

# THE THEATRE ARTISTE AND THE CHALLENGES OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA: SURMOUNTING TIPS FOR THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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## ***Abstract***

*Unemployment appears to be the greatest challenge militating against the development of the African nations. In Nigeria for instance, eradication of unemployment has become a regular item in the agenda of every government epoch of both military and democratic leaders. This study uses the sociological and the literary methodologies to identify theatrical avenues that are employment opportunities for the artistic director in contemporary Nigeria. The study observes among other things that, the artistic director has the capacity to silence unemployment of the theatre graduate because employment for him (artistic director) generates employment for the rest of the theatre collaborators who include the set and lights designers, makeup artist, costumier, props and sound manager, actors and the management crew amongst others. The study therefore, identify and recommends street protests, burial ceremonies, convocations and matriculations events, campaign rallies, church crusades and services, birthdays and naming ceremonies as potential theatrical experiences that are employment opportunities for the artistic director. It is hope that with this, the unattended challenge of unemployment will be reduced for the theatre graduate in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

Attempts at government policy to curb unemployment appear not to have yielded the desired objective due to the insensitivity of government and greed associated with the upper class. Similarly, the increasing level in recent times have questioned the credibility of the Nigerian graduate and made some teachers to be disappointed in their effort in producing graduates that appear unemployable. This worrisome situation, has led to several restructuring of academic curricula at the secondary and tertiary institutions. Nigerian universities in an attempt to surmount this challenge have made her programmes entrepreneurial by empowering graduates with vocational practical skills.

The theatre arts graduate is not exonerated from this unemployment menace as those who cannot find a place in Nollywood film industry, class rooms as teacher or the Arts Councils pace through the streets in search of greener pasture. Apart from the playwright, the director in the theatre whose qualities and functions empowers him to determine the employment direction of the different theatre collaborators appears to have ignored his potentials and, as such, is also faced with the epidemic of unemployment.

The mention of theatre ordinarily conjures a building, drama, an organized area where entertainment in the form of drama is performed. In the words of Alensworth, Allensworth and Rawson:

Most people think of a theatre as a place where an audience come to be amused, interested, entertained, stimulated, or moved by the enactment of a play on stage by actors. But people who work in this field see the word in some worth broader terms. To them, *theatre* embraces all the elements that culminate in a '*theatrical* experience.' In other words

*theatre* represents an art form; and like any other art form, it is a means of communication between artist and audience.(1)

Indeed, the primary manifestation of theatre is the conscious or an unconscious meeting of the artist and the audience. This writer is totally in agreement with Brett Bailey's assertion in his message for the World Theatre Day of 2014 celebration that: "wherever there is human society, the irrepressible spirit of performance manifest". This implies that the functional disposition of the theatre is anchored on human gathering. Corroborating the dynamic disposition of the theatre, Barker expresses thus:

The theatre reflects the social relationship of its time. It might be said with justification that the theatre is the art of social relationships – more than any other art form it concerns itself with the ways in which people interact(151)

The manifestation of theatre which is a social relationship is actually clear in African traditional theatre where experience is collectively shared. Theatre in Africa like our daily experience may not be conventionally bound like the western or literary theatre. For the African theatre, its collective participation moderated by peace, joy, unity and accountability.

The implication this in Africa is that wherever there is an event that requires spectators, the concept of directing and the place of the director is needed. Therefore, in every human gathering where the irrepressible spirit of performance manifests, there is the need for interpretation for effective comprehension from the listeners or viewers. Although, some of these gatherings may not necessarily involve deliberate audience and performances,

the business of this research shall be to identify the theatrical import upon which a director can function in these events.

These social events which have currently grown to full blown theatre are marriage ceremonies, burial ceremonies, birthday parties, University convocations and matriculations, church services, crusades, political campaigns, rallies and street protest

### **Concept and Development of Theatre Directing/Director**

The director in scholarly parlance has been described by many scholars as a newcomer in the theatre. However, some authorities have asserted that the position of the director has been prominent in the production process in virtually all the cultures of the world. To this end, Cameron and Gillespie posit that: "There have always been theatre people who exercised a strong, central influence, on productions, but in the sense that the word is now used, directing is a phenomenon of the twentieth century" (146). However, these personalities who stood in as director were unable to actually oversee the unity of the stage performance, aid the actor in interpretation and coordinate the visual and auditory elements of the production. Commenting on the emergence of the director Wilson and Goldfarb have identified David Garrick and Wolf Von Goethe as the forerunners of the concept of directing. In their work entitled *Theatre: The Lively Art*, they unequivocally posits thus:

Two eighteen-century figures are often considered the forerunner of the modern stage director because they assume these responsibilities: the English actor David Garrick and the German playwright, poet, and novelist Johann Wolfgang Goethe (287)

Indeed, directing is still a relatively new phenomenon that finds its way into the theatre between late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still developing. History has it that directing began to be more prominent during the Industrial Age and before (Romanticism). Wilson and Goldfarb's assertion is in tandem with Cameron and Gillespie as they succinctly posit that: "It is something argued that the theatre director did not exist before the 1874, when George II, duke of Saxe-Meiningen, began supervising every element of the production in his court theatre in German and coordinating them into an integrated whole"(4) However, Wilson and Goldfarb are not ignorant of the general acceptance of the emergence of the modern director with George II. According to them:

It is true that the beginning with the Saxe-Meiningen, the director emerged as a full-fledged, indispensable member of the theatrical team, taking a place alongside the playwright, the performers and the designers. However, though the title may have been new, the function of the director has always been present in one way or another (58)

As a newcomer on the performance floor, several factors necessitated its emergence as scholars have rightly pointed out. Commenting on the factors that led to the birth of the modern director, Whiting expresses clearly that:

It is perhaps significant that the emergence of the director as a separate creative functionary coincides with important social change which began to take place in the nineteenth century. First with Freud, Darwin, and Marx there came a breakdown in established social, religious and political

concepts... second there was a mark increase in communication. With the advent of the telegraph, the telephone, photography, motion picture and eventually television, various cultures which had remained remote from or even unknown to one another suddenly became linked. The effect of these two changes was telephony.

However, prior to this innovation in the theatre that projected the position of the director, different performance experts acted as coordinators of the production process. Scholars such as Brockett, Wilson, Wright and Dukore have historically asserted that in classical Greek theatre, the 'didaskalos' meaning teacher, playwrights such as Aeschylus (252-46BC) Sophocles 496-406CC) and Euripides (480-406BC) instructed the performers, the Medieval era ushered in the stage managers called *conducteurs de secrets*, the Elizabethan performance culture places this responsibility on the shoulders of the actor managers such as Shakespeare and Moliere who coached their different companies. The evolutionary disposition of the director in different cultures of civilization is aptly summed up by Melthin when he expresses that in:

Ancient Greek: The "*choragus*" (head of the chorus) often directed / coordinated song and movement. - Playwrights probably staged the plays, and probably cast them. We know too little to understand if they "unified" the production. Roman: a wealthy citizen organized, but we still do not know to what extent they "unified." Medieval: the "*master of secrets*" – a special effects expert (and there were many special effects in the medieval theatre). "*Keeper of the register*" - the "register" was a master copy of the script – a "*guild*" (group of craftsmen)

could hold on to the register and pass it on from generation to generation. All were primarily managerial skill, rather than artistic... With the rise of professional acting companies (during and after Shakespeare's time (15-1600's) – came the "*actor / manager*".

According to Bruce: “ some of the forces which helped shape the need for a director at this time are public interest in antiquarianism, the development of scenery and scene shifting, and the focus on production over play-script.” (8)

Apart from the western claims of the position of the director, Adeoye from the African scene informs that:

The contention on the presence of the director in the African festival theatre has been laid to rest by Akinwale, Musa and Bell-Gam. The trio concluded that there is, indeed, the presence of the director in the indigenous African performances. Whether in the Yoruba's Alarinjo travelling theatre or in the Opobo's Nji-Owu performance, the director certainly and importantly has numerous directorial functions to perform although his directorial style is mostly tied to the cultural nuances of his traditional performance.(6)

Indeed, from the Nigerian cultural perspective, some scholars have forcefully insisted that the director has existed as a chief priest, lead dancer, chorus leader, chief drummer or the oldest person in the community performance troupe. Bell-Gam for example, drawing from Opobo performance culture, informs that the master drummer traditionally referred as 'Akwafaribo' performs the functions of the director. According to him:

The organization of a performance is not a new phenomenon in the cultural history of (Africa) Nigerian rural communities. Long before the advent of European colonialist, rural communities in Nigeria had versatile of cultural groups. Their performances were in oral form, there were leaders who organized them. For Example in Benue, such a person is called the Kwaghir, by the Tiv people. Among the Igbos, such a person is described as Isiegwu. The Ibibio refers to him as Akwa Uneg, Osu in Isoko, in Kalabari he is called Kukuea abribo lyaba. In Opobo town a person who handles such responsibilities is the “Akwafaribo” the master drummer. (9).

In as much as the above definition may appear persuasive, it may not pass for the universal definition of the director as applicable to all theatre cultures. The master drummer may be the custodian of the rhythm and steps of the dance harmony. However he may not be totally involved in the harmonization of the entire human and material resources of the performance. In a parallel vein, Macgowan and Melnitze identify the activities of Kher-nefert in the Egyptian passion plays as that of a director. They assert that:

What we know about the Egyptian passion plays probably the last to evolve and certainly the most dramatic we owe to the first stage director and actor mentioned in recorded history. He was I. Kher-nefert, who was sent to Abydos by the king Usertsen shrine to Osiris... (8)

The art of directing has continued to grow and improve in line with the different theories emanating in the theatre. Such theories as eclecticism, deconstruction, modernism and postmodernism have



influence the art of directing as some have indeed emanated from the directors craft. Modern directing is still dominating and prescribing rules for the rest of the performers. Indeed, without the art of directing the performance may not have a sharp focus.

### **Unemployment Surmountable Tips for the Artistic Director**

The clamour for entrepreneurial skills in contemporary university training is not new to the theatre. From the origin of theatre education both in western countries and Nigeria, theatre has been a professional occupation capable of empowering its graduates. However, the development of new technologies and societal perception of the artiste has created a defeatist mentality to the artist himself. The profession is now an all comers field where anybody feels he can practice it more than the trained professional. This has resulted in overcrowding of the profession with the challenge of where to practice and how to practice theatre facing the theatre graduate in contemporary Nigeria. It is for the foregoing that we proposed the following as alternative platforms which are dominated with such theatrical elements such as performers, performance, performance(which is embellished with costumes, make-up, props, sound and sound effect etc.) space and the audience.

### **Marriage Ceremonies**

Marriage ceremony may simply be defined as a celebration of union between a man and a woman with the ultimate intention of sharing love, raising children and living together till death. Marriage ceremonies which come in different styles and forms depending on the cultural setting appear to be one of the most

popular entertainment media in recent times. Its elements of theatre are not in doubt as in it we see performers who may come in the form of minor and major characters. The major characters are the couple while the minor characters may be dancers, singers and other performers whose presence is to entertain the audience and enhance the artistic value of the ceremony. The spectators form the audience who are in the form of well-wishers and members of the community. As typical of African audience, most times they join in the performance of the celebration as actors. The performance space may be a church auditorium, village square, rented hall, family gathering square or compound etc. These performance spaces may obey the principles of the arena, thrust, proscenium or transverse as the case may be. The performance in this regard will be the marriage vow which will be administered by the minister in-charge or the entitled person depending on the cultural setting to the bride and groom ceremony. The marital rite may be titled traditional or white wedding in Nigerian parlance. Most couples undergo the two or any of it depending on the economic and fate of the couples involved. Special costumes, make-up, props, music and accessories for the bride and groom and other characters in the ceremony characterize the atmosphere.

Preproduction, production and post-production that characterize theatre production processes are clearly mapped out in a marriage ceremony. The counselling, premarital negotiations with families that will eventually lead to the fixing of the date are all situated in the preproduction process. The preproduction period for some white weddings may require rehearsals as well as procurement of needed materials including food and drinks for the audience. The production period may be one day or two days depending on the economic and philosophical disposition of the couple. It is the day in which the marital vows are exchanged and

the postproduction period will be all the activities that follow after the marital vow. Such activities may include thanksgiving and appreciation letters to supporters of the events.

### **Funeral Ceremonies**

A funeral ceremony is an event meant to either sorrowfully or joyfully usher in a deceased to mother earth. Funeral ceremonies especially in Rivers Ijaw cultures have become highly theatrical with availability of production elements such as costumes, makeup, props, set constructions, actors and audience. Managerial aspects such as publicity crew, security men, ushers, welfare crew amongst others also abound. In contemporary Nigerian coinage, there are titles attributed to burials depending on the age, social affluence, family members and the economic disposition of the deceased or owners of the deceased. Such popular titles usually displayed in different publicity media include Painful Exit, Celebration of Life, Gone too Soon, Obituary, Mama is Gone, Papa is Gone, Sorrowful Exit, Transition sometimes it may also carry traditional titles as written on the costumes which may be a t-shirt such as Denemu, Adughuphroph, mam kel-repho, papa kel-repho demomu, depending on the dialect.

In all, it is meant to title the burial and as such helps in conditioning the minds of the audience in their reaction to the ceremony. In most of these burial ceremonies there are costumes designed basically for the ceremony as typical of conventional theatre production. The planning of a funeral event also follows the preproduction, production and post-production. The preproduction process involves series of meetings of family members to discuss the successful display of the funeral event. It is during these meetings that the date will be agreed upon and necessary materials procured. Casting will attends to the different needed personnel

that will enhance a smooth flow of the funeral ceremony. Performance troupes as well as the necessary materials such as costumes, set and venues are clearly identified. The production period in some cases may be three days, one week or a month depending on the culture and the social status of either the deceased or mourners. During this period the burial rite marks the end of the funeral ceremony and mourners may either celebrate a successful burial or count their losses depending on the atmosphere. The postproduction will involve striking the set and going to the church for thanksgiving. In some cultures inheritance rite and other post-burial rites will be observed.

### **Church Crusades and Conferences**

The growing rate of Christian churches may have been anchored on the great command by Jesus Christ the founder of the Christian Faith. In achieving this great commission, Christian Churches especially in Nigeria, have seriously engaged in crusades and conferences where people are invited to participate for evangelism and healing all to draw members to God through Jesus Christ. Although, some churches may have organized these crusades to win souls to their church rather than God, whichever drive that the crusades are organized is not the focus of this paper rather we are interested in the theatrical import of the crusade and the need for an artistic director.

In each of these crusades, it is observed that costumes, set design and lighting, scripted recitation, actors, audience, props that characterizes a theatre experience are well mapped out and utilised to pass the desired message to the audience. Serious attention is also paid to the managerial aspect as ushering, publicity, security; bouncers and chartering are not ignored. The

planning for this event involves series of rehearsals for the different groups that will perform during the event. Some of the characters who are guest preachers and ministers also engage in personal rehearsals through the supervision of the Holy Spirit. The different preachers/ministers and different performance group are the actors who drive the concept of the crusade to members of the audience who are mostly church members and invited guest mostly there to either secure their or truly accept Christ. Costumes and props are usually found in both the different choral groups and the preachers whose cloth distinguishes them from the rest of the crusade attendees. Print, media and guerrilla publicity methods are central to the creation of awareness of the event. For the event is seriously paid attention to the titles of these programmes are usually misleading and sometimes abrupt. However, the theatrical dimension of it is not in doubt.

### **Matriculations and Convocation Events**

Matriculation ceremonies and convocations and other such events that are characterized with matriculation or convocation features are highly theatrical with all the elements. In any of these ceremonies, there are theatrical elements such as well-defined costumes usually gowns and other special designed cloths, actors who are usually principal officers such as management and academic officials of the institution, special guest such as the Visitor, honorary recipients, tradition rulers, other pro-chancellors and vice chancellors, government officials, and special performance from a troupe as the case may be. Similarly, the matriculation and convocation Oath, goodwill messages from the visitor, etc make up the performance piece, parents, guardians, as well as invited guest all belong to the audience unit. Set design which manifest in decoration for the performance space for the

actors is usually not left out. The stage is usually an arena or thrust formation as in the University of Port Harcourt, University of Calabar, Niger Delta University to mention but a few. The management of this event is also seriously attended to as we have publicity, security, ushers and the welfare team.

### **Political Campaign Rallies**

Since the emergence of democracy in Nigeria, political campaign rallies have become an integral part of Nigerian festivity. Artistic and managerial elements of theatre give the campaign the desired atmosphere for its vision and mission. These rallies are usually competitive and entertaining with some and most times all the theatrical elements championing the concept of the rally. For example PDP, CAN, LABOUR PARTY, APGA rallies are usually mapped out with entertainment dimension. Flag-bearers, party leaders and stake holders in the party are mostly the actors, whereas, the manifesto and the different speeches given by different speakers represent the performance. Members of the audience are mostly party members and the crowd present at the rally. Costumes which may be a special designed cloth carrying the party's identity worn by leaders and other stake holders, makeup, set design, props, sound and sound effect are also utilized to enhanced the success of the rally. Security men such as the Police, Army, Military and other Paramilitary are usually not ignored; ushers, publicity and welfare are part of the managerial units in political rally.

### **Street Protests**

Street protest which is an expression of disagreement on government policies or human actions by an organized groups has

been observed to be highly theatrical. Popular theatrical elements which includes costumes, props, makeup, actors, sketches and audience characterizes it display. The interest of the audience in street protest is usually characterized by the dramatic dimension utilized by the organizers. Recent activities of protester in Nigerian such as the Fuel subsidy removal crisis, pension scam, ASSU strike protest and the most recent Bring Back our Girls are highly theatrical and call for an artistic director for unity, organization and more interpretation of intended case to the receivers.

### **Birthday, Naming and Success Parties**

Celebrations of birth days, victory and successes have become highly theatrical with organizers and participants expressing utilizing theatrical elements. In it like the ones identified above, are costumes, actors, set, make-up, and members of the audience. The managerial elements are usually not ignored in such parties. There are usually ushers, bouncers, security men, and publicity modalities, welfare in terms of food and drinks and sketches. The content of these parties are usually conditioned by the economic or social equipage of the organizers. Irrespective of the organizers, the theatrical elements are usually obvious.

### **Conclusion**

To curb the challenges of unemployment, the artistic director is called upon to venture into the above programmes/events as an alternative measures in practicing his art. The financial involvement of the aforementioned events cannot be misdirected without an achievement of the desired goal. Directors are therefore, called upon to apply their qualities and make

themselves available as directors for such events to generate employment for themselves and other collaborator.

The role of the director in the production process is to harmonize, coordinate, organize, clarify and give a sense of direction to the managerial and artistic products of the performance. His goals will include unifying, interpreting and presenting the production to the audience. Audition, Casting, budgeting and rehearsing may be his key functions in driving the intended message of the play to the audience through his interpretative ingenuity. From the events identified above, the performance elements need to be unified, interpreted and presented in an unambiguous manner to satisfy the audience. It is in an attempt to achieve a highly entertaining show that the director becomes relevant to these events. His involvement will reduce cost and avoid waste of funds; improve performance delivery through appropriate delegation of duties to the production crew. Poor organization due to the lack of a trained artistic director has led to waste of funds, poor publicity, inappropriate costumes and props, poor choice of venue, weak dissemination of performance concept, poor management of security, abuse of audience welfare and lack of artistic unity.

Organizers of these events must engage the services of an artistic director who will bring his theatre acumen and artistic ingenuity to salvage these challenges and guarantee audience satisfaction. For example the marriage ceremonies either, traditional or white must be properly rehearsed and well harmonized by an artistic director from the pre-ceremonies of the event till the day of presentation and post-performance. The costumes, makeup, set, publicity, different actors and all other elements must be united through the creative manipulation of the artistic director. The director all the events must select the



appropriate costumes, makeup, props, sound and sound effect, move the actors in favour of the audience, and ensure that total confidence is built in the minds of all the actors.

The welfare of the audience must not be compromised in any of these events. Food, drinks must be arranged and properly distributed to all members of the audience in line with class, age and seating arrangement. The publicity of these events must not be compromised because the content of the publicity bill and the manner of dissemination will condition the perception of the audience. Ushers, security personnel's must be very useful in carrying out their roles through proper directing to guarantee the comfort of the audience. In order to enhance effective performance of these events, the director should apply his conventional theatre functions which include choice of script, audition, casting, rehearsals, interpretation, drafting of budget and final presentation.

Most of these his functions as implied even in conventional theatre are implied. Some of the characters in the identified events are implied, because the owner/organizers play the lead character(s). For example, the chief mourner and other members of the deceased and the deceased for a burial ceremony, couples in a marriage ceremonies, Chief celebrant in a birthday party, flag bearer(s), party members and leaders, general overseers, pastors, guest preacher(s), speakers are all major characters which the director must consider in his casting. Although table casting is most applicable in virtually all cases for these major characters, but the director can apply the audition method to decide most of the minor actors or train them to be suitable for their roles.

Universities with theatre arts should redesign their programmes to explore these para-theatrical channels as performances that the director is needed. This will help expose the director to the

available employment opportunities to will be helpful to the theatre arts graduate because it is hope that employment for the director open ways for the other collaborator.

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