywhere	Create zone-specific performance units
Cultural ethics	Sources and collaborators are named and respected	Sacred or community-owned signs are used generically	Consult, obtain permission, revise or remove

APPLICATION TO CARNIVAL CALABAR

Carnival Calabar offers a compelling environment in which to apply the framework because each band must interpret a common theme while retaining its own visual identity and competitive strategy. The event brings together dance, costume, music, scenic engineering, performance labour, public space, tourism and media. It therefore demands more than event coordination. It requires directing at a scale where artistic decisions are distributed across section leaders, choreographers, designers, musicians, fabricators and performers (Eneyo et al., 2025; Ajake, n.d.; Eneyo, 2026b).

Thematic encoding should begin by resisting literal illustration. A theme such as shared prosperity, climate responsibility or technological change can easily produce a sequence of disconnected symbols. The director and creative team should instead identify a dramatic movement: from exclusion to participation, extraction to restoration, memory to renewal or fragmentation to collective action. This movement becomes the narrative spine that links sections (Eneyo, 2025a, 2025b; Eneyo et al., 2018; Ochiche et al., 2021; Eneyo, 2026a).

Actor-score construction can then differentiate the sections. One group may embody restriction through compressed movement and downward focus; another may represent resistance through percussive rhythm and diagonal advance; a final group may perform collective release through open formations and shared breath. Costumes and colours would intensify these embodied distinctions rather than replace them. The spectator could then read the theme through bodies even before interpreting the detailed iconography.

Kinesemiotic composition is equally important. Carnival dance is often judged by energy, synchronisation and visual appeal, but movement can also function argumentatively. Repeated gestures may signify labour, ownership, pollution, prayer, celebration or technological control. Changes in direction can represent conflict; changing levels can visualise hierarchy; converging pathways can stage solidarity. Maiorani's (2021) emphasis on motivated movement supports a directorial vocabulary in which choreography communicates through spatial relationships.

Multisensory orchestration would require a deliberate hierarchy among band colour, thematic colours, costume detail, float imagery, text, music and spoken commentary. Not every concept should appear on every surface. Large symbols should carry distant recognition, while costume detail rewards proximity and camera close-up. Music should mark structural changes rather than maintain one continuous emotional register. Where a band uses indigenous motifs, the design should identify their specific cultural meanings and avoid combining unrelated traditions merely for visual abundance.

Processional audience relations would divide the route into functional zones and adapt the performance accordingly. A compact emblematic sequence could recur at major spectator clusters. The judging sequence could deliver the full transformation. Transition zones could maintain character through a lower-intensity walking score. Media zones could use diagonal formations and brief still images that support broadcast. Such planning improves both legibility and performer endurance.

Finally, reflective cultural accountability would examine how the carnival represents Calabar, Cross River communities and the wider Nigerian nation. Udo (2022) identifies the tension between cultural authenticity and the global carnival idiom. That tension should not be solved through a simplistic choice between indigenous and foreign aesthetics. It should be negotiated through informed selection, attribution and creative transformation. A production becomes culturally credible when it knows the sources of its signs and can explain why they are being used (Obong et al., 2012; Eneyo, 2025c; Eneyo et al., 2025).

IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEATRE DIRECTING

The framework expands the director's field of competence. Directing includes literary interpretation, but it also requires the ability to read movement, colour, sound, material, route and audience behaviour. Directors working in carnival should be involved before designs and choreography are finalised. Their role is to connect departments through a shared performance proposition and to maintain the hierarchy of signs across the whole event.

The framework also encourages collaborative authority. Large-scale performance cannot be made through a single controlling intelligence. The director must establish clear decision-making while allowing choreographers, actors, designers, musicians and cultural advisers to contribute specialised knowledge. Collaboration becomes effective when responsibilities, vocabulary and evaluative criteria are explicit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTING AND PERFORMER TRAINING

Acting programmes should recognise carnival and processional performance as serious sites of actor training. They demand stamina, ensemble precision, external awareness, character embodiment, object work, musicality and direct engagement with spectators. Students can learn to construct concise physical scores that communicate across distance and survive repetition.

Training should also integrate semiotic awareness. Actors need not become abstract theorists, but they should understand how their bodies are read in relation to costume, light, music, partner and space. Video review can help performers compare intended and visible meaning. This is particularly valuable in large ensembles, where individual habits may weaken collective images.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CARNIVAL STUDIES AND CRITICISM

Carnival scholarship should move beyond the opposition between cultural celebration and tourism impact. Economic and social studies remain necessary, but they do not fully explain the artistic labour through which a carnival theme becomes public meaning. Performance analysis should examine directing

structures, acting scores, choreography, scenography, music, routes, camera mediation and spectatorship (Eneyo, 2025d, 2025e, 2026b; Eneyo & Archibong, 2024).

Critics also require more precise criteria. A band should not be evaluated only by the size of its float, richness of costume or intensity of dance. Evaluation can include thematic coherence, actor-performer clarity, transition quality, integration of sign systems, spatial intelligence, cultural accountability and the ability to communicate to both live and mediated audiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM, DOCUMENTATION AND POLICY

Theatre curricula should connect directing, acting, semiotics and carnival studies through joint studio projects. A course might require students to develop a theme, construct an actor score, design a sign system and adapt the work from a studio to an outdoor route. Such assignments would reduce the gap between theoretical courses and production practice. Oyewo, Okpadah and Afolabi's (2020) emphasis on committed theatre supports pedagogies that connect training to Nigerian cultural and social conditions.

Documentation is equally important. Carnival knowledge is often dispersed across private design files, rehearsal videos, band archives and personal memory. Universities, carnival commissions and cultural institutions should preserve theme briefs, sketches, music, choreography notes, interviews, route maps and performance recordings. Documentation should identify authorship and cultural sources so that future researchers can distinguish innovation from repetition and trace the development of performance practice.

Policy should recognise directors, performers, choreographers and designers as cultural knowledge workers rather than temporary event labour. Funding structures should include adequate rehearsal time, safety testing, performer welfare, cultural consultation and archiving. Host-community participation should extend beyond spectatorship and short-term commerce to meaningful involvement in representation and decision-making (Eneyo, 2026a, 2026c; Eyo et al., 2026).

CHALLENGES AND SAFEGUARDS

The first challenge is semiotic excess. Carnival's attraction to scale, colour and sound can encourage the addition of more elements even when meaning is already unclear. The safeguard is a hierarchy-of-signs review in which the team identifies the leading sign, supporting signs and unnecessary signs in each sequence.

The second challenge is the subordination of the performer to design. Elaborate costume and floats can reduce mobility, visibility and agency. Early integration, movement testing and performer feedback are essential. A design that cannot be safely and expressively inhabited is not theatrically complete.

The third challenge is cultural generalisation. A production may combine unrelated Nigerian motifs under a vague label of African culture. The safeguard is source specificity: names, communities, meanings, restrictions and permissions should be documented. Sacred or restricted forms should not be reproduced simply because they are visually powerful.

The fourth challenge is commercial displacement. Sponsorship is important to contemporary carnival, but branding can compete with thematic and cultural meaning. The director and production managers should agree where commercial signs may appear and ensure that they do not obscure the main visual argument or transform performers into moving advertising surfaces.

The fifth challenge is performer welfare. Long routes, heat, costume weight, sound exposure and repeated high-intensity movement create health and safety risks. The zonal score should include recovery, hydration, emergency access and alternative movement plans. Artistic ambition is not a justification for preventable harm.

The final challenge is assuming that participation is automatically democratic. Carnival can reproduce hierarchy through access to band membership, costume cost, visibility, gender roles and control of public space. Reflective evaluation should therefore ask who is represented, who makes decisions, who receives economic benefit and whose cultural forms are displayed (Comfort et al., 2026; Eneyo et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This article has brought theatre directing, acting, semiotics and carnival performance into a single field of analysis. It has argued that the director's central responsibility is to organise relations among signs and that the actor-performer provides the human grammar through which spectacle becomes meaningful. Carnival, in turn, expands dramaturgy beyond the stage by making route, crowd, media, city space and public participation part of the composition.

The proposed Carnival-Semiotic Directing Framework consists of six domains: thematic encoding, actor-score construction, kinesemiotic movement, multisensory sign orchestration, processional audience relations and reflective cultural accountability. The framework is grounded in Effiom's contributions to semiotic directing, methodological plurality and historical re-inscription (Effiom, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). It is also informed by recent research on African theatre, actor training, movement communication and Carnival Calabar.

Five recommendations follow. First, carnival bands and large-scale productions should appoint directors early enough to influence thematic development, casting, performance training and design integration. Second, actor-performer laboratories should precede fixed choreography so that movement grows from embodied meaning. Third, route rehearsals should use zonal scoring to balance thematic clarity, spectator engagement and performer endurance. Fourth, theatre departments should develop integrated courses in directing, acting, semiotics and carnival performance. Fifth, cultural institutions should establish ethically governed archives of carnival and processional performance.

The framework is not a finished national theory. Its value will depend on practice-based testing across different festivals, theatre traditions and communities. Nevertheless, it offers a precise starting point: Nigerian performance becomes more coherent when the director does not merely arrange spectacle, the actor does not merely execute movement, semiotics does not remain only a critical language and carnival is not reduced to tourism. From stage to street, these fields become strongest when they operate as one disciplined, culturally accountable system of performance.

DECLARATIONS

Funding

The author received no specific funding for this study.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

The author contributed to the conception, literature synthesis, framework development, drafting and critical revision of the manuscript.

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