

**Technological Advancement and Theatre
Audience in Nigeria**

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Abstract

In spite of the existence of different theories of theatre practice, the truth is that the profession is made up of two components – the artistic and the technical – which must be well blended if the objectives of theatre practice must be actualised for the purposes of societal development and security. However, theatre practitioners seem to only concentrate on the artistic component to the detriment of the technical, a situation that has resulted in dwindling theatre patronage or audience in Nigeria. This paper, aims at tracing the historical perspective of *technical theatre* practice with the accrued advantages, pointing out the negative effects of neglecting the technical aids on the overall processes of theatre practice particularly in contemporary society. To handle this task, both primary and secondary data were utilised and the conclusion that negligence of the technical component of the theatre is one of the major causes of poor theatre audience in Nigeria was arrived at. From the conclusion, recommendations were made, including regular training and retraining of technical theatre personnel and private sector participation in sponsoring theatre activities. If these are considered, students of technical theatre practice in particular, theatre/performing arts in general and other categories of personnel in the profession of theatre practice stand a good chance of benefitting from the outcome of this research.

Introduction

The purpose of theatrical production can be seen either from the traditional or Western perspective. It may vary from one culture or

community to the other. It may also be spiritual, cultural, religious or otherwise. But the most important thing to note here is that there must be a purpose for a given performance, be it serious or trivial. In his contribution, Shelley opines that, “generally, the purpose of a theatrical presentation is to entertain, educate, and communicate ideas. A typical presentation comprises a script, interpreted by both performers and elements of design, all unified by the directors overall concept” (3). This therefore implies that beside the script or the story line developed by the playwright, the story teller or the composer, the activities of other personnel of the theatre including those of the designers are inevitable for the actualisation of the said purpose. It is therefore pertinent to note that in most cases, theatres serve as “catalysts for the rejuvenation of urban areas, create tourist destinations in rural areas, contribute to the synergy of emerging cultural districts, nurture the artistic maturity” and more (Waters 15). To achieve the aforementioned purposes, theatre makes use of personnel, including those grouped under the nomenclature of 'Theatre Design and Technology'. These are those that are directly concerned with technological application in a given theatrical performance. Technological application/advancement and theatre practice therefore form the basis of this paper.

The key concept (Technology) in this context deals with the utilisation of the scientific and the industrial methods in practical experience. Based on the different eras of theatre practice, different forms of technology have been utilised at one point or the other in the process of achieving the objectives of theatrical presentation. These technological applications have contributed in no small measure to the degree of theatre patronage and audience with the resultant development and security of a given country or community. However, due to the lopsidedness in people's thoughts and actions to the detriment of the arts profession, the immense benefits accruable to humanity from theatre practice through appreciative theatre patronage/audience tend to have eluded mankind hence affecting negatively, our national development and security.

Although it has been established that good theatre is much more than mere entertainment but that it serves as a catalyst for national development and security, this fact is still subject to fierce argument because some people do not see anything good coming out of the theatre

about which they have already developed negative thoughts. Based on this, it becomes necessary that theatre be carefully and comprehensively handled and cared for. Explaining why theatre should be constantly studied, adequately funded, and sufficiently developed, Whiting postulates:

In its periods of greatness its playwrights, actors, directors, and designers have sought the meaning and beauty of existence with the same passion and sincerity that has characterized the work of great scientists, philosophers, and theologians; for in its essence the art of the theatre rests on a common foundation with all learning: on man's capacity to explore, wonder, and reflect (3).

However, it is worthwhile to point out that the history of the origin of the theatre has been documented and presented in diverse versions. This perhaps underscores why Brocket asks a question and asserts: “But how did theatre originate? In seeking to describe its origin, one must rely primarily on speculation, since there is little concrete evidence on which to draw. The most widely accepted theory, championed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, envisions theatre as emerging out of myth and ritual” (1).

This version is corroborated by many scholars. Hence, Hartnoll posits that “the origins of the theatre go back into the past, to the religious rites of the earliest communities” (7). This means that virtually every community has one form of religious rite (theatre) or the other. However, it should be clearly noted here that theatre in the modern sense goes beyond a mere enactment of various religious rites by communities but connotes “an imitation of an action, and not the action itself” (Aristotle in Hartnoll 7). Expanding this point, Hartnoll avers that “for the theatre as we understand it today, three things are necessary: actors speaking or singing independently of the original unison chorus; an element of conflict conveyed in dialogue; and an audience emotionally involved in the action but not taking part in it. Without these essential elements there may be religious or social ceremonies, but not theatre” (7). This means that theatre in its true sense deals with performances further taken away from its original state and represented before a live audience.

It is in view of the above that irrespective of the profuse performative elements prevalent in ancient Egypt and other ancient cities, they were and are still regarded as mere directives for corporate religious and or spiritual activities. This implies that theatre in its true sense is a situation or a place where actors (imitators) perform certain conflicting actions conveyed in dialogues before a live audience that does not physically partake in the action though they may be emotionally involved. In this connection, Jacobus asserts that “in assessing the global trends of drama and theatre, Greece always occupies a domineering position” (36). It is from this perspective that Jacobus also says that “the Greeks of the fifth century B.C are credited with the first masterful dramatic age” (7). As at that time, the Greek theatre was extremely important and was supported with public funds; hence, there were attractive prizes that made playwrights compete for them. One of the reasons posited by Jacobus, that made the Greek theatre important to the Greeks was because they saw it as “a way of integrating their relationship with their gods and of reinforcing their sense of community. Drama and theatre for the Greeks were not for mere 'escapism or entertainment, not a frill or a luxury. Connected as it was with religious festivals, it was cultural necessity" (7).

Greek drama was followed by the Romans and the reasons for “Rome's sterility in drama, especially after the great Empire matured, is not hard to deduce. A native drama of some promise had begun to develop; then Rome became a conqueror, and among its early victims was Greece; arts in general and acting and its technical effects in particular were still left in the hands of the Greek slaves in Rome, who were rather brilliant but inferior in status. For this reason, there were similarities between the plots of Greek drama and those produced in Rome after the conquest. However, after the final collapse of Rome and its western empire in the year 470BC, theatre activities became dead and what theatre performances were hitherto given had to degenerate into a mere entertainment that featured mostly vulgarity and obscenity shows.

The above culminated in the abolition of all theatrical activities in Rome by Christian Church as its first act when it came into power. It was the activities of the actors and other performers before their disbandment that made them be classified as thieves, prostitutes and other undesirables. This therefore implies that “whatever the causes,

the fact remains that from the death of Seneca until the beginning of the so-called Middle Ages, playwriting was practically nonexistent. There were exceptions of course.... But on the whole, the Dark Ages as far as playwriting was concerned, were dark indeed (Whiting 28). This answers the question of 'why the artists and artistes should be treated with scorn up till date'.

However, the rebirth of performative activities is still traced to the very influential church that actually championed the cause of theatre's destruction. To support this point, Hartnoll opines that: “it is in any case sufficiently ironic that the drama, so strictly forbidden to Christians—often by men who, like St Augustine, had enjoyed it before their conversion should review itself in the very heart of their cult” (35). Confirming this, Whiting asserts that:

At some time during tenth century, a tiny four-line playlet, introduced into the church's Easter service, dramatized the resurrection in the simplest possible terms; yet it must have scored a success, for soon, Christmas and other holy days were also being embellished with dramatization. Finally the short Biblical plays were moved outside the church and organized into groups known as mystery cycles (28).

These mystery plays featured a lot of topical, mostly Biblical issues some of which included Adam and Eve; Abraham and Isaac; Noah and his wife and many more. Close to these mystery plays were the passion and miracle plays which dealt largely with Biblical issues or themes, and depicted the lives of the saints. More so, other recognisable plays that developed during this medieval era of theatre development were the morality plays, one of which surviving and familiar example is a play titled *Everyman*. During this same period of the Middle Ages, the 'farcical interlude' also survived, because in any event, the farcical interludes have always been recognised to occupy an important position in the history of playwriting and the theatre. Many excellent examples of farcical interludes have survived because of the relevance of such plays to the development of the society, some of which include *Peirre Pathelin* from France. Germany and England are also noted as having their own farcical interludes.

It has also been noted by Whiting that the most celebrated farcical interludes are those of England “which mark the beginning of Renaissance playwriting in England, a beginning that was to culminate in the genius of Shakespeare (30). Renaissance in this context actually refers to the rebirth of interest in the civilisation of Greek and Rome. During the Renaissance, men began to question and re-examine life and death because the old faith had started to crumble. The Renaissance man therefore shifted emphasis to the living rather than preparation for death and began to rediscover the arts and sciences cultivated to improve his lot. This he did through the books and ruins of human existence. In spite of this positive undertone with regard to the Renaissance era, Whiting says, “the Renaissance was infinitely complex and variegated. Evil frequently balanced or over balanced the good. The new found freedom to live was ... frequently interpreted as freedom to exploit, rape, murder, or oppress. In a sense the Renaissance is still in progress, whether it will eventually end in the destruction or exaltation of man seems at this moment ... to hang in ... balance” (31).

It is further documented that Renaissance came to meet Spain in control of most part of Italy and Europe. The activities of the Renaissance had actually established Spain by her own estimation as at that time as the “leading nation of the world” although her achievements, most especially in arts and learning, were said to be hollow and disappointing (Whiting 34). These trends in theatre practice continued until the era of Renaissance England, to which Shakespeare, the genius, belonged. This era of theatre practice was so important and prominent that “Even without Shakespeare the period would have been an important one, but including his genius, it may be claimed that London from about 1580 to 1642 contributed more great plays than any other city during the fifth century B.C.” (Whiting 37). This development went on and on until the arrival of the modern and the post modern periods of theatrical performances in which great and greater plays have been created and presented in furtherance of the development and security of the different nations of the world.

Technological Approach to Theatre Practice: A Global Perspective

In theatre practice, beside the instruments of expression which

include the voices and the bodies of the actors, the architecture and the technical aspects of the performance are important elements responsible for any successful theatrical presentation. From a careful study of the history of the theatre right from its inception, based on western perspective which is traced to Athens in Greece up to the era of the modern theatre, it is quite glaring that both architectural elements and technical aids, being products of technology, have been of immense assistance towards the packaging and presentation of performances before live audiences. A close examination of these theatres clearly testifies to the fact that technology in one form or the other has been playing vital roles both in architectural design and technical aids in different categories during the process of theatrical performances. This is why an examination of technology as a concept becomes relevant at this point.

Technology has been viewed by many as a solution to most of the myriad problems that exist in the world. That has to do with how to use the scientific approach in solving human myriad problems. According to Bain: “Technology is the making, modification, usage, and knowledge of tools, machines, techniques, craft, systems, methods of organization, in order to solve a problem, improve a preexisting solution to a problem, achieve a goal or perform a specific function. It can also refer to the collection of such tools, machinery, modification, arrangement and procedures” (2). Technology therefore has to do with the branch of knowledge that deals with scientific methods or approaches and their practical utilisations in furtherance of the solution of problems plaguing the human race. It is from the above that Bain further says that “technology includes all tools, machines, utensils, weapons, instruments, housing, clothing, communicating and transporting devices and the skills by which we produce and use them” (3). Technology as used here can be viewed as an activity that forms or changes culture. It is the application of science and the arts for the benefit of life in general and mankind in particular. It has to do with the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area. Technology is said to be a far-reaching term that includes single tools as well as the more complex machines as manifested in the concept of ‘Information and Communication Technology (ICT)’

Technological Advancement and Theatre Audience

Theatre Design/Technology has always been one inevitable aspect of theatre practice in general and performing arts in particular, although at the early stage, most of the activities within the scope of *technical theatre* were either handled by the director or the stage manager. This simply implies that right from the inception of theatre practice, especially from the Western perspective, the area of Theatre Design and Technology otherwise known as *technical theatre* has always been relevant and will continue to be. In the light of this, Whiting explains that, “Until the Renaissance, theatre architecture and the art of scenic design were essentially inseparable” (250). From the Renaissance, the practice of Theatre Design and Technology has been growing steadily, passing through different eras such as the crude and analogue age of technological application to the contemporary era of digitalisation in scene, light, sound, costume and makeup being the core areas of *technical theatre* practice. Technology is indeed a source of liberation; therefore, artists/ artistes are breaking new grounds with new forms of expressions. Digital communications technology has indeed opened the doors for new forms of dialogue and creative possibilities mostly in the different areas of *technical theatre* practice.

For instance, at inception of theatre practice, simple tools were used by the Greece for the excavation and preparation of their acting area. Brockett says that “sometimes during the sixth century, a terrace was formed at the foot of the hills, and on it an orchestra (dancing place) was laid out” (31). The Greece also made use of the available tools to carve out the audience side of the theatre with well arranged seats, implying the utilisation of some sort of technology right from the early stage of theatre practice in the world. Describing the Greek theatre with regard to technological application, Hartnoll asserts, “In a horse shoe shape round the orchestra, on rising ground sat the audience, first on the bare hill-side, later on wooden benches, and later still on stone or marble seats. In the centre of the front row were the elaborate stone seats reserved for the priest of Dionysus, to whom the god himself appeals for help” (21). In the same vein, Whiting explains the nature of the ancient Greek theatre thus:

There is no reliable information as to the kind of theatre in which Thespis may have performed while

winning the first Greek tragic contest in 535B.C. Horace mentions something about a cart, and from this fragment of evidence some have conjectured that Thespis probably stood on a cart in the midst of his chorus and “acted” for an audience that gathered about him... And the business of providing the actor with a better chance to be seen and heard by his audience is the fundamental function of all stages (220).

Through design and technology, both the actor(s) and the audience were made comfortable and this singular act encouraged theatre patronage, coupled with the fact that theatre attendance was somehow mandatory.

In addition to the above, the Greek designed their theatre and gave names to the different positions such as the *skene* (scene building); the *parados* (the entryway on either side between the *skene* and auditorium), *paraskenia* (the skenes evolution side wings); the *proskenion* (the forestage). It is also documented that Greek theatre also made use of numerous stage machines and effects. Examining this vital point of utilisation of technological devices as far back as the period of the Classical theatre, Whiting states:

The three major devices appear to have been the accyclema, the periaktos, and the mechane. The eccyclema was a low platform, mounted on wheels or castors in such a manner that it could be rolled out through the doorway to reveal scenes that had supposedly taken place within the skene..., the second device was periaktos..., it appears to have been a prism-shaped unit with different scenes or decorations painted on its three faces.... The third device commonly used, the mechane, was apparently some sort of crane or derrick used primarily to raise and lower the gods (223-224).

The above shows the level of early technological application in theatre practice and how this contributed to appreciable audience patronage of theatrical activities.

As Greek theatre, the Roman theatre also utilised technology in its operation. This was so because “in general there are marked similarities between the typical Roman theatre and the Greek theatre

from which it descended.... As early as 154 B.C.; a Roman theatre is reported to have been built of stone A hundred years later (55-52B.C); the great Pompey cleverly constructed the first permanent theatre – permanent because Pompey cleverly placed a shrine to Venus at the back of the auditorium, thus implying that they were eventually constructed throughout most of the Empire” (224-225). However, in spite of the fact that the Roman copied much from the Greek theatre, it is pertinent to note that “Romans should not be viewed as mere extension of the Greeks for their own character made them reject much that was distinctively Greek” (Brockett 51). It is also worthwhile to point out here that although the Romans could build wonderful playhouses,... their weakness lay in what they said and did in them. As a result of technological application, different types of stages emerged during the Roman theatre. Technology also influenced even the costume and makeup during this period as even masks were used right from the beginning (Whiting 226).

Furthermore, during the Medieval era, of the many stage types that appeared, three major ones are considered and treated; they include:

1. the temporary platform stage of the strolling players
2. the simultaneous stages used in predicting the mystery and miracle plays and
3. the wagon stage used in producing the English and German mystery cycles (226).

This clearly signifies that technology in one form or the other played a great role in Medieval theatre practice. During the period of Renaissance, many achievements were made in theatre practice through technological application and advancement, a spectacular one being the construction of the Olympic theatre called *Teatro Olimpico*. It is regarded as a beautiful and important playhouse that still stands. This Olympic theatre was designed by a famous designer called Palladio. Although he died when the work had begun, his son completed the project in 1584 (Whiting 230). The Elizabethan theatre actually projected so much with regard to theatre and technological application as it was one of the most functional and efficient ever designed. Shakespeare's playhouse called *The Globe* was one of the most famous of all the playhouses of the era. The implication of the above is that technology, mostly from Renaissance to the present day theatre practice,

has contributed immensely to the development of the profession, which has in no small measure boosted theatre audience patronage vis-à-vis the national development and security of countries all over the world.

Technological Advancement and Theatre Practice/Audience in Nigeria

Theatre practice in Nigeria since its inception in 1880 has gone through several developmental stages. According to Oni, “the history of the development of modern Nigerian theatre based on the diffusion of European and traditional/indigenous African models is adequately documented...; beginning from 1880, are the earliest recorded attempts at dramatic entertainments and concerts, mainly in Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta”(87). However, most of these performances at the inception of theatre practice in Nigeria were held in school halls and in churches, with the application of one form of technology or the other. With the advent of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre with Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola and Moses Olaiya as the major progenitors from its inception to the period before FESTAC 77, Ogunde's pervasive influence was remarkable especially in terms of the aesthetics of staging (Oni 94). Ogunde did not introduce theatre to Nigeria; Clark however admits that “he was responsible for withdrawing the theatre from the direct patronage of the church and court” (x).

In terms of technological application in Nigerian theatre practice at its inception, various attempts were made by these progenitors to better the standard of their performances from all the areas of technical theatre practice such as scene, light, sound, costume and makeup. Most of the challenges of scene design were surmounted through the utilisation of painted backdrops while the required special sound effects were realised through application of one form of traditional technology or the other. With regard to stage lighting, Lyndersay postulates that “Ogunde is believed to have had a personal agenda for the stage lighting employed in his dramatic presentations” (98). With the forgoing, it implies that even the earliest practitioners of

theatre profession in Nigeria took into cognisance the relevance of technology in theatre practice. However, it is sad to realise that not much has been achieved since then, the reason being that the federal, state and local governments as well as individuals have failed to appreciate the role of theatre and performing arts in the overall developmental process and security situation of the country. From the period of Hubert Ogunde till the contemporary era of theatre practice in Nigeria where theatre ownership has spread across the government, academic and private, it can be said that much has not been done in furtherance of the conscious attempt towards the development and application of the technological aids in theatre practice. This is quite glaring as most of the academic/government owned theatres in Nigeria exist without befitting architectural structures and allied spaces, not to talk of the procurement of technological equipment needed for effective theatre practice in this digitalised era.

Conclusion

In conclusion, theatre being an ensemble art is a combination of the artistic and the technical aspects. The technical aspect of theatrical performance is a product of technology and design. In theatre practice, most of the elements of the profession including light and sound-effects are products of design. Apart from the organisation of the blockings of the performance by the artistic director, all other visual elements of production are, directly or indirectly, products of design. This therefore implies that *theatrical design* is a significant aspect of every stage performance. Theatre, right from its inception, has been viewed as a powerful tool for societal transformation and communal security. This perhaps was responsible for theatre being made compulsory for all citizens during the era of Greek Theatre. Artists and artistes involved in contemporary theatre practice desperately need to balance efforts towards scientific progress with efforts towards cultural progress.

In theatre practice, the practitioners should rise to the occasion and strive towards the full utilisation and application of technology and

theatre towards the actualisation of the much needed national security and development in our contemporary society. If theatres during the Renaissance era could have such technological facilities as flying mechanisms for special effects creation, and devices for sound and lighting effects, using artificial sources of lighting, it implies that theatre architecture and equipment at that time were better than what we have in many Nigerian theatres today. How do we expect the audience to patronise theatrical performances when there is nothing attractive in the theatre? Audience patronage is bound to dwindle. When there is dwindling audience patronage, the messages packaged in play productions would not be communicated to the target audience even in the midst of stiff competition from such other media as the video, television, internet and other media of information and entertainment available in contemporary society as a result of globalisation. As a result, no impact on the national development and security can be created by the theatre. For theatre in this 21st century to perform its functions, there should be a blending of the talents of the actors, good play scripts, a decorous theatre house, digitalised scene, lighting and sound equipment, skills and the craftsmanship of the theatre.

Recommendations

Based on the above discourse, the following recommendations are made:

- (1) Theatre practitioners in Nigeria should insist on theatre designs and decorous theatre houses to enhance effective and efficient practice.
- (2) Owners of theatres in Nigeria should procure new technological equipment in theatres, good enough to captivate the audience.
- (3) Private sector participation in theatre practice is inevitable. This simply means that rich multi-national corporations and individuals should see the need to invest in theatre industry and not to leave it to the government alone.
- (4) There is the urgent need to train technical theatre practitioners in the art of new technology in scene, lighting, sound and costume/makeup designs.

- (5) Nigerian theatre practitioners should follow the new trends in the world and imbibe the philosophy of technological application and advancement towards plausible theatre patronage with national development and security as its effects. This is desirable as the computer system has asserted itself in almost all spheres of human endeavours. If these recommendations are implemented, theatre practice in Nigeria will play its role towards enhanced national development and security.

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