

ENTREPRENEURIAL THEATRE IN A PANDEMIC ERA: "THE GRADUATES" EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The pandemic created by the Covid-19 virus has ushered in a new way of disseminating educational pedagogy. For centuries, coercive attention has been given to certificates which is gradually diminishing and not ameliorating the numerous problems bedeviling the entire world, Nigeria inclusive, hence the need to shift focus from certificates to skill acquisition. New skills are gradually occupying the space and 'entrepreneurial theatre,' where artistes can be empowered and become self-reliant is gradually taking centre stage. Theatre entrepreneurship may have been subsumed in theatre praxis, but its eloquent manifestations are often attributed to contributions from other professions, thereby depriving theatre its pride of place. This research aims at highlighting the conception, processes and experience of actualizing an entrepreneurial theatre in a pandemic era. The researchers adopt a performative and practice-led research, leaning on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory for the conception and performance of "The Graduate." It was found that Covid-19 as a pandemic could positively challenge and tease out the entrepreneurial capacities of people, including theatre professionals. Hence, the study recommends that if entrepreneurial theatre is embraced, it portends a brighter future for theatre graduates. The paper concludes that a theatrical taxonomy of entrepreneurship can facilitate small scalable start-ups that may snowball into large business companies for theatre graduates.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, Theatreprenuer, Pandemic, Experience and Social Learning.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship education is gradually becoming a vital part of the theatre arts curricular in Nigeria. Though, theatre skills are not altogether new, but its recognition and documentation in the theatre curriculum of the colleges of education in Nigeria is a new development. It is a step in the direction of functional education. Again, it is obvious that entrepreneurial skills are vital to the society and relevant to the sustenance of economic development; hence it is a sub-sector that requires the participation and support of the government. It was therefore applauded when government introduced entrepreneurial

studies in tertiary institutions; though research is yet to prove or validate the learning outcomes from the courses taught and its applicability after school. To further enhance teaching-learning effectiveness and functionality in theatre arts education, the Department of Academic planning of the National Commission for Colleges of Education's introduction of THA 323 titled Entrepreneurship in Theatre, a third year course in the Theatre Arts NCE programme of colleges of education in Nigeria, is a step in the direction of functional education. It brings to the fore, the awareness that Theatre Arts is far beyond acting and dancing as the society views it, but a discipline that enriches the creative industries thereby contributing to the creative economy. The importance of this sub-sector cannot be undermined especially with the challenges of infrastructural decay, stark realities of poverty, unemployment and the increasing cost of living; these are societal challenges that require the dividends of entrepreneurial training for its betterment.

Entrepreneurship as a word is borrowed from the French word *entreprendre*, meaning one who undertakes. Though, it was possibly shaped from *celui qui entreprend* which means 'those who get things done.' However, entrepreneurship may have been fostered by a group of thinkers known as the physiocrats that emerged (In France) within the context of economic theories, they were the first proponents of Laissez-faire as they opposed taxation (government intervention in industry) while they upheld the participation in the economics of a society as guided by the individual (Ross & Ross 576-7). Also, Richard Cantillon advanced entrepreneurship in his book *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en General* published in 1775 where the concept of entrepreneur was introduced. The book is a result of careful observation of craftsmen, merchants and farmers of his time and the research he conducted between 1730 and 1734. Theorists and economists advanced on their research to understand the interplay of markets and the role of the entrepreneur in the transaction of goods and services in exchange of money.

Entrepreneurship education in Nigerian tertiary institutions is specifically designed to provide the requisite skills, motivation and knowledge in stress/professional areas for the student in other to encourage entrepreneurial success in a variety of ventures. That is why, various entrepreneurial education/trainings are offered from primary school levels of education to terminal degrees. This is so because it equips the student to become self-reliant and qualified to compete within the knowledge economy. Thus, in the Nigerian Colleges of Education, Department of Theatre Arts, and the course content for THA 323; Entrepreneurship in Theatre is described as follows: basic business guideline, proprietorship, sole proprietorship and partnership, profit and loss, Employment contract, business letter writing. Theatre as business enterprise, economic analysis of labour market,

entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviour, entrepreneurial opportunities in theatre, troupe organization and events management, writing of proposals (funding and performance proposals), funding of projects (governmental, NGOs, start-ups and bootstrapping, financial institutions, commissions, associations, advocacy groups), budgeting... (NCCE, Minimum Standards 155).

The above quote enumerates the course content of THA 323 for NCE Theatre Arts students, year III second semester. Although, it is a new course that was designed to expose students to the practical knowledge of theatrepreneur; beyond the doing of acting, how theatre graduates can develop themselves into entrepreneurs and employers of labour. Notably, it is apt and observed that prior to the move to inculcate the spirit of self-reliance and a compelling desire to participate in the crusade and advocacy that fights poverty through enterprise education and entrepreneurial skills, the emphasis has been on basic learning and theories that qualify graduates to be certified for a white collar job. Sunday Ojeifo records that:

In a study conducted by Mrs. Catherine Abiola Akinbami, Management Consultant (2005), she disclosed that Aladekomo (2004) documented the history of policies that relates to education, industry, employment and labour in Nigeria dating back to the colonial era. In a related vein Akinyemi (1987) reports that our educational institution few as they were remained factories for producing white collar jobbers with no special professional nor was entrepreneurial skill envisaged in the education system. This means that before now, there has been complete absence of enterprise education in the educational system. Pretorius (2008) reports that there are no tools and benchmarks for assessing the quality of entrepreneurship education programmes offered in the tertiary institutions. (3)

Thus, the dynamism of entrepreneurship education centres on action not intention, measure and relevance to both the student and the society. It is inclined to activities and processes that manifest in self-employment and the risk taking factor in a profit oriented venture. The aim of this research is to highlight the conception, processes and experience of actualizing an entrepreneurial theatre in a pandemic era. The paper states that in a social pandemic era, the survival instinct activates/supports entrepreneurial venture, as it argues that that a simple theatrical taxonomy of entrepreneurial activity can facilitate small scalable start-ups that may snowball into large business companies for the theatre graduate.

Theoretical Background

This research adopts social learning theory, propounded by Albert Bandura, the theory emphasizes the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behaviour. In social learning theory, Albert Bandura agrees with the behaviourist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning. However, he adds two important ideas: 1. mediating processes occur between stimuli & responses and 2. behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning (90).

Observational Learning

Bandura submits that: “Children observe the people around them behaving in various ways. This is illustrated during the famous Bobo doll experiment” (61). Individuals that are observed are called models/teachers. In society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family, characters on children’s TV, friends within their peer group and teachers at school. These models/teachers provide examples of behaviour to observe and imitate. “Children pay attention to some of these people (models) and encode their behaviour. At a later time they may imitate (i.e., copy) the behaviour they have observed” (Bandura 61).

Mediational Processes

Social Learning Theory is often described as the ‘bridge’ between traditional learning theory (i.e., behaviourism) and the cognitive approach. This is because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning. Unlike Skinner, Bandura believes that: “humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behaviour and its consequences” (56). Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work. These mental factors mediate in the learning process to determine whether a new response is acquired. Therefore, individuals do not automatically observe the behaviour of a model and imitate it. There is some thought prior to imitation, and this consideration is called mediational processes. This occurs between observing the behaviour (stimulus) and imitating it or not (response). There are four mediational processes proposed by Bandura thus:

1. **Attention:** The individual needs to pay attention to the behaviour and its consequences and form a mental representation of the behaviour. For a behaviour to be imitated, it has to grab our attention. We observe many behaviours on a daily basis, and

many of these are not noteworthy. Attention is therefore extremely important in whether a behaviour influences others imitating it.

2. **Retention:** How well the behaviour is remembered. The behaviour may be noticed but is it not always remembered which obviously prevents imitation. It is important therefore that a memory of the behaviour is formed to be performed later by the observer. Much of social learning is not immediate, so this process is especially vital in those cases. Even if the behaviour is reproduced shortly after seeing it, there needs to be a memory to refer to.
3. **Reproduction:** This is the ability to perform the behaviour that the model has just demonstrated. We see much behaviour on a daily basis that we would like to be able to imitate but that this not always possible. We are limited by our physical ability and for that reason, even if we wish to reproduce the behaviour, we cannot.
4. **Motivation:** The will to perform the behaviour. The rewards and punishment that follow a behaviour will be considered by the observer. If the perceived rewards outweigh the perceived costs (if there are any), then the behaviour will be more likely to be imitated by the observer. If the vicarious reinforcement is not seen to be important enough to the observer, then they will not imitate the behaviour. (Bandura 68)

These four cardinal processes of Bandura's mediational processes serves as indicator why the theory is suitable for the students in this performance to learn through paying attention to the resources persons, retaining the processes they learnt from the resource persons, reproducing what the resource persons taught them and finally, now some of these students have the motivation to go on with what they have observed from the resource persons and now making their monies from the products thereby, not relenting on white collar job to earn a living.

Theatrepreneurship and Performance

One of the new normal that the world is facing today is the search for functional education and knowledge. Theatre Arts is a functional education and knowledge. This corroborates Kelechi Stellamaris Ogbonna's submission that Theatre Arts is "a performative art that requires collaboration, doing and impacting. It is a field of study that dwells more on the psychomotor development of the artist while training them to use their creativity optimally

in the development and achievement of other feats” (2). Drama and theatre are aged old tools that have been multifunctional. Though theatre predates drama, from its humble origins, drama has come a long way “as an act of necessity utilized in ensuring the steady supply of food, augmenting the spoken word, harmonizing with nature and the elements and relaxing in-between seasons; to put on a garb of professionalism and mercantilism”(Utoh-Ezeajugh 5). Notably, the focus of the performing arts is primarily on dance, music, drama and theatre while overlapping with film and media. Also, the areas of production/design; set and prop design, costume, construction, makeup, lighting and theatre management are skill oriented and inseparable parts of the theatre enterprise.

Thus, the word theatrepreneur is a product of two professional entities; Entrepreneur and Theatre. The merging of the two entities forges a different but unique existence within the world of business enterprise. Thus, “theatrepreneurship is simply how to function as an entrepreneur using theatre business/theatre methods as a process for the achievement of commercial services, products and profits. It harnesses the rich and creative elements of theatre to build a business empire; an enterprise. Invariably, theatrepreneurship harvests theatre business in its dynamic and creative opportuneness to impact on the creative industries” (Ogbonna 2). In its commonplace within the classroom and rehearsal venues, theatre engages in the art of doing, making and presentation of situations. It is therefore a platform for teaching, learning and training of creative skills. The skills manifest in the end product of presentation; a forum where the acquired knowledge from the classroom/rehearsals is presented before a viewing audience who pays a token to relish the production (Product). Hence, the relationship between the theatre and its audience is much more than participative experience, but a commercial enterprise of give and take, of profit making and audience satisfaction.

It is this paradigm shift occasioned by so many factors that engineered the atmosphere of enterprise education within departments, schools and colleges as a response to socio-economic challenges within societies. The Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in Wuhan, China on December 8, 2019 was a public health emergency of international concern which surfaced in Nigeria through an imported case from Italy on February 27th 2020. After the index case, Covid-19 spread continued, the lockdown intervention and other governmental responses to it could not wedge its communal transmission. The nature of the pandemic compounded economic issues in Nigeria; through its lockdown and ‘Social distancing’ which disrupted cultural/social/human interactions, since the virus infection transmits through human contact; it disintegrated the world as it limits movement from place to place. Thus, with

the shutting down of airports, all forms of transportation, businesses, sports, festivals and churches, world economies plunged into a standstill. Hence the measures were in place to stall the global transmission of diseases.

More so, the Covid-19 pandemic did put the Nigerian economy under tremendous strain, it also affected the performing arts adversely. The reasons are not farfetched since the live theatre depends largely on social and human interactions to function; it was difficult to come together for rehearsals much more put together a performance for the audience to watch. Also, while the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were costly and in short supply within the first six months of the Pandemic, social distancing and stay at home were mandatory without facemasks. Hunger was another aspect of the pandemic; though those with the purchasing power were not able to access food easily, much less the large population whose livelihood depended on their daily income. At this point, it became imperative for theatre Arts lecturers to think outside the box for ways or approaches that could possibly sustain the transactional relationship between theatre and its audiences.

Synopsis of the “The Graduates”

The play treats the importance of skill acquisition. It is an expressive play that tries to make its argument on functional education. It captures the challenges students face after graduation and the need for graduates to become self-reliant. The play’s title is a question mark on graduates who boast of certificate that can hardly offer them jobs. Igwe Omekannaya I of Umunjam tries to reason with his elders on the need to start a skill acquisition centre. While some elders disagrees with the Igwe, he is not deterred. The Igwe’s determination to ensure that the graduates of his community are gainfully employed, or are self-reliant, takes the matter to the senator representing his zone. The senator offers her support. The project kicks off with a decree from the Igwe; that all youth of Umunjam, both graduates, undergraduates and the unemployed should as a matter of urgency register with the town hall for skill acquisition. The registration is free. Both Igwe and his palace councils attend the training. On the completion of the skill acquisition training, the Senator commissions the project with all participants/groups presenting their products. Gifts, awards and prizes are given to the participants.

Workshop

It was, therefore, fortuitous when the lecturers assigned to teach THA 321- Theatre Workshop III (a 3 credit load course for NCE year 3) 2019/2020 academic year for the Department of Theatre Arts, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, decided to approach the course content differently. The course coordinator; Dr. Kelechi Stellamaris Ogbonna, working

in collaboration with her co-lecturers; Dr. Mohammed-Kabir, Jibril Imam and Lucy Onaivi-Odusina, decided to apply a teaching method which is more learner centred than other formal teaching methods. As a team, we adopted the workshop and role play method using the “Do it yourself ideology” to achieve the required knowledge for both theory and practice as basis for the production of the play for THA 321. In doing so, both the psychomotor and the cognitive learning were achieved. The team of lecturers scheduled a production meeting and addressed the students on the chosen method to teach the course.

Thus, when we addressed the students who before now understood that THA 321 course content centres on play production, they were excited at the new dimension the lecturers proposed. Moreover, we emphasized our desire to re-awaken theatre skills/design that are embedded in the course content, the type of theatre business and technology that in the past had produced props, costume, accessories and scenery materials for productions; the need to make hand posters and costumes for production without extensively buying or hiring. Though, we explained that the method for this project is not to take the students backward, but a desire to impart knowledge and skills unto the students so that they can become entrepreneurs. The response from students assured us that the Workshop was more than needful. Because it offered them the opportunity to narrate their experiences and the effect the lockdown had on them financially. According to the experiences of Pius Chidera, Onyemaobi Sarah, Isaac Okwuokenye and Ekwuchi Daniel, if other courses are taught using similar methods, students’ interest in learning will increase, and because cognitive learning is matched with practice, students will benefit from the skills as well as the knowledge. The students spoke enthusiastically mentioning their interest areas: Painting, Fashion and designing, Tailoring, Events Decoration, Lighting, Play writing, Dancing, Bead Making, Choreography, Furniture Making, Wig Making and Makeup. They also desired that Soap Making, making of Hand Sanitizers and Detergents can be included in the skills. It was also agreed that students will contribute money for the purchase of materials for their training. The students were asked to make that decision within their groups.

Practice: For effective training, we divided the class into five (5) groups with group leaders. The groups were created with respect to their chosen areas of interest. The group on scriptwriting was asked to create a full-length play on this process that will harmonize and connect all the skills/groups. The scriptwriting group was made up of students whose interest areas varied from playwriting to directing, dance and acting. They worked closely with each group and with the course lecturers for easy simulation of the groups and the

entire storyline of the play. The practice and training were achieved through the following processes:

Resource persons: From the chosen areas of interest, we agreed on the imperativeness of sourcing for resource persons that are more knowledgeable in the chosen areas. Each group was mandated to source for and provide two resource persons. We interacted with the resource persons and found out that they were knowledgeable in their special areas. The resource persons visited the classroom whereby the lecture was for every member of the class after which each group scheduled a time table to visit the resource person at his/her workplace for group training. Hence, we had the following resource persons:

Group 1: (1) Ogazi Faith- on **Tailoring** (2) Nonye Ihueze- on **Bead Making** (3) Kelechi Ogbonna





Photo Credit: The Researchers (Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir)

Group 2: (1) Rachael Amarachi- on **Makeup**. (2) Melody Iyke- on **Wig Making**. (3) Chibuzor Martins.





Photo Credit: The Researchers (Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir)

Group 3: (1) The entire class visited Mr Cyracus Ikebudu's Art Gallery where they had lectures on painting, design, and theatre technology. The group continued with their schedule to train at the Art Gallery. (2) Mohammed-Kabir Imam (3) Lucy Onaivi-Odusina





Photo Credit: The Researchers (Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir)

Group 4: (1) Ogazi Michael- on **Dance Choreography**. (2) Mbara Nnamdi- **Dance Choreography** (3) Achor Akowe- **Directing** (4) Isaac Okwuokenye- **Acting** (5) Chukwunenye Eke- **Dance** (6) Kelechi Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir on **Scriptwriting**.

Group 5: (1) Nwanoneze Gift- On **Interior Decoration/Event Management** (2) Chinedu Oramah - On **Hand Sanitizer/Soap Making** (3) Kelechi Ogbonna (4) Mohammed-Kabir Imam (5) Chibuzor Martins



Photo Credit: The Researchers (Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir)

Group 6: (1) Mr. Ola- on **Nose mask** (2) Mohammed-Kabir Imam.*This group emerged out of their stubbornness to arrive late or absent from rehearsals. So as fallouts from other groups, they formed group six and produced Nose masks



Photo Credit: The Researchers (Ogbonna and Mohammed-Kabir)

Training: Each group trained at the workshop/workplace of the resource persons. The group on Tailoring and Bead making attended their training schedule religiously. They trained as a group visiting the resource persons' workplace to practice on their specific areas of interest. The coordinator and co-lecturers of THA 321 visited each group's training center as a way of follow-up and supervision of the assigned tasks.

Rehearsals: After the training at the resource persons' workshops, a rehearsal time table was drawn as follows:

Tuesday	2-4pm
Wednesday	2-4pm
Friday	11 am-1pm
Saturday	3-5pm

The rehearsal was for every group to attend. It was during the rehearsal that the storyline became more concrete. As each group sat in the auditorium practicing what they learnt from their trainings, the lecturers guided and

supervised them while Group six (6) tried to link each group's storyline with the conflict of the play. The play was written by the students and it is titled "The Graduates." The lecturers supervised the rehearsals making sure that each group produced a specified number of the products they trained on.

Conclusion

It is apparently clear to deduce that theatre is an entrepreneurial discipline that, if well explored the graduates from theatre would not have the need to wait for white collar job after graduation. This is because from the follow-up, it is understood that most of the students involved in the aforementioned method and training are now engaged in one way or the other. Thus, they are making money already, when they have not collected their certificates from the school. Obviously, some of them are into making some of the items that were taught and some are hired by some of the companies that produce some of the items they are trained on, in the cause of the training and learning.

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