ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sustaining Theatre for Development in a Pandemic: An Exploration of Herdsmen Advocacy Project

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Abstract

Considering the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic globally and the resultant need to change the way most of the world's activities are carried out with a view to cushioning the effects and curbing the spread of this virus, enforcing multiple measures to avoid economic and social shutdown becomes imperative.These measures frown at activities that involve mass gathering of people for any purpose. To this end, theatre for development which is characterized by communal participation needs to re-strategize in medium of broadcast andaudience participation to accommodate the needed global change. Sequel to this, this paper offers a new way through which theatre for development can employ new media (digital) means as content transmitting and broadcasting platform to keep alivetheatre for development in a period of pandemic and post-pandemic using streaming platforms. To achieve this, this paper examined the Anam Herdsmen Advocacy Project. This project highlighted the mutual dependency of new media and theatre for development in fostering social change in their social and technological context with an improved environment, broader audience participationand a leavingof legacy. In the end, it was found that streaming of theatre for development projects expands the viewership of the projects, equates it as the best approach to address the pandemic era and the post pandemic era, and still leaves the host communities better than they were.

Key words: Theatre for Development, AnamHerdsmen Advocacy Project, Pandemic

Introduction

> Theatre (for Development) is different from all other forms of theatrical presentation because it is live. . . . At the heart of the theater experience, then, is the Performer-audience relationship: the immediate, personal exchange; the chemistry and magic which gives theatre its special quality (Kaoime, 2015).

The above prefatory quotation justifies the fact that for theatre (performance) to be complete, it must be presented live on stage before an audience in an unmediated (direct) or mediated (indirect) relationship with the audience. This mediation is either by the camera or filmic gadgets or open, fresh and direct contact with the audience. The convergence of this new approach to communication in Theatre and Media Studies coincides with the covid-19 pandemic era with a demanding technological shift and the need to resuscitate every sphere of life not excluding theatre for development and its audience reception and coverage so as to align with the need situational demand, digital trends and pandemic protocols. This demand for a new approach in practice and performance prompted the needed shifts in communication and participation from field work to stage, from stage to cyberspace or a streaming platform. According to actor Wallace Shawn,"I've been spoiled like a lot of people by watching movies and television, where you can see very well and you can hear what the actors are saying" (Shawn, 2007). Shawn, by her postulations, refers to an activity that involves gathering of person or persons for an event characterized by the concentration of folks at a specific location for a specific purpose over a set time. In the pandemic era, these gatherings as postulated by Shawn can amplify the spread of the virus in the pandemic period. So there is a need to carve a means for audience sense of always being connected to events, in a continuous co-presence.

This paper seeks to create a medium where people could gather and enjoy theatre for development performances without being restricted by any disease outbreak, a kind of continually watching from the comforts of their homes through whichever medium they choose: facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Video or Live Streaming, etc. This is made possible through a lot of artistic creation of performances and productions that mix cyberspace and physical performance in different proportions for different purposes. Some of these are projects and performances which granted different permissions to users who could participate in a variety of roles, from a single guest audience to an active participant. The artistic creation, "loses its materiality, and becomes simply an effect or an event; the artist loses his halo and becomes a researcher; the spectator leaves the domain of cultural conditioning and himself, becomes active and creative" (Qtd in Chatzichristodoulou, 2018). The distinctions between theatre for development and technologically mediated performance remains a fundamental and socially stratifying phenomenon and it is important to interrogate it directly and squarely. To do this is to define the tiny line between theatre for development and technologically mediated performances in terms of the physical present and virtual present. Televisions and cinemas for instance are all mediatized and the difference between the cinema and these other online performances are question of technologies involved and the methods of operation.

This paper interrogates the best approach to sustenance of theatre for development in a period of moribund social and economic activities in the society, like a pandemic. Theatre for development is marked out of other theatre performances because of its autonomous, fluid, adaptive, and transposable potential and its acknowledgement of the community as an artistic construct that needs examinations or that opens dialectical discourse(s). These examinations offer a justification to communal participation and co-performance where multiplicities of meanings are generated for onward analysis for the freedom of the people. Involving the community, liberates them from the shackles of individuals with impaired visions of life and transforms them into individuals with a broader perspective of life. They become relevant to the community by contributing to the overall development and well-being of their communities. In our quest to discover and create a sustainable theatre for development in the pandemic era, the communal involvement, and its capacity to reach wider audience despite their place of viewing is presented as the way forward.

Anam Herdsmen Project as a Theatre for Development project carried out in the period of covid-19 in Anam, Anambra West Local Government of Anambra Stateis chosen as the most influential due to the nature, time bound, of its provisions for experimenting with technologies and its participatory approach that is embedded co-performance.

The question now is what is Theatre for Development? We considered this definition cardinal as a result of our involvement and experiences in TFD projects

Theatre for Development and its Intents

Theatre for Development is a subdivision of Theatre Arts. It is recognized as one of the sturdy and effective tools for conscientization and education of the rural and urban people. As a result of the robust nature of it, many scholars have tried to assimilate meanings to it according to their experience and involvements in the practice(s). According to Obdadiegwu (2009), "Community theatre is basically the theatre of ideas and cognitive clarification with its focus on researching into communal problems. It attempts to diagnose the problem of man-kind … find lasting solutions to them." To diagnose these problems, the facilitators of the project need to decentralize the theatre by employing the community medium, culture and languages for better understanding and participation. "It is a means of mobilizing a people struggling for survival…" (Nwanmuo, 1989;Mda, 1993; Boeren, 1992); and"a more participative and empowering form of theatre…" (Nogueira, 2002). Furthermore,their focus is not limited to any particular topic or issue but is determined by the

prevalent problems in the host community. For instance the issue or the problems of the host community may range from health such as: Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Genital Mutilations, and Lesser Fever. The social issues include lack of social amenities like potable drinking water, lack of electricity, low men enrollment in schools and early marriages. For Kabaso (2013),theatre for development are "…modes of theatre whose objective is to disseminate message, or to concientize the community about their objective social political situation." According to Mlama (1991), "Theatre for Development aims to make the people not only aware of but also active participants in the development process by expressing their view points and acting to better their conditions (p.67).Kidds (2008), on his part, maintains that Theatre for Development

> could help bring the community together, facilitate participation, build community spirit, raise issues, spark discussion, challenges apathy and inspire community effort. It could reflect the community to itself in a way that challenges the community to do something (p.68).

These definitions share a single philosophical basis as a medium for encouraging participation, education and conscientization of the masses, what Abah (2005) calls… "a commonality of agenda." According to Etherton (2013) any theatre project in which "The plays (projects)… take the part of the local people… should reflect life from the viewpoint of the villagers themselves…" (p.213).

Sustaining Theatre for Development in a Pandemic Era

Bringing theatre to the people and in their comfort zone by tasking them to become conscious of the situation around is the top priority for a sustainable Theatre for Development. The approach calls for the marriage of technology and Theatre for Development. This technological incorporation shall reflect the reality of life of the people in another dimension. The fact remains that to keep theatre afloat in this pandemic era, it needs to accommodate collective play-making on the stage and on the cyber space to a point where everyone in the audience becomes participants. This new approach shall maximize the potential of video based Theatre for Development and technology. As a way of creating a turn-around in TfD especially in the area of audience reception of information and participation, the application of video streaming becomes a lifeline to sustaining Theatre for Development in the challenging period. This format breaks free of the confines of stage media to sustaining the performance online. A kind of collective and participatory shared experience of the actors and the audience whether mediated or unmediated affirms contemporaneous with respect to time, not being literally in the same physical space. The space created is viewed in respect to time, not being literally in the same physical space.

This is creates cross-reality theatrical performances by combining physical and virtual space. The physical stage becomes a performance venue where the facilitators of the project interact with the host community. It could be indoor, outdoor, raised platform, village square, market square, open field, under a tree, etc. depending on the nature of the Theatre project while the screen or cyber spaces become a viewing arena. Thus, we placed live and virtual stage to run concurrently, so both can make inroads into their various audiences.

Considering the potential for a more open relationship between the Digital Technologies and Theatre for Development, we offer alternative visions for sustainability and development through streaming platforms. This viewing platform is created through Instagram, YouTube, Periscope, Face book, and Twitter enabled phones or laptops. But in more complex and professional dimensions, the use of decoders, like Terradek, Dacast and CDN (content delivery network), etc. creates a virtual world. The virtual world becomes an online stage, which is begotten through a transmission of the realistic stage experience in the Internet. This in turn offers the audience the opportunity to contribute, be part of the performance and interact with the people during and after performance. Streaming as a technique offers a variety of opportunities for

professional users looking to grow their brands, mix-discourse, and foster deeper financial empowerment to stakeholders. Given the numerous and variety of cameras and capture devices, encoders in the market today, the breath of technical setup becomes diverse as the content creators either from a single-camera setup to a much larger multi-camera production with switchers using the encoder as stand-alone-player or a plugging that works as part of a web browser. Its multimedia form includes but is not limited to video footage and interactivity. Exploring this process in a theatre for development project becomes stimulating.

The Herdsmen Advocacy Project in View

This project is an experiment on virtual performance for a sustainable Theatre for Development. It brought scholars, researchers and TfD practitioners together for dialectic diffusion of knowledge and ideas in the field of theatre and community development. The project was like every other TfD project but with unique features of taking the performance to the people through streaming the performance. The objectives are to educate, and to conscentizing the communities on the need for dialogue and mutual existence between them and the Fulani Herdsmen and possibly test its efficacy to keep the people out of danger zones.

The Advocacy Meetings with Stakeholders in the Communities

These meetings raised a lot of issues and problems facing the communities such as

1. Unwarranted Destructions of Crops and Attacks by the Herdsmen
2. Over Flooding
3. Incessant Cult wars and killings
4. Lack of Electricity in the Communities.

Herdsmen attack and flood were chosen through the scale of preferenceas the most devastating which needs urgent attention. The research team initially agreed to merge the two most urgent problems but, along the line, discovered that the project may not do justice to both in a single outing and decided to drop flooding and go for herdsmen attacks.

The herdsmen problem needs urgent and broader attention. For instance, in Ezi-Anam, there were cases of attacks and counter attacks. In Ivite-Anam, the herdsmen were killed and their cows butchered. In the course of our research, it was observed that there were numerous records of killings and clashes by both the community and the Fulani Herdsmen in the past. So from the data and information we have gathered on the chosen topic of herdsmen problems, we assembled a meeting of the stakeholder and the volunteers for and on how to create something visible. We analyzed the data and came to a stage that we had to cast the performance by assigning role to people especially the community members who had volunteered to be part of the process of change. We had rehearsals in the night every day for some weeks. Then a play emerged which was named *Echoes of Silence*.

Synopsis of the Play

The *Echoes of Silence is* an improvised experimental performance on the incessant attacks and counter attacks of the Herdsmen in Ifite-Anam communities in Anambra West Local Government Area of Anambra State. The performance wails at the economic and social hardship the herdsmen impose on the communities especially in area of loss of human lives. Through a procession of music, the narrator and the performing troupe usher in the performance with an introduction from the narrator. The end of the narrator's lines usher in the elders and other members of the communities gather in the village hall to address the issue and search for a lasting solution to these problems. Immediately the narrator is seated, the performance takes center stage. The scene shows the elders decrying the hardship this situation has caused the community. Elders pour out their minds and the way they want these problems to end in the nearest future or else their existence in this earth becomes meaningless. At the end of the scene, they agree to tackle this problem collectively through every means that is open to dialogue.

The following scene depicts the meeting of all the communities in Anam as was summoned by the Okpala, the oldest man in the villages of Anam. The

narrator who is also the spokesperson of the communities welcomes the elders and introduces the topic of the meeting. The elders are deeply worried about the ugly development in the community. Some elders seethe situation as hindering the development of the communities. An elder sees the inversion as an act of sabotage by members of the community. After so many deliberations on the way forward, a resolution is reached which is to send delegates to the government notifying them of the plight of Anam people in the hands of the herdsmen and the need for herdsmen to vacate the communities of Anam.

The meeting with the government leads toa meeting between the leaders of the herdsmen, the delegates from Anam and the government. The government pleads with the communities to let the eagle perch and let the kite perch for peace to reign. The delegates insist that the herdsmen must leave their communities or face the wrath of the communities. The government then sets up a committee to oversee the activities of the herdsmen in the communities of Anam and to make sure that the leaders of the herdsmen recall their brothers from the communities of Anam.

The delegates return with a message from the government house. The communities thank the delegates for a job well-done but caution that the battle has not ended. They set up a vigilante watch group as watch dogs over the activities of herdsmen to avoid unnecessary attacks from the herdsmen. The performance ends with the audience demanding that the herders be chased out of the community through a collective action and oneness. The narrator returns and concludes the performance. The play ends in jubilation and great optimism.

Video Streaming as a Technique for Sustenance of Theatre for Development

Streaming is an act of video transmission to viewers through a platform that can allow access to broadcast in the internet or any other means the streamer may deem fit. Here the camera is always used as the capture device and the encoder redistributes to the screen and the audience. Although the images and sounds that these media provide are not only streamed or played back, but are also staged, and in this capacity not only cinematic, televisual, videographic ordigital, but at the same time theatrical. This is as a result of the transposable roles theatre has played or has continued to play in the inter-media arena. For instance, in the performance (*Echoes of Silence*), the camera was directly capturing from the stage but indirectly connected to encoder to enliven the performance to the audience. To achieve this is to bite the video content into a social media enable format and relay to an online channel created for this purpose. In Herdsmen Advocacy Project, Avant-Garde TVchannel was created to send out the signals through connected encoder.

The streaming reveals captured people's reality which is seen, accessed, and understood by the audience through the viewing experience. In this form, the world of the stage is transformed to the world of the screen in a three dimensional form. Thus, *Echoes of Silence*is converted to drama films – that is drama in filmic forms that contains life situations with realistic characters and portrays solution conflict for social change.

More so, the reality of the character representing the elders of the community and as well bearing their real names in the people's local dialect puts the audience at ease in understanding the whole scenario. That is, they can easily understand the arguments and the decisions of the performance in line with what is applicable in the communities, thus, strengthening their curiosity and permitting distance based communication in the TfD.

Furthermore, camera remains on the elders to make out the maximum effect of the discussions. The community agreed not to take laws into their hand and decided to send delegates to the government to notify them of their predicament. They appointed members from each of the communities as delegates and challenged them to channel their problems to the government. The meeting with the government yielded a positive result because it draws the attention of the leaders of the herdsmen to the situation in Anam.

Part of the resolution in the meeting with the government was that leaders of the herdsmen were asked to withdraw every activity of the herdsmen in the regions of Anam and its environs. And that there should be a joint committee of the Herders and the leaders of Anam to ensure that there is no crisis in the area. This information was aptly captured in the streaming process.

The camera to and fro movement from village square to the drummers back to the delegates projects an aesthetic organization which may be meaningful on its own but the artistic whole or the holistic dimension gives more comprehension and discernment. The streaming platform becomes an avenue for cultural archiving of societal conditions and situations of the communities. In this sense, antiquity can access the project when the need arises. Then TfD is liberated from the four walls of the stage to the screen and thus expands its frontiers for wider receptions.

Reflecting on the actions in the performance and the songs, it may not take stretching the imagination to understand that the communities are hospitable but not to the extent that their hospitality jeopardizes the peace of the community. They even prayed that 'trouble' should leave the community. Here the 'trouble' is personified. Regarded and addresses as a living creature which can walk or move on its own. Borrowing from the last stanza trouble was prayed to "Go away" but this prayer, if examined critically, was not a petitioned prayer of the weak but a way of consolidating the peace of the community on the premise of let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, whoever says the other will not perch….This is enshrined in the principle of accommodation and peaceful co-existence. But this peaceful-co-existence is negotiable. It is not absolutely imperative but sanctionable should anyone fail to keep to the rules of the co-existence.Then "whoever said we should not live, let him not live too" intently offers a supposed path for punishment of offenders.

Furthermore, the streaming captures the intensity on thesong/music which was tactically employed using the village minstrels to bring out the confidence in them and create room for familiarity with the audience and the singers. The medieval philosophers call the type of infusion "musica humana", the music of human existence. Musicembodies the qualitative integrity of human beings that is understood as a particular dimension of life expressed in an in-depth coherence, beauty and integral movement of the musical instruments of the folks, thoughts and culture of the Anam people. In this form, the music of the performance penetrates every side of the audience embodying different commemora-tive potential especially therapeutic and discourse. As therapeutic, it heals the land of their ignorance and diseases. As s discourse it engages conversation and criticism about the general communal issues depicted and opens up room for interdisciplinary studies.

The emotional impact or feeling speaks through the sense of sight which in turn sends signal to other parts of the body for interpretation. In the streaming, these realities of the performance assume a different dimension of penetrating into realms of fantasy and realism in order to bring the message to bear. And they are achieved through the zooming, tilts, pans, and movement of the cameras to creating subjective and objective view point to the audience. The streaming never throws away the reality of the situation at hand like issues of herdsmen and community settings but increases awareness and penetrates the privacy of the audience. In other words, the streaming sells the problems and issues inherent in the locality to the world.

This sustenance technique opens a folkloric form with the screen as the destination point of the video content. The narrator and other characters that are pictured on the screen living their lives depict the reality of the condition and the situation in Anam. The characters refresh their mind on the Herdsmen Advocacy Project. The narrator, however, seeks their consent to perform. Here, the screen becomes the unifying element of the performance. The change or the switch of camera from scene to scene reflects the shift in thought and emotions. For instance, the camera moving from group of drummers and dancers dancing into the performance venue and back to the actors justifies a

shift in thoughts. As the music and dance ceased, the scene shifts to the narrator to build up suspense. At this point, the camera employs different angles and shots to highten the effects of the performance.

Conclusion

The swiftness of the growth in technology especially digital technologies in development challenges have heightened so much requisition for evolving means of capturing and redistributing theatre performances especially TfD performances until everybody becomes satisfied with watching in the comfort of their zones: homes, offices, farms, shops, etc. Despite this, there is still the zeal to watch the performances live online (screen). These desires to watch performances live have led to this paper's mix of the live stage and screen as a way to maintain that both performances are complements.

The performer/audience relationship in video streaming for instance is thought to be mediated by the medium of transmission. But Theatre for Development, by contrast, is seen as direct, unmediated. There is always a different experience of possible contact and interaction between the audience and the performers on stage. In this situation, the video streaming adds to the experience of watching a TfD performance in another dimension. For this experiences are the properties of the theatre and the emotional circumstance of the audience, a feeling created by the situation of the streaming.

To sustain is to increase the audience interest and heighten their perception of Theatre for Development project. The streaming audience(s) is more likely to increase in the future than the stage audience as the study has envisaged. The single reason is that the platform provides an opportunity to experience that which you could not have experienced if it had ended on stage. The streaming broadens the regional reach of the performance and reaches out to isolated communities who had peculiar problems, thus promoting social change in new dimension – a social change that is not limited to geographical or physical confines of a space, time and location. In light of these, we strongly recommend video streaming in Theatre for Development projects as a way of sustaining the art in the pandemic era.

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