

The Business of Theatre in Covid-19 and Post Covid-19 Environment

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Abstract

This study explores the business of theatre in a Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 environment. Although theatre is not a physical medicine that can treat an infectious disease like Covid-19, it is believed to therapeutically heal the sick and a sick society. More so, theatre, taking the colouration of a change agent, is thought to seek ways to instill societal change in the fight against any disease outbreaks, of which Covid-19 is one. As an agent of social change, the usefulness of theatre in bringing about positive change through its web of persuasion and entertainment cannot be downplayed, especially when there is the need to put aside an existing culture. The ways in which theatre becomes a veritable instrument in curtailing the spread of the Covid-19 disease, as well as a vehicle of entertainment through which members of society are purged of their tragic emotions due to the loss of a loved one or economic hardship, are explained using artistic and literary research methods. The result shows that the theatre has not reneged on performing its role facetiously since the outbreak of the coronavirus disease. However, the little it has done has been hypocritical. Nonetheless, with the virus still in existence, there is a greater need to engage the theatre in more sensitisation shows on all media of communication. It is suggested that subsequent creative works should be reflexive of the period.

Keywords: Theatre, awareness, Covid-19, social change, persuasion

Introduction

Towards the end of 2019, the world was shaken, and still is, due to the outbreak of a dreaded coronavirus disease, code-named Covid-19. What started in Wuhan in China (World Health Organization, 2020a) like a child's play, took the world by surprise and has equally plunged the world's economy. Nwakunor (2020) is of the view that there is a global health emergency occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic and it has imposed a severe economic burden on virtually all nations of the world. Marivate, Nsoesie & Combrink, like Nwakunor, unequivocally state that with Coronavirus, "there is a looming evidence about the adverse and secondary damage to other sectors such as education, crime, healthcare, and economy" (2021, p. 111)

The spread of the virus was so rapid that barely seven months after its detection in China, it was confirmed in about 215 countries with approximately nine million cases with four hundred and sixty-nine thousand, five hundred and eighty-seven (469,587) deaths (Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020b). Of this number, Nigeria recorded twenty-one thousand, three hundred and seventy-one (21,371) cases, seven thousand, three hundred and thirty-eight (7,338) recoveries and five hundred and thirty-three (533) deaths, after the first case was reported in Lagos and was claimed to have been

imported by an Italian in February 2020 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2020). As of June 15, 2022, two hundred and fifty-six thousand, three hundred and fifty-two (256,352) cases were confirmed, two hundred and fifty thousand, one hundred and thirty-one (250,131) discharged, with three thousand, seventy-seven (3,077) active cases (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2022).

As it stands, with the pandemic, “things are bad right now and they will probably get worse in the future *if necessary steps are not taken*” [emphasis added] (Doorn et al., 2021, p. 79). In order to avert this prediction, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), and other health-related institutions, as well as research institutions have responded, and are still responding, by devising methods to address it. The humanities are not left out in this regard. The theatre, an integral part of the humanities, with its multiplicity of functions, has not reneged in performing its role accordingly in these trying times. This study, therefore, using the artistic and literary research methods discusses the business of the theatre in Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 infested society. Theatre is known to engender change as well as purvey the challenge of an individual to society and that of the society to the individual (Cohen, 1994). Behavioural and attitudinal changes are necessary for combating and curtailing the spread of the deadly virus. Individuals and society need to deviate from their accustomed ways of life and adhere to the new normal by following set instructions and guidelines considered necessary to be followed in order to curtail further spread while seeking ways of providing a lasting cure. Such guidelines, as stipulated by WHO, include the keeping of social distance of at least six feet; avoiding crowded scenes and the use of face masks (World Health Organization, 2020c).

No doubt, there is the problem of disbelief about the existence of the virus, most especially in Africa. Most Africans believe that the virus is conjured up by the political class to defraud them and loot the economy in the name of providing succour (Anyanwu et al., 2022). This has given birth to both propaganda and conspiracy theories, which have generated unnecessary arguments instead of channeling such energies into proffering solutions.

Although, the theatre is unlike a vaccine like AstraZeneca or any form of orthodox medicine, which act as an antidote to this contagious disease, what then is its business in a Covid-19-affected society? The answer to this question is the onus of this discourse. The Covid-19 pandemic, since its outbreak, has generated a volume of scholarly works but the business of theatre in this regard has not been explored. This study is then unique as it presents theatre as a

tool for curtailing the spread of the virus in a unique manner as well as providing another dimension to the existing literature on the subject matter.

Conceptual framework

The term theatre has been conceived variedly. This study is restricted to two of these: theatre structure and theatre content; the domain of art and the artist. Theatre, in its commonest term, is known as a place of performance or the physical structure where theatrical activities are done, etymologically derived from the Greek word *theatron*, which means a viewing place (Cohen, 1994). Izenour et al., (2020) describe theatre as a building or location where performances are presented in front of an audience. Cohen likens this one aspect of theatre to a computer and refers to it as the theatre's "hardware" (1994, p. 7). This, no doubt, like the computer, the theatre structure is both visual and tangible. Nowadays, performances are not confined to the physical theatre structure; instead, they may take place anywhere, including a garden, town/market square, suspended space, and, more recently, on radio and television.

On the other hand, the activities that take place in the theatre building, drama, music, and dance, are known as theatre. Cohen likewise refers to this aspect of the theatre as the "software" (1994, p. 7), which is only visible and constitutes the content of the building, without which it remains non-functional. This aspect encapsulates all activities that take place in the physical theatre structure. Hence Bay et al. (2020), in an online *Encyclopaedia Britannica* define theatre as "a collaborative form of fine art that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place", and achieved through the use of gesture, speech, song, music, dance and drama. Theatre combines the aforementioned elements to re-enact events before an audience for purposes of entertainment, enlightenment, and edification. Albeit theatre and drama are viewed as one and most times used interchangeably (Cohen, 1994; Iji, 2006), it is pertinent to state that drama is one of the elements of theatre. While this study is not aimed at the contrastive and comparative analysis of both terms, this study totally aligns with the later explanation of the theatre, where theatre encompasses the activities in the theatre building and not the physical structure. Thus, in this study, theatre is defined as any theatrical activity done to entertain, inform, and educate man and members of any society expressed through the medium of the stage, radio, television, or film.

However, based on the definition of theatre provided by Bay et al., one queries whether theatre is synonymous with fine art. While theatre is not, there is however a meeting point, as

theatre uses lines and colours (aesthetics) in a theatrical performance. Moreover, as a collaborative art, theatre explores other art forms, enumerated above, to achieve a holistic performance towards the exploration and provision of solutions to the human problem. Imiti (2019), notes that the conventional stage is becoming moribund arising from the increasing influence of contemporary media, theatre has migrated to other platforms such as radio, film, television and other electronic media, which were, and are still being engaged in the orientation and re-orientation of members of the society.

The business of theatre

Theatre as earlier noted is a potpourri of activities. These activities are what theatre concerns itself with; this is its business. This could be for a specific purpose: entertainment or commercial, or both. Although the business of theatre and theatre of business are like identical twins, there is a seeming dissimilarity. Iji (2006) establishes a sharp contrast between both terms, the business of theatre or theatre business and theatre of business. This distinction is drawn from the function such theatre performs. The business of theatre, as advanced by Iji (2006) is the deployment of theatre to satisfy the urge for human entertainment, education and information devoid of commercial gratification. He also notes further that the theatre of business preoccupies itself with the satisfaction of human entertainment, education and information needs with an emphasis on profit maximisation. The ancient Broad Way Theatres in the US, Roundabout Theatre, New York, Hubert Ogunde theatre, and other Yoruba Travelling theatres in Nigeria are good examples. This study is focused on the business of theatre, which is aimed at human entertainment and enlightenment, devoid of commercial intent, and not a theatre of business.

As aforementioned, the business of theatre simply concerns itself with the functions or roles of the theatre in society. Throughout its existence, theatre is known to perform three basic functions - entertainment, information and education (Ejeke, 2012; Iji, 2006). However, in recent times, it has assumed further colouration of other communication media. In fact, it is impossible for theatre to disseminate information without communication. Being a communicative art, and a medium of communication, it performs virtually all media functions, which include “instruction, persuasion, education, entertainment, development and so on” (Bhattacharyya & Gupta, 2013, p. 1). To these, Dominic and Wright in their different summations add surveillance. While Dominic (2002) lists surveillance, interpretation, linkage and transmission of values and entertainment as the roles of the media, Wright, whose list is not significantly different, notes the functions as

“surveillance of the environment...; correlation of information...; transmission of culture from generation to generation; and entertainment” (as cited in Ibagere, 2009, p. 18). What Dominic refers to as interpretation and linkage and transmission of values are what Wright refers to as the correlation of information and transmission of culture from generation to generation respectively. These categorisations are broad enough to explain the business of theatre. For instance, surveillance of the environment could be deemed to be a systematic research into a particular phenomenon from which a thorough analysis (interpretation) is done, and performance is built for the entertainment and enlightenment of members of the society towards upholding a certain value (culture). While this value is transmitted from generation to generation, there is bound to be a change as would be necessitated by conditions of the period, as culture is dynamic and not static. By this, “theatre serves to redeem a decadent culture, and as a civilizing agent, seeks to re-order and redirect society to the ethical values of life. Theatre is not an end, but a means to explore the reality of the human condition" as well as "a force for mobilization, sensitization and, mediation" (Enita, 2017, p. 54) making individuals become more responsive.

Sensitisation is an essential component in the process of change. A proper sensitisation engenders change. Change in this regard requires individuals to embrace an ethical way of living different from their accustomed pattern of living. This type of change could be described as social change. Theatre engenders social change while also acting as a guide to daily living (Becker, 2009). Hence, the theatre needed at this very moment (in a Covid-19-infested society) is Theatre for Social Change, TfSC, which Prentki and Preston (2009, p. 12) simply define as “theatre in the service of social change.” This theatre attracts people to itself by its web of entertainment, which in turn ignites behavioural change.

The Business of Theatre in Covid-19 and Post Covid-19 Environment

The business of theatre in a Covid-19 and post Covid-19 environment is discussed in view of the previously mentioned functions of the theatre, surveillance, instruction, persuasion, education and entertainment. Surveillance function is most crucial in times of critical situations like the outbreak of Covid-19, which demands getting firsthand information about the phenomenon from members of the society/environment upon which the theatre acts, to be re-presented to the society to educate them through the vehicle of entertainment, engaging any of the mass media. Surveillance in this context entails research into the phenomenon by content producers. There is no gainsaying that the internet has simplified this process, as useful information on the pandemic, its causes and prevention, could be found in most databases,

including the World Health Organisation, Africa Centre for Disease Control, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and a slew of others. By engaging the web on research the role of the artists, who are the content producers, becomes less cumbersome. Having gathered such information through diligent research, the outcome of such then forms the content of creative or dramatic work thereof. These are geared toward the enlightenment and entertainment of society, thereby creating the ripples of social awareness towards social change. A performance churned out of a meticulous investigation has to be bereft of anything capable of insulting the sensibility of the audience, who are members of the society for which the performance is directed. In productions geared towards social reformation beliefs and religion of the intended audience should not be degraded. If there exists a contrary belief that would work counter to the exigencies of the time, the principle of persuasion has to be applied to persuade them to jettison any such contrary belief that could further aid the spread of the disease. In the two years plus of the outbreak and existence of the coronavirus disease, the theatre has engaged itself in the production of informative and entertaining audio, stage and video performances about the Covid-19 virus. Interestingly, these can be easily accessible on various channels of mass media of communication, the internet, with social media trailing the blaze. These productions are based on expert's directives

For instance, one of the guidelines by the WHO to curtail the spread of the dreaded Covid-19 virus was the regular washing of hands. This is something alien to the rural dwellers who perform such a task only when they are set to eat, especially *eba* (an African delicacy) with their bare hands. This inclination formed the content of one of the online trending videos in the early days of the outbreak of the pandemic. A mother who came all the way from the village to visit her son in the city was prompted by the son's security, at the security post, to wash her hands with water and liquid soap, strategically placed at the entrance of the building. To this, she flared up and threatened to place a curse on her son for subjecting her to such a "humiliation" and denying her access to his home. The son, hearing the yelling at the gate, stepped out to find out what it was, only to discover the scenario. In her rage, the mother grabbed her luggage and headed back home, but the son caught up with her and persuaded her to wash her hands, as that was one of the ways of not contracting and spreading the disease. After much hesitation and proving her point that she was not the said virus, she complied, and equally took the same message to the village. This makes persuasion vital in the gospel of change. The persuasive role of the theatre induces individuals into changing their attitudes in a positive direction. The theatre

artist who wants to introduce new social order into any given society, therefore, cannot wave persuasion aside. This way, society could easily come to terms with the intended message meant for it. This can be achieved through the repetition of messages over a given period, thereby leading to the formation of certain behaviour and way of life.

In a related animated video, entitled “The Great Race: A COVID-19 Story”, created by Maya Adam and animated by Matt Torode, the need to wear a facemask by everyone, irrespective of class and position, to control the spread of the coronavirus was emphasised. In the short clip of about a minute seventeen seconds, those who fragrantly negate the preventive directive, as recommended by the WHO were prone to, and sorted after by the virus(Adam, 2022)

In another three and a half minutes video, the students of the University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa used popular theatre forms such as dance, clapping, drama, and music/songs to communicate information about the virus and the precautionary steps the public should take to guard against contracting the virus. This includes washing hands for about 20 seconds and sneezing or coughing into the crook of one’s elbow. Aside from this, the performance also attempts to dismiss the various misconceptions about the virus(*Drama Performance - COVID-19*, 2020).

These examples are amongst the many creative spins on the Covid-19 pandemic productions circulated on modern mass media inclusive of social media, especially YouTube, geared towards creating awareness as well as making it relevant for members of the society to take the necessary safety measures to stay safe and alive. Here lies the duty of theatre in a society needing social change to adjust to the new normal to avoid becoming a casualty of a pandemic. The theatre has therefore not reneged in its function since the outbreak of the coronavirus disease.

The business of theatre in a post-Covid-19 environment is not significantly different from its previously enumerated functions. This time, there is the need for enlightenment while being entertained for readjustment after being ravaged and traumatised, perhaps due to the loss of a loved one, loss of job and an unfriendly economic environment. In this regard, it behoves the theatre to address the pains of members of the society as well as provide relief to the humdrum travails of life thrown at them by the pandemic, as they are distracted from the problems confronting them. However, the message this time should be of hope, for a better future. As

posited by Bharata cited in Ghosh (1950), the theatre gives “relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief....”

It is the business of the theatre too to recreate the memory of the period of the pandemic for entertainment and documentation for posterity. The theatre is a good preserver of history (Imiti, 2013). Soon, if not already, performances on the effects and prospects of the outbreak would be made into a film, which the viewing audience will laugh over, just as projected by Ghosh, mentioned above; by so doing, laughing away their sorrows; what we refer to in the theatre as purgation of emotions.

Albeit theatre has been in the vanguard of social change in the period under review, findings show that it is not reflexive. It is therefore a case of “do what I say and not what I do”. In the few sample performances used for this study, the theatre is seen to be invulnerable, as its practitioners do not apply the rules. For instance, figure 1. shows performers advocating the use of facemasks yet do not have one on. This was a production done in the heat of the Covid-19 outbreak



Fig. 1. *Drama performance on Covid-19 by students of the University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa*

Interestingly, most performances examined by the author in the course of engaging this research were devoid of the application of the rules, which are being enforced in such performances. This does not portend a good example, as it creates the impression of deceit and disbelief in members of the society. Even though there was disbelief by the people (Anyanwu et al., 2022), this should not be the case with the theatre artist, who is considered an ambassador on the frontline of creating awareness about this illness which needs a social change to be defeated completely.

Conclusion

Since its existence, the theatre has always been a potent medium of instruction. Education and enlightenment are the fulcras of the theatre, achieved through the vehicle of entertainment. Theatrical performances are put forth before an audience, be it on stage, on radio, or on film, for various reasons. While whatever is presented before the audience entertains it, the primary purpose, however, is to show and tell the audience what it should see and know. This is the message; the idea behind the performance. There is therefore no performance for performance's sake. It then behooves the theatre to strike the right cord at the appropriate time. There is no better time than now to engage theatre in creating awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic, which has ravaged and still ravaging the world. It is also imperative for theatre, through the vehicle of entertainment, to purge members of society of their tragic emotions due to the loss of a loved one or economic hardship. The theatre is a sure way of escaping from pain and agony. While it seeks ways of engendering social change, it therapeutically heals the sick and a sick society. This is the business of the theatre. While the theatre has not reneged in its function, it has not abided by what it advocates. It is therefore recommended that subsequent creative works should be reflexive of the time.

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