

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)

Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 6(2), S/No 21, April, 2017: 41-

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v6i2.4>

Theatrical Performance as Social Work in Nigeria

Krama, Ilami Clive, PhD

Media Sociology Lecture

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt

Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: Mee4kay2001@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348035515378

Abstract

Every day people experience crises which manifest in poor or inability to make use of thinking faculties to decide on adequate plans to solve them. To solve everyday problems people must use habitual patterns of adaptation to restore and maintain their usual level of social functioning. The complexities of urban situations in Nigeria have made people go through different forms of crisis that range from emotional, physical, psychological, medical, social and economic. There are several means of treatment, techniques and methods for solving human crisis but the method explored in this work is the use of theatrical performances. The performances intended here include the theatre, stand-up comedy, music studies and dance performances. Therefore, implied in this paper is the assumption that theatrical performances are intervention treatment for crisis situations.

Key words: theatre, social work, performance, treatment

Introduction

The theatre is a nerve centre in the graphic presentation and transmission of accumulated culture. Shared experience are transmitted formally and informally from generation to generation. The inheritance of the ways of thinking perception and feeling

of people is learned, Human culture is learned and not like other animals that culture is biologically acquired.

The crisis solving process of social work involves contact or counselling to induce acceptance and the ability to drop the over powering effects of the problem. In Nigeria today, there are no standard practice or systematized processes of social work. The inadequacies of such processes have created deeper problems in people's abilities to manage crisis. Individuals are left with either natural instincts or poor drives to combat crisis. The crises are generated through complex, poor socialization, religion, ethnicity, poor motivation.

In Nigeria, people strive for physiological needs such as food, water, shelter and clothing. These are primary basic needs that in the 21st century should have been built into adequate policy. The majority of the people struggle to obtain social security which are mainly obtained through paid employment.

Theatrical performances apart from providing employment to meet the physiological needs of the people also provide a stimulus for positive response to alterations of society. The theatre combines the application of sociological, psychological and physiological principles to provide solutions. The schema provides adaptive or collective actions aimed at social reorganizations therefore the theatrical performances practically conscientize, and mobilize people for social action. The impact of the performances provides a daily, contact, stimulus response and a therapy to contend with every day challenges.

The music jamborees, the stand-up comedies, the dance performances provide a looking glass for shared experience and a play back of tried selves. Therefore, the tribunal for the trying of the selves provided by the theatrical performances stimulate processes of daily self-evaluations. The audience unconsciously goes through emotional release and evaluate personal experiences that cannot be shared with the usual social worker. The patient involuntarily relates with the therapist in the theatre, experiences theatrical performances and emotional control.

The theatre is a product of the interaction processes of a particular period by a given group of people as an attempt to respond to the group shared feelings and the demands of the environment. To a large extent the response to the demands of the people creates a web of coherence for the people. In essence, the theatre is a creation of every society and period. Therefore, this section of the paper will take a cursory look at the theatre from pre-colonial to post-colonial terms in Nigeria. Krama (2013) noted that:

The theory on the origin of African theatre has it that man gave interpretation to the environment based on his experience. Man saw the environment as filled with unpredictable and implacable forces. He sought various means of explaining these feared phenomena. The

processes which appeared to have the desired results were accepted and repeated as the rule of behaviour or rituals (p. 5).

The prehistoric or pre-colonial theatre provided a platform for shared feelings and a response to environmental stimuli. The theatre was a total experience and a means of regularity behaviour. The theatre manifested in festivals, dances, rites of preparations, marriages and array of celebrations that ensured the one of spirit of the community.

Post-colonial drama drew its roots from primitive rituals which contains gems of drama. Pre-colonial rituals used music, song, dance, storytelling, masks and array of other indices. Post-colonial performances which redefined situations and need were attempts to stabilize society. Post-colonial performances were schema to stabilize the individuals, institutions and the society. The conditions and circumstances of living in Post-colonial societies have extended the definition of performances. Theatrical performances in post-colonial times, though still retain the axiological roles, however, have extended the indices to include those aspects that were not considered in pre-colonial times. The sophistication of society increases its rites and celebrations.

In modern times, performances include, dance, music, oral poetry, puppetry, war, street protests stand-up comedy, marriages, processions, music jamborees etc.

It is important to note that theatrical performance both at the pre-colonial and post-colonial times provide rule for behaviour. So in essence the performances are not merely for pleasure.

Erving Goffman (1979), in affirmation of the crucial role of the theatre in behaviour modification noted that:

...looks at social life as if we were all actors in a play with social roles as our scripts. He calls his perspective the dramaturgical approach. Much of our behaviour, he maintains serves to create impressions (either sincerely or cynically). We use a variety of props, cues and nonverbal and verbal expressions to convey messages about ourselves to those with whom we interact (the audience) (In Howard Robboy et al, 1979, p. 53).

Implied in this position is the crucial role of theatrical performances in behaviour modification. The audience serves as a mirror that through back ourselves either sincerely or cynically. The intent is to improve behaviour. The argument here is not on the inner and alter ego or who the real self is, either the alter or the inner ego. The attempt here is to present the theatrical performances as tribunal for the trial of ourselves and in so doing, improve the perception and appreciation of ourselves for coherence of society. Implicit in the work is the presentation of theatrical performances as tool for emotional control. Performances are graphic representations of the shared social imagery for socialization, integration, interpretation and interaction of cultural

symbols. Post-colonial societies have increased the volume of social interaction and so performances do not only portray the level of sophistication of technology or civilization but function as a powerful tool of selection and control. Thus, performances as powerful tool of emotional and behavioural control transforms artistic expressions into visible sources of social images for the collectivization of action or behaviour.

The power of the theatre or performance lies in its ability to create atmosphere, experience and state of consciousness. Performance evokes emotions ranging from exaltation to despair. Traditional performances prevalent in precolonial times aroused strong emotions because of cultural referents. In general, both precolonial and post-colonial theatrical performances can elicit strong emotional reactions or control. This is possible because of the pristine role of theatrical performances of expressing the inner feelings, environmental and expressive relationships. Siobham (1990) explained “Drama therapy as a psychotherapeutic modality that makes use of techniques derived from the theatre, spans two disciplines, each based on emotional adaptability” (p. 1). Observable from this contribution is that the mental state or interpretation of one’s experience determines the person’s emotional reaction and behaviour.

The theatrical performance is like a looking glass wherein the emotions of the audience are naked on stage. The emotional stimuli provided by the theatrical performances are intended to mediate in the consciousness of the audience to the extent that emotion or drive is entirely private. Krama (2002) further inveighed that “theatrical performances affect individual lives and processes of decision-making through the use of subtle force or persuasion”.

The theatrical performances supplant and mediate in the processes of individual emotional persuasion either inadvertently or advertently. In essence the theatrical performances provide an audited stream of emotional release and emotional therapy where both the performers and the audience engage in a mop up emotion as well as reinvent mental processes.

Theatrical Performance as a Tool of Social Work

The use of theatrical performance for social work is very necessary. The performance has always contributed to personal and collective empowerment, though there have been no deliberate studies in this area, particularly in Nigeria. The performance induces client participation and empowerment which are the principles of social work and practice. Bear and Federico, cited in Iwarimie-jaja (2002), explained that: “The term special work is concerned and involved with the interactions between people and the institutions of society that affect the ability of people to accomplish life tasks, realize aspirations and values and alleviate distress” (p. 1).

The performance atmosphere created through drama, song, dance, music, costume, etc. communicate ideas and messages that provide a rapport between the performance and

the audience. This platform truncates rigid boundaries of conventional social work practices and empowers powerless populations. Most times, people may experience crisis and withdraw due to uninformed fears of conventional treatments. In some cases, poor information about a particular distress may hinder a client from seeking treatment performance as a technique. Social work uses habitual patterns of adaptation to restore and maintain usual level of social and cultural functioning.

The crisis intervention and mediation involved in theatre practice are of two levels. The first level is the general emotional appeal to both stable and unstable situations. The individual encounters these at all times and so to curb stress, people make choices of recreational activities. Such activities may include sports, reading, watching movies, worship activities, theatrical activities, etc. In all the activities enlisted above, the theatrical activities in form of comedy shows, dancing, musical shows, performances, encourage emotional overflow that involves the prying of inner emotion. The release of such stress or pent up emotions frees the individual from deep crisis. Aristotle (cited in Krama 2013) affirmed this as he noted that "...as enhanced by distinct and varying beauty, acted, not narrated which invokes emotional pity and tears with intent to effect the purgation of these emotion" (p. 2).

Some held-up emotion may not be released though clinical therapy or some intentional therapy but can be released unarmed in company of others sharing through the same emotional appeal. Being naked in company of others is like a play within a play. The individual situation is addressed in the open and unprepared, the victim or the individual cracks out the emotion. The release may not be quantified or measured but the effect has been achieved and most times, the psychological stress is removed. Though studies on psychology have situated the use of the theatrical activities in reducing stress, but this form of therapy has not been rigorously studied. At some point, theatrical activities curb stress and crisis at precipitating levels. The images, information and emotion shared in the process of involvement in theatrical activities stimulate awareness and information that prevent crisis precipitating factors. The experience gathered and information obtained during such exercises can encourage people to accept treatments or services rather than retreat indoors and suffer mere problems.

The second level of mediation through theatrical activities is the deliberate use of these activities either as group work or deliberate use of music, dances, sketches or playlets designed to treat a particular client or clients. This forms the focus of this paper and will be addressed in the remaining part of this essay.

Theatre Practice and Socials Work

This aspect of the paper focuses on the use of theatre practice as a social work deliberately with the aim of communicating ideas or messages to the audience. The

desire here is to see theatre practice step out of its pristine location to provide needed services in Nigeria. Not much of theatre practice is involved in social work in Nigeria.

The use of theatre practice in social work provides a real life feel and aids a proper understanding of the client disposition as well as reduces client's inhibitions or apathy. Theatre images naked the client in the company of others and these shared feelings enhance client's understanding of the depth of the situation. Most times, clients seek for help when they are exposed to the external stimuli on how the external stimuli affect their internal responses. The steering of the inner will to positive feelings produces improved behaviour. In support of this position, Iwarimie-Jaja (2002) explained that: "In that case, social workers must motivate clients to conduct self-evaluation about values and self-image...."

The theatre creates images that form the shared feelings and experiences which build new connections as well as resource systems. The experience offered by the theatre may not be as clinical as the one offered by the social work agents or agency but midwifes the client and the systems as well as group connections. Not all stressful situations lead to actual stress or life threatening situations, however, situations that gradually lead to actual stress depends on the individual's perception and interpretation of the situation. This is where the theatre comes in handy as a social work process. The theatre provides the stimuli that condition the reflexes of the client and reactions. Thus, the information provided through the interaction processes between the individual and the theatrical processes create intervention as well as encourage, manage feelings, and motivate to seek proper treatment.

Role-play in social work facilities integration of clients and resources centres, thus, leading to more realistic approaches to social work interventions and breaking of client's rigidities.

In most cases, theatre students or trained actors act as clients in assisting social workers break barriers of clients and communicate skills to social workers. This process aids the comparison of the perception of the intervening techniques of the social worker and the client. The experience provided through theatre practice explores the effectiveness of acting as a technique, using improvisation and standardized clients' interviews.

Conclusion

The methodology employed here in this paper has been exploratory on the use of the theatre as a schema for social work in Nigeria. The use of the theatre as merely for entertainment or relaxation has not exacted the practice of the theatre beyond its pristine role. As a value chain, the paper advocated the extensive use of theatre practice in social work processes. Thus, implicit in the assumption of this paper is the call for strong interest in the use of theatre students and trained actors in social work to create a real life situation.

References

- Ammen, B. (2003). Community Theatre as a Means of Empowerment in Social Work. *Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 11:34 London: Sage Publications.
- Aristotle (in Krama 2013). *African traditional theatre and drama: Themes and perspectives*. Choba, Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Erving G. (In Howard Robboy et al, 1979). *Social interaction: Introductory readings in sociology*. New York: Martins Press.
- Iwarimie-Jaja, D. (2002). *Understanding social work*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers.
- Krama I. C. (2002). *The mass media and cultural production in Nigeria: A case study of the city of Port Harcourt*. An Unpublished PhD Thesis of the Department of Sociology, University of Port Harcourt.
- Krama, I. C. (2013). *African traditional theatre and drama: Themes and perspective*. Choba, Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Siobham, J. (1990). Approach to emotion in psychotherapy and theatre: Implications for drama therapy in the arts. *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 17:1 New York: Pergamon Press.