

EXPANDING THE PERFORMANCE AREA: THE NIGERIAN ARTISTES' ORDEAL

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Abstract

It is no longer news that the live theatre needs to go out of the four-walls of a university building in search of its audience. The history of Nigerian theatre be it from the literary or traditional perspectives is incomplete without a mention and recall to performances on the streets, market places, religious houses and other unconventional places. These arenas no longer experience the performance as in the days of old and their audiences are either completely denied of the pleasure or have looked elsewhere for an alternative. To bring back the lost pleasures to the audience and to revive the old practice comes with a lot of challenges and demands. These challenges and demands though appear as difficult tasks, they are surmountable. Theatre practitioners owe it a duty to the audience, if they are ready to brace-up to the challenges, to showcase relevant, meaningful and understandable performances to them. The improved and advanced technologies should not be confined to the building; rather their adaptability and functionalities should be subjected to test and used at some orthodox performance spaces.

Keywords: Expanding, Performance Area, Artistes Ordeal.

Introduction

At the beginning of what we can refer to today as modern theatre, there were no conventional theatre buildings where people gathered for the purpose of seeing a show. If critically looked at, the school halls, church halls, community canthers, etc, should serve other purposes in the coming together of people at these venues. Performances were included on the list of activities as means of entertainment and relaxation and relief. The time of triumph of the live theatre performances saw the professionalization of the arts of many troupes and discovery of many hidden talents. The advent of television, radio and other electronic media of entertainment brought about advancement and diversion from live theatre performance.

This also brought relaxation and entertainment outside the theatre and deprived it of its audience patronage. The insecurity of lives and properties at designated theatres located in cities as well as long hours of travelling to and from the theatre prevents the patrons from seeing performances. Man as a social animal has looked elsewhere for the kind of entertainment and relaxation he desires or ought to get from theatre. Hence, he takes solace in television and other electronic media which are mobile. Although, he is quick to admit the fact that they are expensive and the experience obtained from these other media cannot be the same as that of live theatres. Our attention is hereby drawn to the submission Dandaura & Asigbo; (1999:51), thus:

Live theatre is fast losing its audience and the reasons for this loss could range from socio-economic factors to advances in technology and Nigerian audience also has preference for novelty.

In Nigeria today and other developing countries of the world, man seeks means of relaxation and entertainment after the struggle of the day. One of such places where he goes is night clubs, or any other relaxation centre to ease-off the stress of the day's work. Advancement in technology and presentation facilities would go a long way in aiding presentation at such relaxation centres. This new marriage should be explored and utilized in such a way that the end products would be beneficial to all and bring about advancement to the 'less privileged' that is, live theatre.

These centers feature live music, comedy and other light entertainment as additional services for their patrons. This is not to make the place boring and to diversify the content of services in order to retain their customers. Quite right, theatre performances demand more than the musical or light comedy, but it does not mean live theatre performance cannot be featured. Hence, the time has come for theatre artists to take their arts to the audience wherever they are and present them with the desired cherished relaxation and entertainment.

Of the Yestar Years: What we have as theatrical enactments today were been merely referred to as entertainment or operas in the 60s in the hands of Ogunnde and his contemporaries. The operas for the matured citizens of the country, who were out to celebrate achievement of club members or to honour a deserving member at retirement, birthday celebration or mark end of the year activities of their club. These were occasions where and when the then Yoruba travelling theatre troupes would display variety of performance sketches. Jeyifo's (1984:vii) experience shows the kind of performances the troupes put up at such occasions and the experiences of the then audience. He relates his experience thus:

My earliest contact with the theatrical tradition popularized by the Yoruba travelling theatre troupes took place in my primary school days during the end-of-year concerts that rounded off the work and experience of every school year. These concerts were typically a mixed bag of songs, dances and modes of dressing and the dramatic items comprising plays and operas.

In other words, the performances were done to ease boredom and add spices to people's life in the various communities. Despite the annual traditional festivals which are means of entertainment, the presence of the Travelling Troupes was a welcome idea at occasions. The patronage and impression of the performances on the audience was as a result of a need for other forms of entertainment which were beyond the old culture, communicated in new, contemporary accents and idioms, but in a new vibrant art for a new age.

In addition, the experience brought about by the visits and performances of the travelling troupes gratified and satisfied needs of cultural expression and socio-economic relevance in the audience. This brought about conviction on issues of the day and appreciation of the arts in the audience. This to a large extent has a bearing on the erection and nurturing of the indigenous arts and the establishment of the modern art forms. In the account of Jeyifo, (1984:x) the troupes' performances across the states,

...become a central medium for telecommunication and expression of the traditional values... and aspiration of the class from which the great majority of its practitioners have sprung.

The peoples' way of life, living and dead are usually expressed in songs, dance and occasional mime or the operas. This form of

communication and entertainment was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the people. There were satisfactions derived from the enactments, moral lessons taught, as well as political or socio-economic issues made known to the viewers -audience. It also served as means of teaching and enlightening the rural dwellers who are usually ignorant of the happenings in the cities or government. The performances took place at various unconventional building where people could gather to see and hear. Usually the local dialects of the people are means of communication.

Where necessary, idioms and symbols are employed to convey the message with desired meanings. The themes of such performance are taken from the social lives of the masses at whom they are directed. The performances enjoyed greater turn-out and patronage than other forms of entertainment. The turn-outs are usually in hundreds and thousands as experienced in 1981 at third anniversary celebration of Radio Oyo in Ibadan. This is one of such occasions when live-stage performances are given their due patronage. At such situations, the class barrier is usually broken and one single message is passed across and received by all at the same time.

Taking a step further to United States of America, one would discover that the Broadway theatres are not only being challenged by the regional theatres, but by venture, with works that are regarded as superlatives or which Broadway never had chance to do. Also the wheels are used to keep residence away from Broadway. Works from other countries are not left out of theatre reformation or the dynamic movement of theatrical performances experienced in the late 1980s. As recorded in history by Brockett and Hildy (1999:379),

These movements and many more were recorded at the various regions of America. These theatres have slowly but surely challenged the might and main of Broadway by regular sending the best of the seasons.

The regions were regarded as powerhouse of theatrical activities who brought live theatre to millions. The bringing of theatrical activities out to people of Nigeria, would not be out of place, if individual groups and cooperate bodies can utilize the available spaces though unconventional- to reach the audience. The readily available spaces are truly unconventional but they can as well be adapted to suit drama presentations. Such venues as eateries, night clubs, relaxation centers and parks that are growing everywhere in our cities should be put to use as venues of enactment. A reference to the American experience shows that every region has a challenge to give the Broadway theatres, hence, it cannot lay claim during the 80's to monopoly of theatrical activities.

This period in Nigeria had a similar experience. Cities like Ibadan, Osogbo, Abeokuta, Kaduna, Kano, Owerri and other places visited by the Travelling Theatre Troupes and where such or similar troupes existed, performances were taken to the door posts and various groups were formed and operated within the immediate locality. The creation of Theatre Arts/Performing Arts Departments at the institutions of higher learning took theatre to the people. This tradition did not live for long, as the National Theatre in Iganmu; Lagos became the centre point of attraction for show casing films/video. This was the beginning of the demise of live Theatre. The institution auditoria are meant for teaching and learning, with their immediate environment inhabitant as audience. However, secondary schools then enjoyed the privilege of the enactment of their prescribed major literature texts in their school halls. The annual ends of the year parties/award ceremonies were

incomplete without short sketches from known drama texts. All these were looked up to at such occasion and add flavour to the events.

Theatre and its Audience

Theatre as an art form naturally concentrates on human problems and aspirations while being used as an important tool of civic and social value. Right from the Greek age, theatre has not ceased to perform this function, even where other arts such as propaganda fail. Theatre as an art form evolves from people, treats their problems and aspirations and proffers solution or navigates a way out. Where it cannot proffer immediate solutions, it conscientizes and reawakens their consciousness to the situation. This type of theatre is called Theatre for development (TFD). With all its indices, it deals with the masses; they own it, while in turn it performs the role of pedagogy within the people's cultural set up. This for this paper is a better replacement for live theatre for it shares all the dynamics of live theatre itself. Theatre through the ages has been a great tool in the teaching of pastoral doctrines as witnessed during the Roman age.

As a tool of exploration and explanation of moral and social values, it has remained a very vital weapon in the hands of the masses. Theatre in the modern times has assumed a greater role-playing in the formation of ideas, issues, laws, education and enlightenment of the people by government. It has become one major factor of unity in the handling of issues in most developing countries. The work of theatre arts or performing arts is not limited to the work of the actors and directors. The artists which now include theatre marketers and producers can now harness and utilize the available facilities provided by the new structure. They can form leagues and approach banks for loans for building of

theatres. Various groups can do the same to improve and upgrade their profession. The same goodwill gesture can be extended to the take-home pay of the actors. The desired and required dignity will not only be accorded the artists, the profession of theatre arts will receive a boost from the government and the citizens. Modern day theatre has not been restricted to a particular building or arena. It has moved beyond the four walls of buildings and if given necessary attention, it can retrace its steps to the streets, market places and other unconventional places where it could make positive impact on the people. Theatre has also reassumed its religious role of explaining the doctrines not only in the churches but in die mosques as well. Various community groups as well as human oriented organizations find it more appropriate to talk to, educate, enlighten and inform people about their various programmes than any other medium of communication.

The government and its agencies have always found theatre as a very vital tool of getting across to the populace. However, we must quickly observe that the channel and means of communication have been restricted to those in the cities and the educated. Although, theatre employs both verbal and non-verbal means of communication, it will go a long way to talk directly to the people in the language they would easily understand, that is, mothers' tongue. In the words of Obadiegwu, (2004:xvi):

The theatre we are talking about speaks to the people in their own language and idioms and deals with issues that most affect their life.

The issue of language and idioms cannot be overlooked the theatre that is meant to be participatory, conscientize, awaken people to the issues of the day. Although other media of communication can also make use of the peoples language and idioms, but the channels

most often constitute the restraint thereby making such information unavailable to the people. For instance, most Nigerian rural dwellers do not have access to electricity but the village squares or town halls are venues of disseminating information and interaction. Even the urban dwellers cannot boast of being adequately informed because of lack or life supply of electric power. Theatre that would yield positive result must emerge from amongst the people, giving them chance to look at it the way it concerns them. This is when they would be able to map out a way out of their problems and bring about personal as well as communal development.

Theatre that is involving would not only be experienced by people, it can bring about a new being and attitude towards issues. Theatre has as its primary function, the ability to influence while performing the traditional functions of information, entertainment and education, in addition to its effective use for political and ideological persuasion (Umukoro: 2002:114-115). Theatre has not failed in playing its roles in solving many national issues especially those that concern the well-being of the people. Various government and regimes in the past have employed theatre as organs of mass education to promote their programmes. Drama or play production has been a most economical mode of expression which can convey ideas directly and impact than any other forms of expression.

The Nigerian society is a very complex and pluralistic one, hence the need to employ drama and theatre to directly get to the people. For theatre and drama to rebrand the people of Nigeria, the theme must be relevant to the people's socio-cultural reality and address the problems within their environment and be appealing to them. The issue of rebranding Nigeria must start with the change of attitude of Nigerians thereby bringing about a new people with

new orientation and focus. The government and its agencies should not forget that to every duty and obligations certain rights and privileges must be attached. If the government would sincerely provide all needed rights and privileges to its citizens, there would naturally be discharge of duties and obligations from the citizens.

Conclusion

The new banking structures in Nigeria which is interested in developing and improving the communication gap between the masses and the government can be approached for financial backup. Various artists guild should come together to harness and utilize the available facilities provided by the structure. Leagues formed should approach banks for loans for construction of theatre buildings and rehabilitation of community and town halls. The village squares and palaces should be made to re-assume their traditional functions of venues of information dissemination and interactions. Political meetings and endorsement of political flag bearers should be restricted to party secretariat and other venues meant for such. The government of the day should see community as the bedrock of their success and accord the grassroots their due respect.

Due respect should be accorded the artistes who spend so much time and energy to package his work and present such before the people. The artistes should be seen and regarded as partners in the formation and implementation of policies by the government. The artistes should be vital contributors to the legislation and execution of national issues such as goals aimed at the human development. The government should bear in mind that when the people are able to see and understand their way of being in the nation they are able to go far beyond the narrow horizon and be

healed in global perspective of reality. Theatre which emanate from the people is able to make positive impact on them and necessary response arose towards the issues and ideas of the government. Theatre of this kind must break beyond the four-walls of theatre auditorium and go in search of its audience in the market place, school halls, village squares and town halls. This type of function is the business of Theatre for Development as earlier mentioned.

Theatre and drama that would yield positive results must not be detached from the ways of life, yearning and aspirations of the people. Both the artistes and the government should realize that theatre that are people oriented would not only rekindle, sensitize and conscientize, which readily you find in TFD, it should evolve and involve the people. Hence, the need to examine the dramaturgy, language, content, context, aesthetics and purposes in relation to the time and people.

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