

NAVIGATING LANDMINES AND PATHWAYS: INTERROGATING NEW APPROACHES TO THEATRE MAKING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The growing global economic uncertainties have in recent times been attended by a cutting down of costs by corporate bodies and families alike. In most developing economies, the perennial scaling down of budgets has meant dwindling provisions for leisure and entertainment. This accounts for the sharp drop in theatre attendance in most of these countries. In Africa where people are used to enjoying folk theatre performances in the open community squares for free, the idea of paying for tickets to attend theatre becomes more and more unattractive. The growing cases of global terrorism and general insecurity in most societies has made it even more difficult for families to see the wisdom in risking attending theatre productions at night, what more to spend scarce family income on tickets when there are cheaper and safer alternatives at home by way of cable television and soap operas. Undaunted the theatre makers have been reinventing their audience engineering strategies and production approaches. This paper is an incursion into the new approaches theatre makers have adopted to keep their art and professionalism afloat in the face of persisting harsh social and economic realities.

Introduction

What is often glibly referred to, as Nigerian theatre nowadays is an amalgam of both the *traditional* and *modern* theatre traditions. The traditional strand is indigenous, eclectic, boisterous, diverse, and abounds in every community. This strand of theatre manifests in two forms. First, in the form of purely ritualistic performances, chants, masquerades, and festivals of the over 450 ethnic groups in Nigeria. Secondly, it also manifests in the form of age-long, entertaining and highly educative story-telling performances, folktales, fables, proverbs, idioms, praise songs, mimes, and dances performed during social events. Unlike its modern counterpart, traditional Nigerian theatre utilises any open space as its stage, with or without modern technological support and shies away from purely mercantile considerations.

The concept of theatre as a profession or enterprise is better associated with the modern Nigerian theatre strand, which subsumes theatre produced by *government-owned arts councils* in all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria; *experimental theatre*; and box-office driven *Yoruba Travelling Theatre* and the *literary theatre* traditions. *Experimental theatre* refers to the ideologically driven applied

theatre/theatre for development workshops that draw from the traditional theatre production aesthetics to lace their socially relevant messages. Their performances spaces range from the market squares, street corners, and other open spaces where people are found. In terms of structure, the performances are basically exploratory, fluid, unscripted and emphasise research, horizontal communication, people-centred development, and social change as their *raison d'être*.

The literary strand of modern Nigerian theatre, on the other hand, is a by-product of Nigeria's experience with colonialism and the intervening European theatre traditions. This is the category of theatre Oyin Ogunba describes below:

Apart from the popular travelling theatre of Ogunde and his followers, there is also literary drama, which is pre-dominantly Anglophone, largely university-based and elitists. One of the first practitioners of this mode was James Ene Henshaw. He wrote several plays including *This is Our Chance* (3).

This strand of Nigerian theatre emphasises scripted plays, western literary canons, imported theatre technology and box office collections. Rather than the total theatre performance format of the indigenous theatre forms, the literary theatre encourages compartmentalisation of the theatre enterprise into different professional callings as playwrights, directors, choreographers, designers, critics, and so on. These professionals strive to earn their living by collaborating to *make* theatre in enclosed buildings, which are specially designed for such purposes.

This paper interrogates the challenges that have attended the development of modern Nigerian theatre in the face of the growing economic downturn of the last decade. Our emphasis is on the modern strand of Nigerian theatre described above because the traditional Nigerian theatre strand being a communally owned cultural product has remained robust and perhaps more resilient in the face of the growing financial challenges affecting the modern strands. This paper shall dwell more on theatre as enterprise in Nigeria.

Emergence of Professional Theatre in Nigeria and the Search for “Newness”

In 1945, Nigerian Theatre was set on a search for “newness”. Hitherto, theatre was a communal activity, which was jointly created, executed and enjoyed by the people. Though theatre was part of the social and religious lives of the people, it was not a full time vocation or practiced as enterprise. Talented artists and designers engaged in it for free or as a part time vocation.



A Traditional Nigerian Open-Air Performance (Credit: Nzeh Mada Festival Secretariat)

However, the formal establishment of the African Music Research Party (later Ogunde Theatre Party) in 1945 as the first ever-professional theatre in Nigeria (Clark 4) introduced new dynamics to theatre making and consumption. The precursor to this bold move by late doyen of African Theatre, Hubert Ogunde, were the intervening English and European styled operas and concerts by popular artists like Handel and Mozart in Lagos city of the late nineteenth century. According to Ogunba, “the actors, concert groups and clientele of the foreign tradition were the new, Westernised elite... Similar concert groups were set up in Ibadan and Abeokuta” (6).



African Music Research Party (later Ogunde Theatre Party) in Performance in 1945

However, Ogunde's effort in 1945 was significant because it was the first recorded effort by a Nigerian to eke out a living solely from live theatre. This venture was not without its pains, because from day one Ogunde's managerial acumen was continuously put to great task. In order to survive, Ogunde continuously reinvented his strategies. He was in persistent search of what was "new" as far as the taste of his audience was concerned. Sometimes, he resorted to "not too conventional methods" to keep his theatre company afloat all through the over three decades of its existence. For instance, in order to survive the stiff competition from the concert party and musical maestros like Bobby Benson that enthralled most of the audience in the 1950s, Ogunde acquired modern musical equipment and rebranded his production format to include an opening and closing glee. These were basically short musical sessions that catered for the new musical craves of his audience. In 1969, during his performance tour of the UK, Ogunde and one of his wives had to learn the tap dance in England to further enrich the opening glees of his performances. Ogunde also rebranded the name of his troupe a couple of times to keep in tune with the changing tastes of his audience.

Overall, Ogunde's search for "newness" was driven by the need to sustain the interest of his diverse audience and surmount the numerous challenges he was confronted with, from the social, economic to even the political challenges like his imprisonment by colonial authorities over the *subversive content* of some of his artistic works. His understanding of the changing tastes of his audience was what led to the unending transformations and refocusing of his performance structure, choice of themes and medium of expression. This also explains his engagement with the different performance media like theatre, dance, music and film. However, Ogunde was conscious of his ultimate goal, which was to use his performances as means to entertain, educate and inform his audience. Ogunde's appointment as the founding Artistic Director of the

National Troupe of Nigeria by the federal government in 1989 is a testimony to the success of his theatre enterprise.

Worthy of note is that Ogunde's bold venture opened the vista for the emergence of the numerous private theatre companies in most Nigerian cities to date. First to key in were the educational institutions starting with the University of Ibadan's School of Drama Acting Company, which later became the Unibadan Masques in 1967, Wole Soyinka's 1960 Masks, which gave birth to a full fledged professional company, the Orisun Theatre Company, in 1964. Ola Rotimi's Ori Olokun Acting Company (ACT) located at the then University of Ile-Ife, In the 1970s came the Performing Arts Company of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, ABU, Zaria, Bode Sowande's Odu Themes, and a lot more. By the end of the 1980s most of these companies were disbanded for several reasons, Barclays Ayakoroma opines that principal among these was poor funding:

The university performing companies were conceptualised as business ventures that could be self-financing. Unfortunately, the austerity measures that were introduced in the mid-80s, coupled with the harsh business climate, made the operations of these theatre companies unviable (6).

Besides the University based performing troupes, there were private theatre companies that also catered for the needs of the Nigerian Theatre audience from the 1980s like PEC Repertory Theatre in Lagos, Ajon Production Company in Ilorin, Anansa Playhouse, and Wizi Travelling Theatre. From the 1990s, there was the introduction of more theatre companies in capital cities like Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Jos, among others. Top among these recent companies are: the Crown Troupe, Lagos in 1996, Jos Repertory Theatre established in 1997, Thespian Family Theatre, Lagos, Ijodee Dance Company, Lagos in 1998, Renegade Theatre, Lagos in 2007, and Arojah Royal Theatre, Abuja in 2009.

Defining “Newness” in Modern Nigerian Theatre

A cursory look at contemporary trends in the ‘professional’ Nigerian theatre environment reveals that while the population in these urban centres has increased tremendously, the impact in terms of theatre attendance remains minimal. A myriad of socio-economic realities have conspired to complicate the case of the private theatre companies trying to drive theatre as enterprise in Nigeria. For example, some of the challenges like insufficient professional theatre infrastructure, funding, poor government support, which were faced by the early theatre companies, have become even more complicated in recent times and like *landmines*, remain threats to the growth of professional theatre in Nigeria.

The crux of this paper is to examine the pathways being created by the current crop of Nigerian theatre makers to circumvent these landmines. The pathways define what we also refer to here as the “newness” in modern Nigerian Theatre. The paper argues that these pathways are motivated more by the need for the Nigerian Theatre makers to survive in the face of dwindling funding and patronage of their theatre products than the crave for self-expression or aesthetics. The “newness” discussed here is therefore

essentially market driven than motivated by any inner desire for self-expression. First let us examine the conditions (landmines) that have made the search for “newness” in Nigeria Theatre a necessity.

Mapping of the Landmines on the Nigerian Theatre Terrain

Modern Nigeria theatre, like most national theatre traditions, has its challenges. Some of these are peculiar to the Nigerian environment, while others, like the challenge of dwindling sources of funding for the arts, are essentially global. In a recent review of Nigerian theatre, Barclays Ayakoroma concludes thus:

Theatre practice in Nigeria has not been really vibrant over the years; the theatre profession has not created good jobs for trained artists; ... Unlike other professionals, theatre artists have not consciously tried to make a living out of the theatre; Funding is a major challenge militating against theatre practice in Nigeria (12).

The landmines within the Nigerian Theatre terrain are of two broad types. The *surface mines* are those common challenges whose dimension differs from one company to the other or those that are more within the control of individual theatre companies. These include the limited sources of funding, dwindling audience/patrons, competition from cable television and social media, and so on. The *underground mines*, on the other hand, are those deep-rooted challenges that are beyond direct control of the theatre companies. Often these predate most of these theatre companies and greatly threaten the sustenance of professional theatre practice in Nigeria. First, let us discuss some of the *Surface Mines*:

Dwindling Sources of Funding: The dwindling sources of funding for activities in the arts and culture sector has exacerbated in the last two decades in Nigeria. However, while film, music and other popular entertainment forms still enjoy relatively better financial support from individual patrons and corporate bodies, live theatre in Nigeria is alienated from this limited financial pool by the years.

Lopsided Distribution of Corporate Support: The involvement of corporate entities in funding the Nigerian arts and culture, a development spearheaded by few commercial banks and the telecommunication companies from 1999, is yet to make significant impact on live theatre in Nigeria. This is against the relatively higher interest shown in funding reality television shows, stand-up comedy, and Nollywood (popular name for the budding Nigerian film industry).

Since the headquarters of most of these corporate bodies are in Lagos or Abuja, theatre companies located outside these two major capital cities are invariably at a disadvantage in terms of securing funding from the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) budgets of these few corporate bodies. Theatre companies located in the other 35 states in Nigeria outside Lagos, often have to either depend sole on irregular patronage from state governments, or travel to Abuja or Lagos to compete for the highly limited

corporate sponsorships. The producer who braves it to Lagos soon discovers, on arrival that most of the corporate patrons have since granted their sponsorship deals to troupes within Lagos or its environs.

Lack of Government Support and Transparency: Over the years, government has played a lip service to funding of the arts in Nigeria. The national endowment for the arts has been in the ‘drawing board’ since late 1980s. Therefore, there is hardly any sustainable grant or regular financial support from government for theatre productions. The provisions of the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* that pertain to government’s role in the funding and promotion of Nigerian arts and culture has remained as dead as the paper upon which it was printed since 1988. The few opportunities that come from time to time to get government patronage for theatre productions are also not openly competed for but cornered by theatre companies whose chief executives have deep relationship with government officials.

Dwindling Theatre Audience/Patrons: The current economic recession in Nigeria has meant increasing loss of patrons and disappearance of regular audiences that frequent productions in Nigerian theatre. For theatre makers, this trend is a disincentive to creativity and administrative planning even as it is a debilitating disincentive to corporate bodies that are in a position to invest in theatre productions.

Competition from other Entertainment Forms: The Nigerian theatre maker’s stiffest competition does not come from fellow Nigerian theatre makers but other sources leisure and socialisation – television, cinema, social media, nightclubs, bars and recreational gardens (Dandaura, & Asigbo 45). All other avenues where the brazen or intellectually stimulating entertainment is offered deplete the already thin Nigerian theatre audience. A condition worsened by the inconsistency of theatre productions, which also adversely affect the cultivation of sustained followership for theatre.

The cumulative impacts of the aforementioned landmines are enormous. First the absence of sustainable sources of funding and patronage has impacted negatively on creativity as most companies opt for less challenging productions that will cost them less to produce. Investment into major theatrical productions that will compete favourably with Broadway productions and the like are avoided.

Underground Mines

To continue our thematic metaphor of landmines, the underground mines in the Nigerian theatre terrain point to the polemics of whether or not a Nigerian theatre industry exists. In answering this question, I have summarised the frame upon which theatre as enterprise is founded into four key factors. These factors are fundamental to the existence of a healthy theatre industry regardless of the prevailing economic systems, religious leanings or state of development of the host community/country. These four pillars, *Infrastructure, Technology, Labour, and Industrial framework*, must interact effectively for a performing arts industry to thrive as a commercial venture.

Infrastructure: This refers to the stock of basic facilities and capital equipment needed for functioning of the art form; *technology* refers to the devices or instruments needed to undertake the creation of the work of art; *labour* refers to the creative, technical, administrative and other individuals involved with or who influence the creation of the work of arts; and, *industrial framework* refers to the matrix which connects the various aspects of technology, labour and the market, for the purpose of sustaining the creative enterprise and cultural production. Without technology, labour and infrastructure cannot interact to any productive level; in the same way that without labour, technology remains lifeless machines gathering dust in a facility; and without these three in balance, industrial framework cannot come to be, because the predicating dots to connect into a network will be missing.

Theatre infrastructure, which serves as both the factory and market for theatre production, as already indicated above, hardly exist in Nigeria besides the few state owned cultural centres across the country. This is a reality Chris Nwamuo highlights thus:

a good number of theatres in Nigeria have very poor facilities, such as lack of rest-rooms, water including lack of comfortable seats for members of the audience, who pay to watch performances. This gives rise to situations where members of the audience are uncomfortable.... Naturally, such members of the audience and those who feel greatly disturbed will bid eternal farewell to the theatre after that type of experience (34).

In terms of technology, churches and other non-theatre events use the bulk of the available theatre lighting and sound equipment. Thus, modern technological aids taken for granted in most European theatres are hardly available to most of the private theatre companies in Nigeria, because they lack the funds to acquire or hire them. Labour on the other hand, is readily available, however, the low avenues for the utilisation of this labour force have limited the capacities and competences of labour available to feed the Nigerian theatre. Consequently, there is a weak framework to grow the theatre industry, hence the polemics of whether or not a theatre industry exists in Nigeria. Jahman Anikulapo summarises his impression of the situation with Nigerian Theatre thus:

we cannot expect the art, the entertainment produced by artists living and functioning in this stifling environment to be well rounded in all creative departments as that produced in other societies where there are, at least, the basic infrastructures that enable creativity to flower; that encourages clean, clear thought, and make provision for facilities, including social respect and understanding; and thus assist the artist to concentrate on the business of thinking and creating (4).

Perhaps in order to appreciate the problem better, let us compare the above situation we have identified in the Nigerian theatre enterprise with the more successful Nigerian film and music sectors.

In the Nigerian film sector we find similar circumstances to theatre. The most relevant infrastructure to a film industry includes nationwide distribution of cinema halls and/or high quality and affordable broadband access. Compared to its population and potentials, Nigeria currently has grossly inadequate cinema exhibition halls. The few available are sparsely located across the country. This has impact negatively on the growth of the Nigeria film industry. This is so because the availability of a variety of film distribution channels creates the environment to allow for large scale viewing of films, and invariably expand the market size and platform for a successful film enterprise. Technology on the other hand has had the strongest impact on the growth of Nigerian cinema because it is as available as labour. Therefore the industrial framework in place for filmmaking lacks the needed cohesion that could allow Nigeria maximise her filmmaking potentials.

The Nigeria music sector, on the other hand, is better positioned as an industry because of the relatively better mix of the four fundamentals already identified above. This has in turn ensured its sustained growth, which has seen local genres like *Juju*, and *Afrobeat* gaining full international recognitions. The infrastructure for Nigerian music exists with new musical studios springing up sporadically across the 36 states and the federal capital territory, Abuja. A second vital infrastructure which links audience to producers (the “marketplace” of music), which are radio, television and the internet, are also in good supply and under no threat as they are part of a value chain which transcends music. This is unlike the situation with the theatre houses and film sectors. Technology is also available to the Nigerian music industry as it is in the film sector. Consequently, the performance of the Nigerian music has been on the increase in the last three decades. Thus, the success of the Nigerian music industry has confirmed our earlier position that a good mix of the aforementioned four fundamentals is a sine qua non for a thriving theatre enterprise. Herein lies my submission that the most fundamental challenges facing the development of Nigerian theatre as enterprise are akin to underground mines as against what we discussed as surface mines earlier.

Non-Inclusion of the Performing Arts in the Formal Economic Sector: Other underground landmines include the fact that, the performing arts sector in Nigeria operates within the non-formal economic sector as its activities are largely not regulated or considered worthy of any serious economic value. This makes it difficult for any serious investment to come into the sector as the financial institutions consider the theatre a high-risk investment space.

Security Challenges: The onset of terrorist activities in Nigeria in the last decade has dealt another devastating blow to sustainable theatre practice in Nigeria as the few patrons left find it very risky to be out attending productions late at night (Dandaura, & Asigbo “Dry Bones...” (152). In the alternative, such patrons turn to television soap operas and productions from the budding Nigerian Nollywood industry. This is yet another underground landmine as the security challenges is outside the direct control of the theatre companies. Other challenges include: High cost of theatre productions,

inability of theatre companies to generate supporting or internal income, and poor understanding of theatre as enterprise.

Pathways Created by Nigerian Theatre Companies

In the bid to effectively navigate the landmines, the contemporary Nigerian Theatre makers have adopted several ‘new’ production and management strategies. The ‘newness’ of these strategies is defined from the perspective of the cultural context of their usage and not necessarily that they are new in the true sense of the word. Some of these ‘new’ approaches might have long been in use in Europe and other parts of the world with longer traditions of theatre as enterprise. Within the Nigerian context, some of these new approaches to theatre making could be summarised as follows:

Theatre Festival Seasons: The introduction of annual European styled theatre festivals in some major cities by theatre producers backed by rich patrons and international organisations are gaining momentum as the most visible platform for theatre producers to exhibit their works. The Lagos Theatre Festival, which was created by the British Council, Nigeria, and supported for the past three years is a good example. This festival runs a variety of shows for about a week every February. This Lagos Theatre Festival has motivated the creation of new plays and fresh opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas between theatre producers, festival curators from the UK and the rich mix of Lagos audience. Though at the moment, this approach of having special theatre festival seasons is one of the few that give the budding practitioner a feel of the operational set up of a functional theatre industry, it lacks the frequency, funding and intensity required to sustain theatre makers as full time professionals.

Boundless, Found Theatre Model: This approach sees theatre taken away from the physical structure of a hall and put in *real*, day to day physical locations which were not originally built for theatre production, thereby bringing a raw and unfiltered theatre experience to the audience. The new theatre performances spaces are found in car parks, garages, gardens, street sides, filling station, or whatever environment the dramatic content requires. This approach has also received some encouragements from the British Council, Nigeria. Among Nigerian theatre makers that are experimenting with this approach is Kelvinmary Peter and of late Arojah Royal Theatre, Abuja. Om’Oba Jerry Adesewo, the executive director of Arojah Royal Theatre advances here part of his reasons for his choice of this production approach:

There is not a single theatre space in Abuja and the halls available are too expensive for us to afford in the business sense of the word. That’s how we find ourselves here. Call it ‘Parlour Performance’, if you choose (*Daily Trust* 21).

This production approach could be said to part of the legacy practice of the Yoruba travelling theatres in the 1940s-1960s. Itinerant theatre practices go in search of audiences in their natural habitat rather than pull them out to a theatre structure, thus it is equally expensive when one compares the cost of transportation and accommodation of

cast and crew. As a commercial venture, the risks are difficult to calculate because one can hardly guarantee the availability of an audience willing to pay for tickets in the mobile locations.

The other challenge with this production approach is that it limits the extent the theatre makers can express themselves in terms of producing visually expressive performances that will give the audience an aesthetic experience near to the 'magical' experiences offered by cable television and film. The use of modern theatre technology that could enrich the aesthetic experience of the audience is also limited.

Adaptations of Western Musicals: Also a direct consequence of the aforementioned challenges is the renewed craze for adaptations of Western styled musicals on the Nigerian theatre scene. These have seen the creation of productions like *High School Musical Nigeria* (KiDZtrust in 2010), *Grease Naija* (Krump Studios in 2013), *The King and I* (Strauss School of Music and Arts in 2013), *Disney's Frozen* (El-Amin International School, Maitama in 2015), *The Sound of Music: with Nigerian Spices* (University of Abuja in 2016). This resort to adaptations of popular European texts derives its inspiration from the experiments by travelling troupes from Nigerian Universities in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The performance of these adaptations leave more to be desired as the audience sees Western performances being haphazardly executed by local amateur actors, dancers and singers who have neither the historical link, exposure, or professional training to effectively interpret the adapted foreign creative works. Consequently, while the unsuspecting audience might enjoy or comprehend some scenes in the performances, the overall effect gives the feeling of a stylistic and cultural mismatch, which makes it difficult to build a critical mass of followers that could translate into subscription based audience for a professional theatre.

Limited Cast Plays and Minimalist Theatre Production Approaches: The harsh social and economic terrain has encouraged more companies to opt for limited cast productions and less dependence on elaborate costumes, scenery and lighting. Notable performances in this minimalist tradition are Arojah Royal Theatre's production of Adinoiyi Ojo Onukaba's four man *The Killing Swamp* in 2010, African Renaissance Theatre's production of Africa Ukoh's six character *54 Silhouettes* in 2013, Majmua Theatre's production of Abiodun Kassim's four-man *Band Aid* in 2015, Patrick Otoro's production of Ola Rotimi's five character *Grip Am* in 2016, and Ojo Onukaba's three man *Her Majesty's Visit* also in 2016.

This limited cast and minimalist production approach may have the greatest impact on the development of playwriting in Nigeria should it become a dominant Theatre production strategy. Numerous plays from Nigerian playwrights of the first, second and third generations require large casts of performers, they being the equivalent of the Western musical, bustling with song, dance and evocations of communal traditional African life. So prevalent were these grand plays in the time of the first three generations of playwrights that some considered the spectacular drama-musical as the only way Nigerian/African drama and theatre should exist. From the fourth and fifth

generations we begin to see a shift from this trend as necessitated by economic realities. Of course, large cast and spectacle-driven theatre is not completely abandoned but plays with fewer characters appear to command the interest of most producers. As such audiences themselves have come to embrace the intimacy of these minimalist theatrical offerings.

Split Performance Model: One innovative production approach adopted by some theatre companies in Lagos in 2015 saw theatre makers splitting performance runs across the four or five Sundays of a month. Rather than run for two or three days, a performance would be scheduled for each Sunday and where possible the play would run twice, successively, on one day. However, this experiment seems to be fizzling out since the beginning of 2016.

Corporate Integration and High Budget Broadway Styled Musical Productions: Despite the comparative limitations faced by theatre in accessing financial support, the corporate world remains the most likely source of funding. With the aid of some major telecommunications giants like Etisalat and MTN in Nigeria, there is an emerging new strand of high budget Broadway styled productions that are designed to satisfy the taste of a wide range of local and intercontinental audiences. However, in order to attract such corporate sponsorship, theatre makers need to integrate the brand identities and campaigns of the corporate bodies into their events. This strategy has proven most successful in Lagos. Two notable examples stand out in this regard: Ifeoma Fafunwa's *Hear Word* in 2016, supported by the Nigerian telecommunications company, Etisalat. *Hear Word* took its star-studded show on a world tour across Nigeria, the United States and Amsterdam; and Bolanle Austen-Peters' *Wakaa! The Musical* supported by Nigerian telecommunications giant MTN, gaining the performance runs in Lagos and The Shaw Theatre on London's West End.

One of my concerns with the Broadway-styled musical craze is that it favours escapism as against serious socially relevant productions. Since most corporate organisations exist basically for profit, they strive to make money regardless of the socio-political atmosphere. This means they must not fund productions that are overtly political or critical of the political class no matter how callous it is. This is the situation Carrier and Johnson, critiquing the British theatre bemoan below:

Musicals have been doing stunningly well, but all serious theatres rely on donations and they have been drying up.... Several leading venues for overtly political drama have either closed or are under severe pressure (76).

Thus, the kind of productions that get funded here are those that promote banal entertainment or essentially conformist artistic creations. Such light-hearted theatre productions rob society of the needed self-reflectiveness, which ultimately leads to growth and better living conditions.

In terms of aesthetic appeals, these high budget Broadway styled productions are visually exciting and utilise modern theatre technological aids to support the performing

artists on stage because the corporate sponsors prefer spectacle-and-celebrity-driven theatre as this best captures the grandeur, which they want their brands to be associated with. However, the impact of this corporate integration option hardly stretches beyond the performance run of the sponsored show. Also, the decision on which theatre production to fund is often subjective as there is more reliance on board room horse-trading than an open competitive selection process where only productions that could have significant socio-political impact win the sponsorship. These and many more factors limit the ultimate benefits Nigerian theatre can derive from such corporate involvement.



Poster of Wakaa the Musical in London

The success of Saro in has led to many more commercially successful musical theatre productions like *Wakaa*, *Grandma Wura* Theatre performances which targets young audiences.

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that while political, economic and social circumstances surrounding the Nigerian Theatre scene have changed considerably since 1945, the challenges and approaches towards solving them have remained similar. Is it, therefore appropriate to conclude that the attempt to firmly establish the Nigerian Theatre as enterprise has seen the theatre makers merely running in circles? What really is the current crop of Nigerian theatre makers doing to chart pathways that could guarantee greater audience engineering, increase box office earnings and ensure the commercial viability of the performing arts sector? These are some of the questions we shall address in the next section.

“Newness” in the Sources of Funding Theatre Productions

Just as modern Nigerian theatre producers are navigating the landmines through experiments with new production approaches, so also are they finding pathways out of the perennial challenge of poor funding. At this juncture, it may be beneficial to survey a few of these ‘new’ survival strategies.

Cultural Partnership with Embassies in Abuja (‘Cultural Diplomacy Initiative’):

Cultural partnership is a new trend, which is becoming popular in Abuja where most of the foreign diplomatic missions are located. This is the attempt by theatre makers to develop professional working relationships with the cultural arms of foreign embassies in order to secure financial support for their productions. The choice of plays in this case is essentially drawn from the works of major playwrights from the home countries of the embassies supporting the venture. These productions are often organised to mark national days of these foreign countries or significant events in the history of such countries like the American Black History Month. The forerunners of this style are the Patrick-Jude Oteh’s Jos Repertory Theatre Company, Jos and Jerry Adesewo’s Arojah Royal Theatre Company, Abuja.



*A scene in August Strindberg’s 1900 play, **Dance of Death Part 1** performed by Arojah Royal Theatre, on Saturday, 28 June, 2015 at the official residence of H.E. Mr. Svante Kilander, Swedish Ambassador to Nigeria*

As innovative as this strategy is, partnership with Embassies or what the *Daily Trust* calls, “Cultural Diplomacy Initiative”, is limited to promoting the interests of the embassy concern. This cannot sustain a viable Nigerian Theatre enterprise because often,

what could be of interest to the embassies is determined by interplay of factors in their home countries than genuine concern for the development of sustainable theatre entrepreneurship in Nigeria. This reality means that the content of performances from this initiative might have little cultural value or appeal to the larger Nigerian Audience.

UN designated Special International Days: In an attempt to secure funds from government ministries and other potential sponsors, some theatre companies have organised their annual theatre festivals around UN designated special international days like the International Day for Women, World HIV Day, The Day of the African Child, International Theatre Day, and so on. The idea is to have short run of select plays whose themes compliment the objectives of such UN designated special days so as to secure the prior support of sponsors and ultimately audience interested in celebrating such special days.

Self-financing: Like Hubert Ogunde did in 1945, today some theatre practitioners fund their productions with resources from other personal ventures or savings. Gold Ikponmwo's Royalhouse of Gold and Africa Ukoh-led African Renaissance Theatre are two notable theatre companies in Abuja employing this funding approach. From February to June of 2016, the two companies collaborated to produce six shows (each running for three days at the end of the second week of the month) at Silverbird Galleria, Abuja.

The danger with the self-financing option is that since the source of finance is from an individual whose resources are often shared with other equally demanding wants and needs, any disruption to the flow of the individual's income leads to a collapse of the theatre production process. Also, if the budget of the self-financed production, as is more often the case, very low and the minimalist production approach fail to impress the audience, their experience cannot translate into core following and the needed consumer loyalty aborted.

Crowd Funding/Patron-financier systems: Only recently the Jos Repertory Theatre experimented with the crowd funding online platform, which was not too successful as recounted by the producer, Patrick-Jude Oteh in a recent interview in 2016:

We needed to raise USD \$25,000 but we ended up raising \$200. The operation of the platform was another experience on its own. In fact, for me it is an industry whose workings we did not understand before we went into it. There are people who will help to jumpstart your fundraising, ...broadcast your appeal... ensure that you got into the right 'channels' of the crowdfunding network... but all these for a fee!!! You will have fees ranging from \$20 - \$1,000+

Adedoyin Owomabirin, a theatre producer who is based in the South-Western part of Nigeria, is also currently experimenting with the terrestrial crowd-funding approach. His new patron system targets contributions from potential audience members functioning as long-serving financiers of theatre shows. The challenge with the patron-financial is with the current state of theatre audience engineering and development in Nigeria. In order to

engender and sustain the interest of any theatre audience to subscribe to a theatre, one needs to first build brand loyalty through frequent good quality productions. This requires sustainable sources of funding, which is of course hardly available.

Networking with Companies within the Entertainment Value Chain: Theatre companies and makers are increasingly realising that there is much to be gained from mutually beneficial partnerships and being part of entertainment hubs, professional clusters and networks. Partnerships with closely related businesses like restaurants, cinemas, event centres, lighting companies, and so on, are also on the increase as part of the strategy to lower production costs by getting services provided directly by a partner rather than paying for such. The partner in turn gets publicity or services the loyalty of its stakeholders by hosting them to theatre productions or publicity during productions and promotional materials. The experiment by Bolanle Austen-Peters at Terra Kulture arena in Victoria Island, Lagos where a purpose built theatre performance arena coexist with a restaurant, book shop, craftshop and art gallery is a bold example of this model of theatre survival technique even though in her case she owns the property and the auxiliary businesses.



*Main bowl of the 400-seater Terra Kulture Arena Theatre at Victoria Island, Lagos
Courtesy: Ideas Photography*

Theatre Enterprise and Criticism in Nigeria

One of the essential supports commercial theatres require to run profitably is a vibrant theatre criticism tradition and of course the medium the critic uses to communicate to his audience. This is because often the decision of the audience as to what performance to spend their hard earned money on is partly dependent on the mediatory role of the critic. How then is theatre criticism faring in Nigeria?

Theatre criticism in Nigeria started as a casual activity than a profession. In the late nineteenth century when the British colonialists introduced English and European styled operas and concerts into the Lagos city, the colonial officers and the emerging local intelligentsia who attended such shows captured their experiences in form of memoir which they shared with friends and loved ones. This gradually translated into

public writings through *Iwe Iroyin* Nigeria's first newspaper in 1804 and an academic journal called the *Teacher*. The 'critics' at this time were mostly white colonial officers and a few Lagos elites who had studied abroad. The rebranding of this journal as the *Nigeria Teacher* in 1933 sharpened its focus and interest in artistic and cultural events in the country.

The establishment of *Nigerian Field Society* by expatriates staff of multinational companies and some teachers in Missionary schools galvanised interest in theatre criticism. Then came the regular publication of the *Nigerian Magazine*, which was managed by Frank Aig-Imoukhuede who was the secretary of culture in the colonial office. The German scholar, Ulli Bier's regular contribution of reviews in *Nigerian Magazine* and the *Nigerian Field Study journals*, culminated into his founding of the *Black Orpheus*, which provided platform for exposure of works of theatre critics who were basically either broadcaster or writers like Segun Olusola, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Charles Nnolim, John Munonye and later Ben Obunzolu, Theo Vincent, and Dapo Adelugba, among others. The founding of the university college, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) in the 1948 and arrival of theatre scholars like Martin Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy in the 1950s saw the emergence of academics as the major players in theatre criticisms in Nigeria. This engagement at the University of Ibadan produced new generation of critics and writers like Femi Osofisan, Yemi Ogunbiyi, Ossie Enekwe, Gordini Darah, Odia Ofeimun.

The First and second editions of Festival of World Black and African Arts and Culture (FESTAC), which Senegal and Nigeria hosted in 1966 and 1977, respectively, brought a renewed interest in theatre criticism by Nigeria Newspapers after the lull occasioned by the Nigerian Civil war, which lasted from 1967-1970. During and after FESTAC'77 most Newspapers and broadcast medium created regular columns and programmes dedicated to the arts and culture criticisms with theatre enjoying prime focus. First to take advantage of this was the *Punch Newspaper* with music critics like Dean Disi, John Chukwu, Laolu Akins, Benson Tomoloju, then Eddy Aderinokun of the *National Interest*. In the broadcasting industry was Benson Idonije with the then popular *Top ten Chart* musical programme whose reviews were also published in the newspapers. Next platform for theatre criticism in the Press category was *Concord Newspapers*, after which that came the introduction of specialised supplements/ newspapers like *Spears* (published by *The Punch*), *The Drums* (franchise from South Africa operated in Lagos) and the *Lagos Weekend* of the *Daily Times*, where more names like Ladi Ayodeji, and Azuka Jeboise Molokwu were added to the list of budding critics.

With the debut of Ben Tomoloju's 'Review Desk' at the then *Weekly Democrat* in 1983, fresh impetus was given to arts criticism as a profession in Nigeria. This was to come to greater fruition with the establishment of *The Guardian Newspaper* in 1984, which ushered in the first full-fledged Arts Desk of a newspaper in Nigeria with its complements of full time staff dedicated to arts criticisms. Jahman Anikulapo appraises the situation thus:

a certain section of the Nigeria mass media has evolved and sustained a consistent and forward-looking tradition of arts journalism practice in both the

print and electronic media. Indeed, it is the sheer commitment to the noble ideals of culture, buoyed on a sound intellectual base that made the leading light of arts journalism to plunge head-long in the late 1970s into a vocation that they felt needed to be professionalised in accordance with the demands of journalism (2).

Sadly the golden era of theatre criticism in Nigeria described above has since nose-dived. A combination of several factors are responsible for this, one of which is the suffocating harsh environment described above in which the Nigeria theatre operates. It will be stating the obvious to say the theatre critic's job is in jeopardy if the theatre makers are not producing maximally. Anikulapo is apt on this:

Criticism can only thrive in an environment where there is room for creativity. But when you live in an environment that stifles creativity, you cannot expect criticism to thrive. You want to look at the work of art, you want to talk about somebody's performance – a dancer or a visual artist – you must look at the environment of performance (3).

Anikulapo goes further to explain his personal experience and resolution as a Nigeria theatre critic:

I don't want to go through the exasperating experience of writing comments on works that are by all the parameters for critical discourse are substandard; especially works I know... the dirty thing that people had to go into to raise money to produce a play. I have once been a witness to a lady theatre producer having to befriend a banker just so to be able to pay the balance of his cast and crew fees, when the supposed sponsors ditched her at the last minute (3).

As majority of the trained critics abandon full time work to become 'culture activists' or in search of full time appointments in the Universities, or even to become private business men in other sectors of the Nigerian economy, the space is left to journalist and other freelancers that have little or no training in theatre studies. As is expected, their reviews of theatre productions lack depth since they see their roles essentially as news reports or at best writers of memoirs from the perspective of a casual audience member. Even for the few that have learnt the craft of theatre criticism on the job, the economic crunch has robbed them of their objectivity as critics. So, they often write according to the extent of the gratifications they have received or expect from the producers of such performances. So, rather than provide independent professional evaluations that could guide the creators and the audience in their subsequent choices, these 'critics' merely serve as the marketing agents of theatre companies commissioned to secure favourable media mentions for their principals.

Perhaps, this explains why outside the academia, there are today very few notable names as far as theatre criticism is concerned compared to the golden age of theatre criticisms in the 1970s and early 90s. Arts editors and writers in the Nigerian mass media hold very little influence as theatre critics today unlike what is obtainable in the UK and

US broadways. Besides *The Guardian Newspaper*, which has also lost most of its vibrant theatre critics, there are very few credible publications in the Nigerian press as far as theatre criticism is concerned.

Though the campus based theatre critics keep Nigerian theatre criticism afloat to date, it is instructive to note that their contributions remain largely inaccessible to the bulk of the theatre makers because they are published in academic journals that have very limited circulation and readership compared to the newspapers. Even here one notices the infiltration of vanity publishing producing poorly edited academic journals that contribute little or nothing to the development of theatre criticism as a profession in Nigeria. There is also the challenge of limited avenues for engagement between the theatre industry and the academia in Nigeria. Majority of the vibrant theatre critics who contribute to academic journals have minimal exposure to emerging trends in the Nigerian ‘theatre industry’ since they hardly attend performances beyond the university-based theatres.

While it is gratifying to note that some of the trained theatre critics who have stop practicing as full time workers like Jahman Anikulapo started resurfacing as bloggers and arts advocates who still write regularly. However, the emergence of a new crop of ‘online citizen theatre critics’ whose only qualification is that they own mobile devices that can connect to various social media platforms has deepened the complexity of this scenario. What is certain is that, as an ephemeral art, no good theatre survives posterity without the full complement of a critic. Indeed no theatre industry can thrive without a vibrant culture of criticism.

Conclusion

We have so far conducted an environmental scan on the variables that interplay within the Nigerian professional theatre scene. We have identified some of the critical social, economic and cultural factors that, like landmines, continue to pose serious threats to the development of Nigerian Theatre as enterprise. We have shown that the modern theatre makers are equally undaunted as they try to invent or reinvent old approaches in new ways to keep their theatre businesses afloat.

However, in spite of their resourcefulness, the ‘newness’ in their approaches is only relative as most of the strategies are drawn from already existing paradigms albeit with slight modifications to suit the Nigerian environment. It is also evident that as interesting as some of these pathways or ‘newness’ are, at best interim measures that may not provide an enduring solution to the landmines. They may provide the needed palliative measures to keep the theatre makers going but they certainly cannot guarantee the theatre producers a means of livelihood as full-time professionals. This cannot be until the fundamental issues retarding the building a theatre industry in Nigeria needs are addressed systematically.

As the foundational problems remain unattended to these approaches see Nigerian theatre makers skipping – sometimes shabbily, sometimes deftly – the surface landmines only to inevitably land on the deep-lying landmines which are engrafted into the very path itself. The question that begs to be asked is: when dealing with landmines on a path what is the best solution, *avoiding* them continuously or *uprooting* them once and for all? I will go with the last option but that requires commitment, political will and

huge financial resources to put the necessary infrastructure in place. Theatregoers need basic comfort, facilities and regular power supply in the theatres and of course security, regular salaries for those employed and good roads as they commute to the theatres. It is also necessary for all stakeholders to take their responsibilities towards the development of an enabling environment for theatre enterprise and allied businesses to thrive.

Among the initiatives that come to mind readily here are as follows:

- a) There is an urgent need for the government to step up efforts towards the establishment of the national endowment for the arts as specified in the 1988 *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*. The tedious process of reviewing this 1988 policy document to incorporate emerging trends not earlier envisaged while the initial policy was crafted also needs to be brought to a logical conclusion soonest.
- b) Corporate bodies and well to do individuals interested in supporting theatre need government encouragement by way of tax waivers and the like to establish foundations that could guarantee their sustainable involvement and institute fair competition for the funds.
- c) National Theatre's Open Theatre initiative put in place in the 1980s by the management of the National Theatre to encourage the development of amateur and professional theatre practice in Nigeria needs to be revisited. This will open up the space for performances in the fringes to get better exposure through occasional performances in the national theatre.
- d) The Annual Nigerian Universities Theatre Festival (NUTAF) needs to be supported by the relevant stakeholders and repositioned for sustainability to provide more room for experimentation by young theatre artists and increase their professional exposure even while they are still in training. Indeed most of the emerging playwrights in the fourth generation actually 'cut-their-teeth' during this annual festival before it went into limbo in 1997. In its first twelve editions, over 136 new plays were produced.
- e) The Nigerian theatre makers need to think globally and act locally in their choice of productions, programme design and networking. The consolidation of the strategies that have worked for each of the companies is necessary and should be encouraged so that theatre companies can leverage the gains recorded by their sister companies in navigating the landmines.
- f) Finally, concerted efforts need to be made to nurture the return of professional theatre critics to the Nigerian media scene. The veterans also need further encouragement to utilise available social media platforms or at least columns in newspapers to make their contributions towards providing the critical voice the Nigerian Theatre makers require to navigate the landmines and evolve enduring pathways that can grow the Nigerian theatre enterprise.

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