

MIGRATING FROM STAGE TO SCREEN: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

It is on record that theatre arts had survived over the ages due to its capacity to reinvent by embracing, new tool and languages, new style and form. It is a fact that when a discipline reinvent its techniques of impartation and training in line with modern demands, the standard of performances is enhanced and the quality of the practitioner is tremendously improved.

Over the years, Nigerian theatrical performances had gone through many stages (i.e. ritual, court/church, traditional travelling theatre, professional travelling theatre, academic drama, radio drama, television drama, celluloid film, and video film), reinventing itself in order to keep up with the requirement of each era.

In reviewing the essence/spirit of the 50 years of Theatre in the African academy through the University of Ibadan experience, which our eminent and erudite Professor Olarinle Bamide is an integral part of, one could not but to wonder why a film school has not developed out of the old Ibadan school of drama. Or question why the central mode of training the theatre artistes in academia stocked to the stage despite the various innovations that had taken place over the years.

Using a post modernist theory within an historical perspective and a participatory observation approach, the paper explored the

challenges and prospects of migrating from stage to video screen in academic training cum practices and offers plausible solutions to some of the identified problems.

INTRODUCTION

University system anywhere in the world is expected to carry out research, training and other extension services as may be required by the society. In other word University is meant to service as the arrow head of research and new discovery; provide highly trained human capacity for societal growth and development; provide training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations within a given society (and these may include technological inventions, equipment maintenance and hiring etc.)

In reviewing the essence of the 50 years of Theatre in the African academy through the University of Ibadan experience, one could see that, the first school of drama in Africa which was officially established in October 1963 was designed to provide the above functions. This was why Geoffery Axworthy, the pioneering head, School of Drama, University of Ibadan, preferred the running of a diploma programme instead of a degree course. According to him:

I got the first intakes to read a diploma instead of a degree course because I wanted them to discover what things are all about by doing them. I was more concerned with professionalism than with academic accumulation. (LACE Publications Vol 1 No.9, 1984:8)

One could see that as soon as the goal of the school was established and directed towards developing human capacity, serving and making impart on the society, the financial needs of the school was naturally supplied by private commitments, Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and other international bodies. On meeting the needs of the school, Axworthy again observed that:

The major assistance which came in terms of finance also helped tremendously the activities of furthering and developing the theatre school. In 1960 from the Cocoa funds we obtained money for the alterations and repair, and by 1962 the Rockefeller Foundation gave funds for the running of the school for five years. In 1965, the Ford Foundation gave funds for the teaching of film and other activities at the Theatre School. (LACE Pub., 1984:6)

From the foregoing, one could detect that fund was even made available for the then School of drama at the University Collage Ibadan for the teaching of film related courses. Thus, one could not stop but to speculate: "why has film school not develop out of the Department of Theatre Arts 50 years after?"

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework and an historical perspective through which it will propose the establishment of a programme on film studies as well as ruminating on the challenges and prospects of this migration from stage to video screen productions in term of academic training and practice. In providing plausible answers to a set of questions raised in this paper, the researcher was guided by postmodernism theory, and the discoveries in this study were acquired through historical exploration and participatory observation. The observation so employed was of two-folds: personal experiences as student of this great institution and personal experiences as a media arts tutor in another University.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to a have a better focus on the study, and in applying postmodernism theory to this work, the concept of postmodernism as defined by James Morley within the context of pre-modernism, modernism and postmodernism will serve as a good premise of distinctions:

Premodernism: Original meaning is possessed by authority (for example, the Catholic Church). The individual is dominated by tradition.

Modernism: The enlightenment humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favour of reason and natural science. This is founded upon the assumption of the autonomous individual as the sole source of meaning and truth – the Cartesian Cogito. Progress and novelty are valorised within a linear conception of history – a history of a “real” world that becomes increasingly real or objectified. One could view this as a protestant mode of consciousness.

Postmodernism: A rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual with an emphasis upon anarchic, collage, diversity, the mystically unrepresentable, Dionysian passion are the foci of attention. Most importantly we see the dissolution of distinctions. The merging of subject and object, self and other. This is a sarcastic playful parody of western modernity and the “John Wayne” individual and radical, anarchist rejection of all attempts to define, or represent the human subject. (Postmodernism in *the Electronic Libyinth* elab.eserver.org/hfl0242.html, (7/8/2013))

It could be recalled that, postmodernism was a movement started in architectural field but with time, the movement was embraced in arts and humanity. The emphasis of this movement was on rejection of the modernist theory, avant garde concept or the passion for the new. Modernism according to the above web-source is to “understand in art and architecture as the project of rejecting tradition in favour of going “where no man has gone before” or “to create forms for no other purpose than novelty [i.e. art for art sake].”

Postmodernism movement in the 50's and 60's rejected modernism's exploration of possibilities and a perpetual search for uniqueness and its cognate individuality. Even modernism's valorization of the new was rejected for conservative reasons.

Fundamentally, postmodernism wanted to maintain elements of modern utility while returning to the reassuring classical forms of the past. “The result of this was an ironic brick a brick or collage approach to construction that combines several traditional styles

into one structure. As collage, meaning found in combination of already created patterns."

Following this, the modern romantic image of the line creative artist was abandoned for the playful technical (perhaps computer hacker) who could retrieve and recombine creations from the past - data alone becomes necessary. This synthetic approach has been taken up, in a politically radical way, by the visual, musical, and literary arts where collage is used to startle viewers into reflection upon the meaning of reproduction (robin.escalation@ACM.org).

For example the current trend in pop music in the country where musician combined both the traditional beat with modern elements could be seen as postmodernism influence on indigenous pop music in Nigeria.

In summary, postmodernism is seen as a general and wide - ranging term which could be applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural/ literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific knowledge or objective or any other effort deployed to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. (A Glossary Definition on www.pbs.org/postm-body.html)

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From Yemi Ogunbiyi's (1981) edited resource book: *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria...*, and other available texts, one would agree with Ola-Koyi (1997) that between the pre-historical period and now theatrical performances in the country had gone through many stages starting from the ritual drama, (Ola Rotimi, Dapo Adelugba,) moving through the traditional travelling theatre (J. A. Adedeji),

through the church cantata, school musical concert/performance, (Echeruo), through the popular/ professional travelling theatre (Ebun Clark, Uli Beier, Wale Ogunbiyi, Akinwunmi Isola), through the academic drama (Biodun Jayifo, Demas Nwoko), through the radio drama (S. A. Shaibu), through the television drama (Segun Olusola), to the celluloid film age (Hyginus Ekuazi), and pausing on the current video film era (Foluke Ogunleye).

Right from the time Hubert Ogunde and his contemporaries Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola etc. took to professional acting in the 40s down to the period 1956, when Axworthy was invited by Molly Mahood, a professor in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, there were flourishing Student Dramatic Societies and other voluntary performing arts groups in Ibadan and Lagos.

For instance, there were so many Dramatic Societies in secondary schools, Teacher Training colleges, and the then University College, Ibadan. In the 50s and 60s, there existed along with other Yoruba operatic/dramatic travelling troupes, the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society (UCIDS); the Arts Theatre Production Group, The Players of the Down, the Mari Club and the Ibadan Operatic Society. All these groups were made up of theatrically minded people, students, clergymen, teachers, civil-servants, and business men, who engaged in the organisation of concerts, cantata, and other dramatic entertainment in a *British tradition format*. (LACE Pub., Vol.1 No.9, 1984:4)

With the establishment of the first African school of drama in Ibadan, a new door of cooperation in theatrical experiment between the town and the gown was opened. In upholding the tenet of postmodernism which strived to maintain elements of modern utility while returning to the reassuring classical forms of the past, one could identify a positive result of this collage approach to dramatic construction that combined several traditional approaches and

modern styles into one amalgamated structure in academic training and practice.

With a postmodernist analysis, one could see that in the 60s through to the 80s, the University of Ibadan was able to perform the following functions:

Serve as the arrow head in discovering new methods and techniques, in scripting, designing and the staging theatrical productions (for instance, most of the current great African plays text and stage productions were written and performed during this period.)

Provide highly trained human capacity for societal growth and development (for example, in the country today, most members of staff and students of the then school of drama are now leading theatre scholars and performing artists in academia.

Provide training facilities and other extension services for interested individual and organisation within and outside the country. (That is, between 1963 and 1964, Kola Ogunmola's theatre troupe was invited to the University as Artist in Residence. With his cooperation, an experimental production "Palm Wine Drinkard" was carried as a masterpiece for his one year stay on campus. After this, many other great productions had emerged from the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan.

In furtherance of the above objectives, when Wole Soyinka became the director of the School of Drama Acting Company, the school provided extension services and training facilities for selected group of talents. It is on record that the School of Drama Acting Company was the first theatre company formed by any Nigerian University and it produced most of the plays of the then emergent Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, and J. P. Clark etc.

In term of celluloid film productions, it is on Ekwuazi's account that the first nongovernment feature film produced in this country in 1970 was *Kongi's Harvest*, a collaborative venture between staff of the Department (Wole Soyinka and others) and Calpenny Films.

Within the short time of its establishment, many of the players of *The 1960 Masks* and *Orisun Theatre of 1964* migrated from their Mbari Club resident in the city of Ibadan to join and become members of the then School of Drama Acting Company. With time, according to Jide Malomo (1986) this Acting Company metamorphosed to "the University Theatre Arts Company following the reconstitution of the school of Drama into a full academic Department at the University in 1970.

By 1979, the University Theatre Arts Company re-emerged as Unibadan Performing Company (UPC). But it was not inaugurated until the 8th of April 1980, when the then Vice Chancellor late Prof. Olajuwon Olayide declared the UPC as the first experiment in a viable, professional, profit oriented theatre company in any Nigerian University.

Although UPC was set up as an autonomous entity with its own board of management, however in term of play productions both for the stage and the screen, the director of UPC who was in charge of play directing, and actor training worked hand in hand with the Department of Theatre Arts. Consequently, there was a symbiotic relationship between the Department and the UPC.

Jide Malomo equally believed that, play selection for the stage was guided by concern for the well tested, successful and accessible plays by Nigerian authors. Secondly, plays were chosen based on their entertainment and simplicity values. As a result, the UPC gave accelerated popularity to some Nigerian plays such as: Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Wale Ogunyemi's *The Divorce* and Obi Egbuna's *The Wind* etc. during 1980/81 season.

During the reign of television drama productions in the 1980s, the UPC and the Department of Theatre Arts were the main source of local drama productions for many stations in the South West. Thus as first independent producer, the Unibadan Performing Company / the Department of Theatre Arts secured TV recording contracts with NTA Ibadan, where they produced *Theatre on the Screen*; for Television Service of Oyo State (TSOS now BCOS) they produced *Screen Drama*; for Ogun State Television (OGTV), *Tellydrama*; while *Weekly Dramas* were produced for both Benin Television (BTV) and NTA, Ilorin.

Between 1980 and 1986, under the directorship of Jide Malomo, UPC/Theatre Arts Department produced two serials - *The Visitors* written by Femi Osofisan, a lecture in the Department and *Cloudy Horizon* written by Taiwo Adeyemi a member of the UPC. In addition to all these achievements, over sixty single one-hour dramas were produced and shown on various stations all over the country.

In commenting on the running of the UPC operation, Jide Malomo opined that, "The UPC earned the bulk of its income from television contracts. A break-down of its gross income showed about 60% accruing from television performances, about 30% from film show, and less than 10% from stage performances."

From all indications, the Department of Theatre Arts has been actively engaged in theatrical and drama productions from her inception in the 60s (which could be termed "the popular/professional travelling theatre period) moving through 70s (i.e. "the Nascent celluloid film era") to mid 80s (i.e. "the television drama period") but went under siege right from the beginning of the video film productions era (1988 till date.)

As a student of this great Department, the researcher could not help but to ask himself these three basic questions:

Why it is that, one of the most innovative Departments in this great University of Ibadan had not come to term with the latest medium of dramatic and filmic production in Nigeria?

Why it is that, the first Department of Theatre Arts in Africa has not develop new strategies or invent a new method of teaching or device a new means of engaging and promoting video film productions as they did in the 80s, during "the era of television drama productions"?

How is the Department fulfilling the two other functions of providing highly trained manpower for emerging Nigerian film industry or providing training facilities and other extension services for interested individual and organisation in the country, apart from serving as the arrow head of research and new discoveries in film study?

In providing answer to the first question, one could not but take solace in the fact that the great Department of Theatre Arts might not want to mingle with uncertainty found in an experimental, nascent or under developed industry like "Nollywood". However, one must acknowledged the fact that due to individual interest and afterschool training, some members of staff and alumina of this Department have done the University proud in the areas of directing, acting, costuming for the Nigerian film industry while many staff and students of this same Department have carried many resounding studies on this industry.

The fact still remains that, up till time of writing this paper, it is yet to be seen that the Department has worked out a new means of engaging and promoting video film productions as she did in the 80s,

during "the era of television drama productions. That is, one could not point out a production in Nollywood endorsed by or emanating from this Department as she did for Kola Ogunmola's production in the 60s or as she led in the production of the required local dramatic contents for most nascent television stations in the 80s.

On the challenge of moulding, the highly trained human capacity required for the growth of Nigerian film industry, one must come to term with the fact that, the first Department of Theatre Arts in the country has not directly commence any programme that will take care of the training of executive personnel/crew for the nascent film industry in Nigeria. To some operators/employers of labour in Nigerian entertainment industry, the university graduates in the country are unemployable in the sense that most of these graduates are often retained before they could be given any executive portfolio in the industry.

For instance, the top echelons of a film production company will include director, script supervisor, dialogue coach, director of photography/cinematographer, sound designer, special effect specialist, makeup artist, costumier, production manager, supervising editor among others. Even though, some of the alumina of this Department have found their ways into some of these executive positions in Nigerian film industry, this is made possible largely due to their personal interests and after school knowledge acquisition or on the job training. Thus a full credit could not be given to their undergraduate training at the University. In our previous study on "Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the Development of Performing Arts Programme", one wondered:

...how many tertiary institutions in the country could claim to have included the following courses on film as part of their media arts syllabus: *Cinematography, Film Editing, Soundtrack Design, Location and Production Management* etc.? ⁷⁷ Yet the qualities of manpower produced in our tertiary institutions are seen by some practitioners as grossly incapable and inadequate for the emerging digital film industry. (Ola-Koyi, 2011:45)

Apart from areas such as script writing, dialogue coach, makeup, costume, and sometimes production management that are common positions in which knowledge and training on stage techniques could easily be applied when it come to screen production. Other areas such as cinematography/ "viedography", sound design, special effects and film editing are yet to be incorporated into the University of Ibadan undergraduate training programme/degree syllabus. In his study on "Theory, Criticism and the Nigerian Film", Tunde Onikoyi (2013:312) suggested that:

It is essential for the Nigerian university don to ensure that the Nigerian student is equipped with the various ideas of the usefulness of theories to film. They shall develop not just a critical mind but 'an active critical mind' that will question existing ideas for the purpose of developing new direction to theory. But it rests upon the shoulders of the teacher to courageously guide the student carefully, meticulously and dynamically.

From this quotation, it shows that some of the existing programmes on theatre/per formative arts and media entertainment are not specific designed to meet the peculiar needs of the Nigerian film industry, therefore, there is a fresh demand for university trained human capacity for top executive positions in Nollywood. Hence there is a need for the Nigerian Universities to develop new programmes that are specifically tailored towards meeting the demand for highly trained manpower requirement in the ever growing entertainment industry in Nigeria.

As at the time of writing this paper, a fresh high school graduate could not inspire to study any of the following modern programmes in some universities in the country not even at this great University of Ibadan: Filmmaking, Sound Design, Sound and Music for Interactive Games, Music for Moving Image, Audio Post Production, etc.

A Concept of a B.A. / B.Sc. Programme in Film Studies

To be more specific, a designed B.A. /B. Sc programme in film studies as it is ran by other higher institutions in foreign countries, is based on both theoretical study and practical exercises in the art of filmmaking, distribution and exhibition. It involves creativity, project development and the business strategies on film production, distribution and exhibition and a strong collaboration with independent production companies.

In this course, the concept of the filmmaker as auteur is emphasised and his place as a creative artiste is at the heart of teaching the process of film production. Basically this course often involves sharing on various filmmaking techniques and theories. A properly designed course on film studies often enables student to think, research, discuss and watch a lot of films. It encourages radical approach to film production, and the development of truly independent stories and ideas.

In this course, students are exposed to different genres and modes of film productions - areas such as narrative, documentary, animation and other experimental filmmaking are common grounds for workshop ensemble. At the end of this programme, each of the students is to specialize on any of the following areas: screenwriting, screen directing, creative production, cinematography, production design, sound recording technique / Design, film editing, screen performance, special effect design and animation etc. Sometimes the institution could also give financial assistance to some deserving students to pursue final year projects in film production.

In his postulation Onikoyi (2013:321), among other things recommended the establishment of a Department of Film Arts, that will develop of full time or part time undergraduate and post graduate programmes on film studies, the employment of

master/PhD students in film related fields, and the setting up of film laboratory / studio for practical training.

The Challenges of the Proposed Programme

Like any other innovation, the introduction of film programme or film production courses into any academic system could not be without any problem, confrontation or hindrance. The plausible challenges which the introduction of this proposed programme may encounter include: challenges on the retraining of manpower, problem of equipment acquisition, enlargement/introduction of new syllabus, the cumbersome process of registration with regulatory bodies.

Challenges on Retraining of Manpower

Naturally the introduction of a new programme/course of study will required the retraining of human resources who are the facilitators of the proposed programme/ discipline. From practical experience as tutor, one could see that most conservative lecturers are unenthusiastic about the introduction of new programme. Some tutors are not just willing to explore new frontiers or venture into new courses except to remain in their comfort zone. This unwillingness of these rigid tutors may compel them to antagonize any move to introduce any teaching on film production as a new discipline/course of study.

From all indications these conservative lecturers (both young and old) must realise that theatre or performing arts as a discipline is very dynamic in nature. It continues to reinvent itself years in, years out by adapting new media in its training, practices and manifestation. This is why the course is still very much relevant to the new age of ICT (information and communication technology). Therefore the conservative teachers must change with time and allow themselves to migrate from stage to screen. By venturing into the new frontiers or acquiring filmic knowledge and engaging in

retraining programmes, both the students and the film industry will be better for it.

To be more precise, it is on record that some of the pioneering playwrights on the Nigerian stage (Akinwunmi Isola, Adebayo Falati and Femi Osofisan) have already migrated or in the process of migrating from stage to screen by acquiring new skills of writing for screen drama/movies which is not the same as writing for the stage. Some of the productions scripts written by these pioneering playwrights include *Afunsetan Aniwura*, *Saworoide*, *Agogo-Eewo*, *Basorun Gaa* and *Maa mi*.

Thus the conservative custodians of knowledge in the Departments of Theatre or Performing Arts, in our universities / colleges stand to gain more by cueing into new trend of per formative arts and acquiring new knowledge which the new terrain demands. In addition, as Onikoyi suggested above, post graduate students/ PhD. candidates in film related fields could be injected in to the system by encouraging them to take up the teaching of the new courses on film studies.

Problem of equipment acquisition

The task of acquiring new equipment for a new programme could be very cumbersome and tiring. Administratively, the proposal for the new equipment could take donkey years before it could be approved; its execution might equally be tied to the availability of fund. If these two huddles are finally scaled through, the new challenge that the department will need to overcome is sticking to the specification of the standard/quality of the required equipment or else wrong or inferior equipment might be purchased and this will in long run be a disservice to the proposed programme. Therefore, sufficient capital must be made available for the purchase/importation of required apparatus for the programme and skill must be acquired on the equipment handling and maintenance. In addition, constant

electricity source must be provided for the operation and preservation of these gargets.

Enlargement/Introduction of new syllabus

A model B.A./B.Sc. Programme in film studies could be obtained in any of U. S. Universities that offer film studies or other independent film Institutions in Europe or Asia. Even though, most syllabi will include courses in introduction to film, mode of film studies, film analysis, history of film/media, film theory and criticism with emphasis on time/period; regional creation; genres, and creative style/auteur approaches. In attempt to enlarge or introduce new syllabus on film studies, care must be taken to incorporate indigenous components and tailored towards national inspirations.

The proposed programme operators must see to the setting up and the provision of the following practical facilities: required media laboratories, sound studio, standard theatre, green screen and other industry-standard equipments. And the programme must be designed in such a way that it will make provision for industrial attachment and other linkage-programmes with other institutions and production companies.

The Involvement of Regulatory Bodies

Even though the film industry and other performing arts fields do not have a central professional regulatory body like ICAN, Nigerian Bar Association, Nigerian Medical Board, The Guild of Editor etc. that could assist in instilling standard in the training of films practitioners, yet the involvement of related bodies in education (NUC, technical education body etc.), and other professional organisations in the industry could still go a long way in ensuring standard in training of professional for the ever expanding film/entertainment industry. However, the cumbersome process of

registration with regulatory bodies must be revisited and restructured to be less cumbersome.

The Prospects of the Programme

In order for Nigerian universities especially the great university of Ibadan, to carry out her fundamental roles of serving as the arrow head of research and teaching, providing highly trained human capacity for ever growing entertainment industry; providing training facilities and other extension services for interested individuals and organisations, this institution must be alive to her responsibilities and come up with designed programmes/courses of studies in line with required manpower needs of her immediate environment.

For instance in the 60s through to mid 80s it is fashionable to study Theatre Arts solely as a course or a standalone discipline but from 1990s till date it is no longer fashionable for any institution to train students solely on the arts of the theatre. Rather the new trend in theatre arts training is usually in combination with other disciplines such as Mass Communication, Film Arts, Psychology, or Biology

Since the proposed programme involves both human and institutional changes, the paper therefore, propose a transitional period during which existing Department of Theatre Arts will run combined courses in both Theatre Arts and Film Arts. However, a well designed Department / Programme on Film studies must aid any institution in carrying out all the identified functions of a university.

By producing graduates in the fields that required highly trained manpower for the Nigerian entertainment industry it is believed that the new programme will help in eradicating "the try by error approach" in filmmaking and other entertainment industries.

CONCLUSION

Having ruminated on theoretical framework, gone through an historical reflection, developed a concept on the proposed B. A. / B. Sc. programme in Film Studies and considered the challenges and prospects of such programme, one can conclude with the fact that if the quality of a tree is known by its fruits, then it is possible that by improving the quality of training given to potential filmmakers, this will rub on positively on the quality of their productions.

Secondly, negative image created for the country through movies could be changed or enhanced by improving the quality of films made in Nigeria. Thus the productions of knowledgeable directors always shown their insightful movies, and they often create better image for the country in terms of film contents and themes,

Moreover, a team of scholars/experts in the Department Theatre and Film Arts will not only benefit from rendering consultant services like their counterparts in legal profession, medical, engineering fields who often combined profession practices with teaching and research but the adequate training facility provided for the use of the students, could also be used for extension services in the area of camera hiring, sound system and editing for individuals and private organisations requiring such services.

Once the Department or the University is attuned to the reality in the Nigeria film/entertainment industry, the institution will definitely succeed in performing her statutory duties of carrying out beneficiary researches, training advanced manpower for the overgrowing entertainment industry and providing other extension services as may be required by the society.

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