



**The Contemporary Nigerian Theatre Practitioner in Search of Market: The  
New Media to the Rescue**

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**Abstract**

The theatre practitioner, in Nigeria and in most parts of Africa, is today faced with the challenges of limited funding and space to market his art. He or she is also confronted with the task of raising and sustaining a true professional group that can turn his art into a money spinning venture, especially with the overwhelming presence of the new media. Using *Play Theory of Mass Communication* as its framework, this paper examines the position of the theatre artiste/practitioner in the context of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and new media. It first attempts a study of the 'pre-independence' practitioners of theatre and drama as professionals, followed by the apathy and misfortune that characterised the sector in the 'post-independence' era. The paper discovers that while the practitioners in the 'pre independence' era sustained theatre as business and art, the reverse is

the case in the 'post-independence' era, owing largely to the overriding influence of the new media. The paper concludes that for the contemporary theatre practitioner to succeed, he or she must be well versed in the popular mode of stage drama, and must equally learn how to incorporate the new media into his or her practice. A deficiency in either of the two above may hamper the growth and substance of the theatre profession and reduce the marketability of the art form generally.

**Keywords:** Popular African Theatre Mode, Professionalism, New Media, Contemporary Theatre Practice, Marketability.

### **Introduction**

In this growing era of information technology which has over time created diverse media outlets for theatre to thrive beyond the popular mode, it behoves of the theatre practitioner to redirect his art and device a new way for sustainability. The theatre artiste finds himself as a creative person who must learn how to survive by embracing the new media of Radio, Television, Film as well as the Internet offerings to make his art relevant to society. The artiste needs to respond creatively to the demands of the new media in order to market his products effectively; aside consolidating his social, cultural, educative entertainment and interventionist roles in society.

#### **Drama and Theatre in the Pre-Independence Era:**

In the years before Nigeria's independence, drama and theatre had thrived with the activities of privately owned theatre companies. The Yoruba Travelling Theatre Companies had started touring the country with their plays which ran for many years. For example, Hubert Ogunde (1912 – 1990) started his professional group as early as 1940s travelling and touring the country with his plays. He was soon to be joined by his colleagues such as Akin Ogungbe, Oyin Adejobi, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo who equally ran independent travelling theatres between 1940s and 1950s. Notable among the plays of Hubert Ogunde were ***Bread and Bullet*** and ***Strike and Hunger***.

In the same vein, there existed a thriving theatre culture in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country at the time. A medical doctor, James Ene Henshaw had a group of amateur players based in Calabar. The group usually travelled with its plays to Port Harcourt and other neighbouring

towns and villages purposely to entertain the people. Most significantly, Henshaw's first and most popular play; ***This is Our Chance*** later inspired other younger writers who emerged after the 1950s. In the words of Dapo Adelugba;

There was a vibrant theatrical atmosphere in Nigeria before the 1960s, and if independence sowed seeds which; in retrospect; seen vital, it must be firmly asserted that the ground which was to receive these seeds was already fertile. If the germination and flowering has been quick, we must seek the reasons for this not only in post-independence developments but in the overall receptiveness and promise of the Nigerian environment pre-independence (Adelugba; 1989, p. 60-72).

**Drama and Theatre between 1960 and 1966:**

Following the pre-independence era was the First Republic (1960 – 1966) which was generally known as the years of national jubilation for Nigerians. At this period, Nigeria just attained independence (1960) and the pride of an independent nation free from colonial rule was still in the air. Quite significantly too, the First Republic recorded important developments in the areas of drama and theatre. In the Western part of Nigeria at Ibadan, the only university in Nigeria before independence – University College – later had the first School of Drama in Africa created in 1962. The school was facilitated by a generous grant of about a quarter of a million dollars from America's Rockefeller Foundation. The establishment of the school further led to growth and development of drama and theatre in the country. Adelugba also recalled that:

Developments in drama and theatre at Ibadan took firm root with the joint nourishment of an educational base for theatre studies and an apt collaboration between the earnestly searching work of

academia and the effervescent creative impulse of the work of the wider Nigerian community, a collaboration which received an early impetus in the bringing into the University College, Ibadan, of the Kola Ogunmola Travelling Theatre early in 1963 for a six month programme of the artists in residence which climaxed in the joint production by the school of Drama staff and the Kola Ogunmola Theatre of a staff adaptation of Amos Tutuola's novel; *The palm wine drunkard* (Adelugba; 1989, p. 60-71).

Aside the role played by the School of Drama, the period between 1960 and 1966 also witnessed a robust season of published dramas in English Language. The likes of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark became the most widely published literary writers of the period. While Soyinka came up with such plays as ***A Dance of the Forests (1960), Lion and the Jewel (1964), and The Road (1965)***, **J. P. Clark also earned reputation for his four dramatic texts – *Song of a Goat (1962), The Masquerade (1963), The Raft (1964) and Ozidi (1966)***. It is also significant to note here that during this period, Wole Soyinka ran and operated his theatre companies – The 1960 Masks (Ibadan) and later Orisun Theatre (Ife, which was then located at the current site of the Polytechnic, Ibadan).

For most theatre critics, the 1960-1966 period was described as the hey-day of James Ene Henshaw, who was the oldest of the elite dramatists then. It was also the same for his younger colleagues – Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark. But the years that followed the First Republic saw the emergence of such young and resourceful dramatists like Ola Rotimi Umaru Ladan, Wale Ogunyemi, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi and later, Zulu Sofola, Akanji Nasiru, Segun Oyekunle, Kole Omotoso and Femi Osofisan.

#### **Drama and Theatre from the 1970s to the present:**

Although the Yoruba travelling theatre continued to make impact alongside the dramatists who wrote in English Language, the 1970s ushered in the era of television as a major medium of communication. With the incoming of television dramas and soap operas, as well as radio, the Nigerian theatrical

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scene began to change from the popular stage mode (itinerant productions) to the now easy and less expensive screen drama.

Besides, the fortune of travelling theatre (Alarinjo) was beginning to change as television and radio proved to be commercially viable than the stage which involved movement of cast, crew and set from one location to the other.

In fact the numerous tours undertaken by the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners were being mitigated by the fear of automobile accidents on the road and the more attractive fees being offered by the television and radio stations for theatrical performances.

Another widely believed factor which mitigates against popular stage drama from the 1980s to the present is the growing economic hardship and inadequate security occasioned by the danger of moving to the theatre at nights to watch plays. So, live theatres and their producers were losing patronage from the paying audience while a handful of them were embracing radio and television to showcase their art.

In the same vein, another major setback for popular stage drama was the inability of governments and political office holders to guarantee people's free movement as well as ensure adequate protection of lives and property.

Obiora Ekwueme notes that majority of Nigerians have been rendered "voiceless, socially degraded, psychologically dehumanized and economically disadvantaged by the oppressive leaders" (Ekwueme; 2013, p. 170)

As a vindication of the above social milieu, another scholar and popular playwright, Bode Sowande observes:

Nigeria of today is dysfunctional. It is holistically dysfunctional. So the arts within that kind of anomie suffer. But the Nigeria of my early days encouraged the arts – we did not have theatre buildings but we had town halls. From Lagos to Sokoto, Hubert Ogunde was touring the cities. There were town halls everywhere – Mapo Hall in Ibadan, Centenary Hall in Abeokuta and the old City Hall in Lagos –

all of which harboured theatre. At that time, theatre was alive, buoyant, stable and profitable. What practitioners did then was that if one was an artiste or a professional, you would take time off your occupation to pursue your objective during the theatre season, make your money and later return to your tailoring job ... Theatre was still on but what killed theatre really was the military regimes of IBB and Abacha. The rate of insecurity increased during this era and everybody was forced to stay indoors. This gave rise to the home video in Nigeria but this is no competition to live theatre. The home video in Nigeria is still very mediocre (Sowande, 2012, p.30-31).

Sowande's observation rests on the fact that live theatre can hardly be compared to a video drama as a result of the lack of technical quality and poor handling of the stories or materials by theatre practitioners. He believes that the situation is further worsened by continued presence of politicians and leaders who lack the will and vision to transform the society.

But the argument about inadequate security at nights may be faulted by the simple logic of people's preferences or interests. In the days of the Travelling Theatre mode, theatre practitioners offered their audiences such popular plays that reflected their lives hence people were able to relate with the stories in such dramas which re-enacted their own experiences.

However, as the exponents of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre were getting old and some of them dying, the succeeding theatre companies and institutions shifted emphasis from the popular theatre mode to elitist theatre. The immediate response to this was the migration of theatre audience to other avenues for relaxation and enjoyment. So, rather than spend a meagre amount to watch an elitist play, for just two hours, the average Nigerian theatre audience would prefer to watch a popular home video in his closet or visit the bar or club and spend fortunes drinking with his friends till almost daybreak.

The foregoing argument lends credence the fact that the post-civil war era in Nigeria saw theatre moving gradually from the popular to the elitist mode. While the likes of Hubert Ogunde, Oyin Adejobi, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo offered the popular theatre mode, the succeeding Western oriented drama in English seemingly gave the audience a kind of drama that was alien to them. Although some of the plays in English explored African motifs of folklore, music and poetry, majority of the plays, particularly the ones produced at the institutions of higher learning, were basically elitist and too experimental as to entice the Nigerian audience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theatre audience is basically interested in being entertained, hence his or her desire to escape from reality to the seemingly ideal world that the theatre offers. It is therefore not surprising for people to be interested in watching drama or musical programmes which they derive pleasure from. The Play Theory of Mass Communication as propounded by William Stephenson in 1967 holds that the main function of the media is to provide entertainment. This is based on the assumption that most people in the society consume dramatic or musical shows for pleasure. According to Stephenson's theory, the media and theatre serve audiences primarily to create entertainment and provide play experiences.

The stated Play Theory explains that there are two basic situations in life: First is the play situation such as Entertainment, Relaxation, Pleasure and Self-Satisfaction; and the Second is the work situation that concerns Self-Improvement, Development, Productivity and Ambition. It would be observed that Social Media thrives on entertaining the audience who are the users or subscribers of the ICT. In a symbiotic relationship, the ICT investors earn their income from the subscribers to sustain the technology, while the subscribers too derive satisfaction from the offerings/content of the social media operating on the ICT.

### **The New Media: A Description**

New media refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation. It incorporates real-time generation of real and unregulated content. New media is also a generic term for the many different forms of

electronic communication that are made possible through the use of computer technology. The term may be viewed in relation to conventional media forms, such as print - newspapers and magazines - that are static representations of texts and graphics.

Most technologies described as new media are digital, often subject to manipulation, networkable, dense, compressible and interactive. The term media incorporates:

- ❖ Websites;
- ❖ Streaming audio & video;
- ❖ Chat rooms;
- ❖ E-mails;
- ❖ Online communities;
- ❖ Web-advertising;
- ❖ DVD AND CD-Rom;
- ❖ Virtual reality environment;
- ❖ Internet telephony;
- ❖ Digital cameras;
- ❖ Mobile computing.

The caller-tunes sharing platform on our smartphones are all part of the listed new media. We should understand that the musician whose audio track becomes a caller-tune is actually performing to an interactive audience on the new media. A full length play can be accommodated on video streaming thus making the director's work accessible on new media platform.

Although the platforms we loosely referred to as new media here accommodate film, radio and television; the contemporary Nigerian Theatre Practitioner may not survive economically without being operationable on the listed platforms. However, new media does not include "raw" television programmes, feature films, magazines, books or any paper-based publications unless they are captured in technologies that enable digital interactivity.

Wikipedia, an on-line encyclopaedia, combines internet accessible digital text, images and video with web-links, creative participation of contributors, interactive feedback of users and formation of a participant community of editors and donors for the benefit of non-community readers.



Facebook is an example of the social media model in which most users are also participants. It accommodates pictures, videos and interactive platform. The foregoing explanation points to the fact that social media exist mainly for social interaction; hence it enhances social communication using diverse techniques. In the words of Teddy Hanmakyugh, social media components traverse many outlets as stated below:

Social media services such as e-mail, instant messaging, social blogs, weblogs, wikis, photographs, Facebook, music sharing, video, book marking etc. are made accessible through this technology platform either as a recreational tool or an instrument for personal security. ...it is also a status symbol among peer groups, a social organisational tool as well as an instrument for sharing knowledge.

The various platforms listed above accommodate diverse contents which are mainly centred on entertaining the subscribers or promoting interactions among the users of social media. In other words, it is the entertainment content that sustains the interest of the audiences/subscribers on these platforms.

### **Brief History of New Media**

The origin of Social Media is traceable to the invention of the electronic computers in the United States of America in the 1950s. It started with packet networking which originated from different computer science laboratories and later got introduced to the United Kingdom and France. In the early 1960s, the United States Department of Defence awarded contracts to computer operators and this led to the Advanced Research Project Agency Network (ARPANET). The first result came through a message sent over the ARPANET by Professor Leonard Klein from his laboratory at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

In the United Kingdom, Donald Davies designed another package at the National British Laboratory which was on for almost two decades. Eventually the ARPANET project led to the development of protocols for internet

networking. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a different kind of parallel relationship existed between social changes and computer design. (Wikipedia, (2015) [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/video\\_CD](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/video_CD))

In Nigeria, the internet came in 1995 through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) which organised a seminar at the Yaba College of Technology on the benefits and awareness of the Internet in private and public sectors. The seminar led to the establishment of the Nigeria Internet Group (NIG), a non - governmental organisation which further popularised Social Media and the ICT in the country. The National Communications Commission also licensed a total of 38 internet providers to operate the internet in the country. Today, the internet revolution has been of great use in private and public sectors such that over 140 million of the Nigerian population now have accesses to Social media.(Balogun, 2016, p. 28) Media Society and the Arts, Vol 2, Centre of Praise Academy, First Apex Avenue, Ayetobi lagbado Lagos,)

The origin

Theoretical forerunners to New Media include:

### **Marshall McLuhan (1964) in Understanding Media:**

The extensions of man claimed that “the medium is the message”. He drew attention to the too often ignored influence media and technologies, themselves, rather their content have on humans’ experience of the world and on society broadly.

Prior to 1980s, media relied primarily on print and analogue broadcast models, such as those of television and radio. The last 30 years have witnessed rapid transformation in the media which are predicated upon the use of digital technologies, such as the Internet and video games.

### **Globalization, Pop-Culture and New Media:**

New Media as a globalized structure has increased communication between people all over the world – through blogs, websites, pictures and other user-generated media. For instance, the new media in globalization shortens the distance between people all over the world by the electronic communication (Carely 1992 in Flew 2002) and Cairncross (1998) express the great development as the “death of distance”. New media “radically break the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location

much less significant for our social relationship (Croteau and Hoynes 200, p. 3311).

Whatever reason the people have for not coming physically to the theatre does not arise now; because you can stay and watch wherever you are at any time.

### **New Media Opportunities**

The creation of virtual communities online transcends geographical boundaries and eliminates social restrictions. Howard Rheingold (2000) describes the globalized societies as self-defined networks, which resembles what we do in real life.

### **Interactivity and New Media**

Interactivity as associated with new media-use-options evolves from the rapid dissemination of Internet access points, the digitization of media, and media convergence. New media as communication technologies enable or facilitate user –to-user interactivity and interactivity between the user and information. This, in a way, replaces the “one-to-many” model of traditional mass communication with the possibility of “many to many” web of communication.

Any individual with the appropriate technology can now produce his or her online media and include images (video), text and sound about whatever he or she chooses (Croteau, David and Hoynes, William, 2003, p.303).

Interactive new media has led to further categorization of the communication modules:

- ❖ Interpersonal media as “one-to-one”;
- ❖ Mass media as “one-to-man”;
- ❖ New media as “Individuation media or many to many

### **The Filmmaker and the New Media:**

Interactivity is viable in the traditional media but had never been fully utilized. In the mid-1990s, filmmakers started using inexpensive digital cameras to create films. It was about the same time that moving image

technology had developed, which could be viewed on computer desktops in full motion. This development of new media technology, according to Sherizaf Rafaeli (1998, p. 28) was a new method for artists to share their work and interact with the big world. The performance may be done in Lagos but marketed globally.

Interactive new media has become a true benefit to everyone because people can express their artwork in more than one way with the technology that we have today and there is no longer a limit to what we can do with our creativity. Interactivity can be considered a central concept in understanding new media, but different media forms possess different degrees of interactivity and some forms of digitized and converged media are not in fact interactive at all (Flew, Terry, 2002, p. 13) .

### **Advantages of the New Media**

New Media shares an open association with many market segments in areas such as software/video game design, television, radio, and particularly movies, advertising and marketing; everyone seeks to gain from the advantages of two-way dialogue with consumers primarily through the Internet.

People now use the new media as a device to source ideas, concepts, and intellectual properties of the general public. The television industry has used the New Media and the Internet to expand its resources for new programming and content. The advertising industry has also capitalized on the proliferation of the new media. Large advert agencies now run multi-million dollar interactive advertising subsidiaries. Interactive websites and kiosks have also become popular. Public relations firms are also taking advantage of the opportunities in the new media through interactive PR practices.

### **Youth and New Media**

The cellular smart phones has created constant company for the user such that he or she is never in complete solitude. The device has equally enhanced the users' potential of establishing and sustaining relationships. The smart phones activate the insular cortex of the brain, which is associated with feelings of love. People now show similar feelings to their phones as they

would to their friends, relations and loved ones. Lindstrom (2012) observes that “countless people spend more time on their smartphones, while in the presence of other people than spending time with the people in the same room’.

### **Inhibiting Factors**

Sailing in the boat of the new media requires some conformities. A good knowledge of the computer is a prerequisite for ascending any of the platforms. It becomes a must, therefore that would-be beneficiaries of New Media are exposed to computer education as an integral part of every professional training. Obviously, computer training in most theatre departments in the country is inadequate.

Oftentimes, where the equipment for training may be available, the required trainer may be far-fetched. A good percentage of the lecturers in the older generation universities never had adequate exposure to computing. It is business as usual in the old ways of doing things. Computer literacy has become a must for every professional who wishes to remain relevant in today’s scheme of things.

There is therefore an urgent need for the departments of theatre arts to incorporate computer and related electronic trainings in their curriculum. If this is done effectively, their products stand a good chance of becoming job creators rather than job seekers.

### **Conclusion**

The current theatre industry in Nigeria is far from being viable as a result of inadequate training of artistes and failure by practitioners to embrace the opportunities of the New Media. Unlike the travelling theatre practitioners of the Pre-Independence Nigeria, many of the theatre practitioners today are limited not merely by inadequate funding but by lack of relevant space and medium to showcase their art. The first solution is for the theatre training outlets (such as Schools, Colleges and Universities) to train their students on the gains and advantages of the New Media as a way of exposing them to the ample opportunities available.

Also, computer training should be of priority importance in the theatre departments of our Universities. Following this is the need for theatre

trainers to review the theatre curricular in favour of the “town and gown” syndrome. By this, theatre students must learn how to produce good theatre that can appeal to the audience. This presupposes that the theatre practitioner, producer or dramatist must learn how to produce popular plays that can sustain the audience at various levels of society.

As a way of maximising the gains of the New Media, the contemporary Nigerian theatre artist must not only produce plays that reflect the experiences of the people, but must also learn how to make money through New Media outlets such as smart phones, the video format, the TV and other internet facilities.

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