FACILITATING STUDENTS' THEATRE PRODUCTIONS DURING A PANDEMIC

Nkemdirim Olubunmi ADEDINA
Department of Theatre Arts,
Lagos State University of Education,
Otto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria
Email: bfadedina@gmail.com

Abstract

The surge of Covid-19 pandemic came unexpectedly that it caught most nations unaware. Not only did the health and wellbeing of the populace become a concern, preventing the spread of the deadly virus was paramount. Subsequently, restrictions were placed on physical contacts, human movements and interactions and in some cases there were total shut down for a period of time. This in no small measure affected several sectors of human existence, prominent among them is education, where the practice of educational theatre is not left out. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, teaching and learning of theatre, especially practical courses took a new dimension bringing to the fore, challenges, innovations, restructuring and reorganisation of students' theatre productions. It is on this premise, that this paper attempts a study of how students' productions survived the heat of the pandemic in a teacher training institution. It specifically beams light on an educational theatre domiciled in Lagos State University of Education with the intention of sharing experiences of coordinating students' productions in a pandemic era. The research is based on experiences gained during the experimentation of teaching practical courses online through a specific study of a group work that culminated in a stage production.

Keywords: Educational Theatre, Covid-19, On-Line, Technology, Students' Productions.

Introduction

A pandemic is an epidemic that has travelled internationally, thereby giving it a larger wide spread. "A Pandemic is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic." (Robinson par. 2). Within the scope of religion, adherents are taught past [and impending] dangers of plagues that have affected the human world and this has shaped the beliefs and responses to pandemics over time. Huremovic gives a historical account of some plagues in the world, namely, the Athenian Plague (430-26 B.C) – Associated with the Greeks; the Antonine Plague (165-180 AD) – Associated with the Romans; the Justinian Plague (Mid 6th C) – Associated with Ethiopia; the Black Death (1347) – Associated with China; Spanish Flu (1920) – Associated with Spain; HIV Pandemic (1980s) –

Associated with USA; Smallpox Outbreak (1972) – Associated with former Yugoslavia; Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (21st C) – Associated with China; Swine Flu (2009) – Associated with Mexico; Ebola Outbreak (2014-2016) – Associated with Central and Western Africa; ZIKA (2015-2016) – Associated with Uganda, among others.

Outstanding features of these diseases range from, skin eruptions, cough, vomiting, hallucinations, acute respiratory symptoms causing impairments, disabilities for those that survived and death of a great number of people. These diseases are accredited for de-populating the world during their spread and a major way of controlling their spread was to reduce human contact, isolate and devise vaccines to prevent further disasters. The Covid-19 pandemic is one out of the many kinds of viruses that currently plagues human society. Though it is said to have originated in China, it has crept into all continents of the world with devastating effect on human lives as well as economy. Covid-19 came into the news for the first time in November 2019 and due to its nature as an airborne disease, it is contracted through human contacts. It may not be easily detected in people infected with the virus until two weeks, thereby making the spread fast and almost uncontrollable. Most often, "people infected with the covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without special treatment (Ibrahim 204). However, some others, especially older people or those with underlying medical conditions requiring special treatments may not be fortunate to survive the disease due to low immunity. While the treatments and cure, vaccines have been developed to curb its spread by boosting immunities.

Up to fifty-four (54) countries have confirmed cases and deaths. These led to closure of borders, international flights and international trades. There are, however, lots of speculations about the vaccine and many people are yet to come to terms with the need to be vaccinated against this deadly virus. It has created a major crisis and greatest challenge in the health sector since its emergence. Apart from this, Covid-19 is also devastating and has led to social, economic, political and educational crises and there appears to be no respite yet. While mankind was busy seeking ways to contain the virus, it mutated into a deadlier variant known as Delta. The Delta variant has minimal symptoms, which in the space of seven days may lead to death. Recently, the deadliest variant, Omicron was discovered in South Africa on November 24, 2021 (WHO, 2021). Educational Theatre Association confirms that internationally, institutional theatre programmes encountered grave threats and devastating consequences from the effects of the Covid-19.

> Most school districts, faced with lost instructional time, limited capacity, and the added resources needed to address new modes of teaching and learning, are likely to retool their curricula to emphasize

core subject areas, such as math and reading. Theatre, along with the other arts, may be considered an expendable subject area as district leaders struggle to adapt their schools, teachers, and students to a new reality of education that is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. For theatre education to maintain its place in schools, advocates will need broad-based community support…. (6)

Apparently, educational theatres workshops as well as performances were cancelled in the wake of Covid-19 culminating in gross loss of revenue provided by ticket sales which is a major source of income for the management of these theatres apart from institutional support. In order to confront the situation and prevent theatre performances from total collapse, it became imperative for teachers and students to re-shaped teaching methods opportunities by embracing new tools and resources to deliver online instruction that will afford learning opportunities to students. While the varying degrees of success regarding students' engagement with virtual instruction for theatre programmes may not be fully ascertained in this paper, due to a series of other variables, it is worthy to note that this era is the beginning of innovative virtual lessons for theatre lecturers and students. Hopefully, it would lead to a review and retool of curricula in theatre education and may likely continue to be a desired part of the well-rounded education of all students.

Covid-19 and Education in Nigeria

At the onset of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the government rose to the occasion by taking measures just like other nations. This was after the news of the first human contact with an infected person in Nigeria on 27th February, 2020. In a short time, it spread around the country like wildfire. Consequently, President Muhammadu Buhari announced a lockdown of two major states and the federal capital at the first instance. They are Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. As the virus extend to other states, many states government embarked on the similar measures to curb the spread of the deadly virus. This action was not a welcome development among Nigerian citizens because of the infringement on their fundamental human rights. These include freedom of association, movement, religion, education and so on. It further prevented citizens from accessing their daily livelihood especially as there was too much hunger, restlessness, hardship and insecurity. In order to ameliorate these conditions, several measures were introduced to affect men, women, boys and birds. The government came up with welfare and relief packages, programmes and activities to cushion the effect of the Sit-at-Home with support from companies, organizations and institutions. Unfortunately,

this good intention was hijacked and politicized by a few powerful and influential individuals.

Just like other sectors, education suffered a setback especially during the lockdown. On March 19, 2020 there was a directive by the Ministry of Education to close down all institutions of learning from pre-primary to tertiary. Students across the various institutions of learning from primary to tertiary, cut short their stay in schools and returned home without plans/policies on how academic activities would continue from home. This was a highly traumatic and turbulent period for students especially those in federal and state owned institutions. In response to criticism, some state governments took initiatives for teaching and learning from home by introducing online academic activities. Private universities which seemed to be better prepared went on with teaching and learning to complete the session and even conducted examinations. Given the lack of development of online learning tools in public schools, there were lots of difficulties and challenges in the use of technology to reach students. Students from poor homes that did not have access to smartphones or internet facilities were totally deprived of on-line learning. Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education in some states to adopt mass production of Radio and television, power supply rendered them almost useless.

As of 12th April 2020, approximately 1.723 billion learners have been affected with the sudden closure of schools in response to Covid-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO Monitoring as of the date above, 191 countries have implemented nationwide closures and 5 have implemented local closures impacting about 98.4 percent of the world's student population (Adelakun 88). The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted most industries in the world except for the education industry that was fully transferred online. The switch to online education came suddenly with little preparation or readiness for the swift move especially for developing countries like Nigeria. While online learning had already been activated in some institutions prior to the emergence of the pandemic, the same could not be said for most schools, colleges and universities who do not use this mode of teaching and learning. Online learning took the centre stage and there was increased awareness, involvement, utilisation and guidance of students to be motivated in virtual learning. It became the only option during this era and the experience varies from one coast to another despite the fact that it was riddled with so many challenges, confusion and in some cases total failure. Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education was able to launch online classes amidst the lockdown and this created the platform for the Department of Theatre Arts to explore virtual learning in theory and practice.

The Federal Ministry of Education did not come up with adequate policy or measures on how to ease learning during the school closure. The idea of home schooling is not fully practiced in Nigeria and mostly, shocking to children's social life and learning as there was no prior preparation, education and enlightenment. Apart from the adaptability of the children, teachers were ill prepared and ill equipped to adopt an untested and unprecedented process. Also, not every parent was knowledgeable enough to handle the technicalities involved in the pedagogy. However, lecturers in private universities responded to virtual teaching than those from public universities and that a negative relationship exists between the socio demographic/occupational variables (gender, current position, and years of experience) and virtual orientation of lecturers of Nigerian universities. (Iseolorunkanmi, Adebola, Adebola, Rotimi, Nweke-Love, Adebisi and Lawal 3)

Some identified cable television, radio stations and social media outlets came up with special programmes for primary and secondary school students at specific times of the day. Private schools rose gallantly to the occasion by moving further to engage their students in e-learning, involving the use of Apps and software like, Google classroom, Google meet, Whatsapp, Zoom, You-Tube etc.. Similarly, private universities proceeded to complete the session, conduct exams for their students and resume a new session. The same cannot be said for public/government owned institutions of learning across board. In a research carried out by Olasunkanmi (n.pag.), Nigerian students complain of higher data consumption, erratic power supply, internet network fluctuations and environmental distractions to establish their negative dispositions towards online schooling. The effort of the government in this aspect was less significant and unnoticeable.

Department of Theatre Arts LASUED as an Educational Theatre

Before the emergence of the department, there already existed a theatre culture in the College community through the efforts of Dr Femi Adedina in the early eighties. He was a lecturer in the Department of English but was equally assigned a General Education course, Drama Minor. It was this platform that first gave opportunities for theatrical performances involving students cutting across all departments in the institution. As a follow up, he established a drama troupe known as Gazelle Players, and they thrilled the entire College to exciting moments of quality and standard stage productions. It was, therefore, not a surprise that a proposal establishing the Department of Theatre Arts was accepted and became fully operational in the 1999/2000 academic session. It kicked off with two foundation lecturers; one, a Senior Lecturer in the English Department (Femi Adedina) and the other, a lecturer III in General Studies (Gbenga Windapo). Initially, there were only two course

combinations namely Theatre Arts/English and Theatre Arts/Yoruba and the students' population was paltry, eight. In 2001/2002 academic session, there was a population explosion with the inclusion of five other combinations, such as, Theatre/Social Studies, Theatre/Christian Religious Studies, Theatre/Political Science and Theatre/Economics, although the last two were later removed and replaced with Theatre Arts/ Igbo, Theatre Arts /French and Theatre Arts ISS. This also necessitated the employment of five additional lecturers in the early days of the department. Students' population increased subsequently in preceding years as the department continues to churn out crops of well-trained theatre arts teachers and professionals.

> The mission of the department is to provide qualitative teacher training education in the discipline of Theatre Arts to students both theoretically and practically so as to prepare them adequately for their chosen profession. In pursuit of this objective, the department's main duty is to equip students in theory and practice in all aspects of the Theatre in preparation for the world of Arts which is highly competitive. Students are exposed to and given opportunities give to serve as students' Stage Managers, Directors Assistant Directors, Technical Directors, Costume Managers and other theatre personnel of their plays. Students are also trained to have a well-rounded and balanced theatre experience driven with a quest for professionalism, to compete favourably with their counterparts from other institutions and the larger society. Unfortunately, in the early hours of March 20, 2013, the department was reduced to rubbles by fire as everything went up in flames. The fire incident practically wiped off all the thirteen years of hard work and labour of staff and students as student records, Gadgets, Studio, books and DVD's of students' practical works were razed. Undeterred, the department has risen above this challenge and has created new path ways in terms of exploits, relevance and achievements within and outside the College community. (Adedina 188)

Practical Productions during Covid-19

The old NCE curriculum of 2012, was designed in such a way that most practical courses were in the second semester starting from 100 level to 300 level. The usual practice is to merge students across levels in groups especially when the course cuts across or is interrelated and a lecturer is allocated the course but it is jointly coordinated by all other lecturers. This tradition was the first casualty of Covid-19 as a new norm emerged to include restrictions on closeness, popularly known as 'social distancing', as a measure to stop and or drastically reduce the spread of the pandemic. Closely related is the use of a nose mask, when in a public space, to control its spread. These two major

conditions were the first hurdles crossed as conditions for students to participate in practical courses. Focus will be on two of such courses namely THA 124- Principles of Directing and THA 222- Nigerian Drama in English, students are expected to merge theory with practice by exhibiting their dexterity on stage to evaluate their knowledge of arts of the theatre. Before Covid-19, the normal practice was to fix and attend rehearsals in the evenings after lectures. The lecturers in charge of each group supervise students, conduct activities as well as ensure that discipline is upheld. It is after this period that groups go on stage to perform to a paying audience. However, this was not to be so in the second semester of the 2019/2020 session when a pandemic hit the face of the earth and distorted and disrupted lives and living. In ensuring compliance with Covid-19 protocols after resumption from lockdown in November, 2020, new approaches and methods were introduced into practical courses to ensure that objectives of such courses were achieved even within limited resources. To start with, the number of students in groups was reduced from above thirty to twenty. This was followed by selection of short plays that do not require large casts and where stage movements and bodily contact could be reduced to the barest minimum.

Audition

Once students were grouped, Zoom meeting was arranged for the audition. Economic and technological challenges were easily overcome at this stage as staff and students had access to free WiFi in the college. Also, students that do not have android phones were permitted to pair up in twos. Since these students' abilities were already well known to lecturer and student directors in charge, the selection process for cast and crew was not cumbersome. Moreover, the play in question (*Birthdays are not for Dying* by Femi Osofisan) had few characters so the cast and crew arrived during the first meeting of forty minutes.

Reading

The first and second readings followed the same trend, but the meeting time was extended from the normal forty minutes to eighty minutes to allow for the play text to be completed at each reading session. After the second reading, another forty minutes meeting was scheduled for play analysis. The scheduling of zoom meetings was the responsibility of the stage manager.

Rehearsals

The major approach here was to organize pocket rehearsals. This was in a bid to reduce human contact and possibility of contracting the disease. The groups' director and stage manager arrived at a workable rehearsal schedule

that allowed actors in some scenes at rehearsals. Songs were learnt via zoom meetings. Also blockings and movements of actors were majorly notated in prompt books by the directors with the assistance of stage managers and given to actors to visualise and comply in their own space. Movements were minimised to reduce bodily contact and emphasis were laid on the message of the play by insisting on actors' interpretation of roles and characterisation. After the third week of zoom rehearsal, it was discovered that little progress was made by students in achieving any outstanding result. Therefore, the last three weeks were dedicated to pocket rehearsals. The rehearsals which spanned six weeks culminated in a stage performance on Nov. 4, 2020. At this point, cast and crew members were mandated to wear face masks and observe social distance. It was observed that students were more comfortable with following instructions and attaining achievements when physical rehearsals resumed. Blockings were easier to achieve, lines were learnt faster and these boosted the morale of students. All students attended dress and technical rehearsals to fuse all aspects of production in just three hours.

Performance

The performance took place on November 4, 2020 with a lot of changes to the usual mode. First the performance was not made public, so tickets were not sold to the audience. Rather, two students from the group were responsible for streaming on line or uploading to any social media platform such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. To ensure compliance with social distance, the performance was held in a large space to contain few actors on stage and lecturers as examiners. By so doing, the performance was restricted to only the people that had direct connection to the production while observing covid-19 protocols.

Observations

Being the first time such a method would be adopted in teaching and learning practical courses in this institution, some observations were made and would be highlighted in preceding paragraphs. Facilities and Equipment: It exposed the inadequacies in facilities and equipment in the department. The hall used for performance was a lecture hall not a theatre building as the institution is yet to complete an on-going project in this regard. The use of nose masks produced muffled speeches which could have been improved with use of lapel microphones, but the department could only produce two.

On-line rehearsal: Students did not make considerable progress during the period of on-line rehearsal because they were not used to it. It was at the point of pocket and joint rehearsal that considerable progress was made.

Internet Access: Although students had access to College Wi-Fi, some of them did not have android phones. This prompted pairing in twos which was contrary to social distancing protocols.

Financial loss: The department lost out financially because there was no paying audience to watch performances as students were only graded for examination. The gate-takings which is a major source of IGR to the department was not realised. This took its toll on other activities of the department during the period in session.

Audience: The absence of audience affected the morale of students during performance as there were no reactions to acting. All efforts made by students to put the production up lacked the presence of the final consumer. It made the students too conscious of the fact that they were performing solely for examination and it was obvious that actors did not enjoy themselves on stage.

Recommendations

Given the present development of the spread of Covid-19, it is evident that there is still no closure in sight to this epidemic. Thus, it has become expedient that adequate provision be made towards improving on-line learning and teaching by all lecturers and students of higher institutions. The Nigerian Government and policy makers need to stop playing lip service to education. This is the time to brace up to the situation and provide basic teaching facilities that will spur on-line learning. There could be a policy enforcing network providers to create special platforms for e-learning which would be affordable and cost effective to teachers and students. This could be part of their social responsibilities to touch many lives positively. Providing adequate training for teachers to improve their skills and facilitate effective on-line learning. This will include acquiring requisite skills in the use of apps and teaching platforms. The 21st century teacher must embrace the use of technology in all ramifications and re-educate themselves to be at per with counterparts from other climes. While some students are already conversant with on-line learning, there is the need to improve and up-grade the disadvantaged ones who might not have access to android phones or internet. Customised phones with on-line learning apps could be made available at reduced rate solely for this purpose especially for public institutions.

Conclusion

E-learning and digitalised education is still relatively new, especially for practical oriented courses in the arts. This is the age of increasing access to information and communication technology and theatre practitioners, teachers

and students must not be left out of this movement. While hoping that the spread of Covid-19 will abate, stakeholders should be proactive by coming up with creative and innovative measures that would comply with the new normal and still afford them opportunities to function maximally. According to scientists and researchers, Covid-19 will be with us for a while and we must learn to live with it. Although the first time experiment at LASUED theatre arts department, online rehearsal culminating in physical performance might not be said to be fully successful, yet it is a move in the right direction and can be improved upon. It is indeed a confirmation that change is constant and there is the need to move with the tide or drown. Students should also acquire relevant skills that will aid maximum exploration of on-line teaching and learning, especially for practical courses. They should be encouraged to use their technology skill of the 21st century positively for e-learning and not just for social media platforms. Departments involved in practical works, culminating in performances in the arts could design apps that will meet the needs of students for performances. This will make provision for the period of rehearsals to productions and also enable the public to watch such performances online.

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