
PERSPECTIVES IN THE PRACTICE OF THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT: A CONCERN FOR AN IDEAL YOUTH THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines a selection of literature on Theatre for Development (TfD) as well as the general perception of Youth Theatre. The choice for these two is first, to establish the various perspectives to the practice of Theatre for Development, which took its stem from Paulo Freire's work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and subsequently from Augusto Boal's adaptive concept of "Theatre of the Oppressed." These perspectives shall be examined as "Schools of Thought". The aim will be to examine the practical mode of the concept as explored by certain practitioners in the field, highlight the strength of each practice and the extent of audience involvement. Secondly, effort shall be made to elicit an ideal format for a youth-based theatre. Lastly, the study shall recommend a highly participatory theatre which will be largely hinged on Boal's perception of "Theatre of the Oppressed".

INTRODUCTION

Understandably, there has been an on-going trend in the practice of theatre for development. And a number of theorists and practitioners have diversely explored the essence of this angle of theatre practice as clearly stated by Kennedy Chinyowa. He observes thus: Pradip Thomas (1996:213) has alluded to a 'crisis of form' in African theatre for development arising from the practitioners' tendency to depart from the objective of making popular theatre a truly people-based counter-culture. David Kerr also makes a similar argument when he refers to the "guru-ization of Theatre for Development" (1991:72) arising from its limited capacity to radically challenge the prevailing national power structures. Again, Michael Etherton (1988:2) notes that the central problem of popular theatre concerns the nature of social change: *by whom and for whom* should it be? To tackle these problems, Etherton (1988) suggests that it is necessary to consider the means by which theatre for development transforms knowledge into action (*Manifestations of Play as Aesthetic in African Theatre for Development* 10).

The term Theatre for Development is, according to Dale Byam, "a phrase in the framework of theatre nomenclature, which was coined in Botswana in 1973, to describe an approach that attempted to reconcile Freirian concepts to a development project that used theatre as the stimulus. "It emerged" she continues, "from the quagmire of theatre terms with the distinct purpose of using theatre as a vehicle, a code to raising consciousness" (*Community in Motion* 25). Kevin Bott, argues however, that the practice dates back to the 1950s "when government-sponsored troupes of actors traveled to rural areas to perform propaganda plays promoting the colonial agenda on such topics as hygiene, birth control, agriculture, and

effective methods for producing cash crops" (30). This dimension of theatre practice is highly participatory in outlook, (see Kawanagh, 1991:187; Oga, 1997: xiv; Byam, 1999: 18, Conrad, 2004:99, Saldana, 2005:117, and Chinyowa, 2011) that it sometimes adopts the tag "popular theatre", and that because of its generally appealing approach to the practice of the theatre art, as well as its consequent people-centered orientation which tends to give it a wide acceptance amongst communities. It is also worthy of note that this same mode of theatre practice has often adopted a diversity of convenient labels, all being suitable nomenclature for given conditions and demands of the practice. While it is popularly referred to as Theatre for Development or Popular Theatre, it is also known as Applied Drama or Theatre (Somers 221), (Taylor xviii), Community Theatre, Participatory Theatre, Theatre for Social Change (Idoye,1996), Theater of Social Engagement (Kershaw 5-6), and most recently, according to Esiaba Irobi, as a Theatre of Necessity. Describing it he asserts: "This theatre is about survival. It is a form of performance which responds to a collective crisis. It draws its semiological constructs from the past...in order to address, confront and transform the life-threatening situation of the present (Irobi 34).

Paulo Freire and the Doctrine of Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The doctrine of Paulo Freire, from which the basic principles behind the practice of theatre for development evolved, was articulated in his renowned work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which bothered on Freire's conclusion that the existing educational or teaching module had been founded on a stereotypic premise. This module Freire considered inactive and dismissed as a "banking model". According to him, the existing teaching mode reduces education to a mere act of dumping. Stating further, he continues thus:

Education... becomes an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing the deposits (Freire 72).

In place of the 'banking module' Freire proposed an alternative which he called "problem-posing education", a situation whereby teacher and students equally evaluate problems as well as seek solutions to the same, at the same level of commitment. Differentiating between the former and the latter Freire opines:

The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge, at the level of the doxa is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the logos. Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (81).

Armed with this information, the practitioners of Theatre for Development therefore have a sole intent, and that is to take the theatre to target communities using this principle of interactive performance. Nonetheless, there still exists a diversity of approaches from the various practitioners of TFD which are based on other concepts.

Perspectives in Theatre for Development

Chinyowa identified five different perspectives, which he conveniently referred to as "schools of thought", namely: the Freirian School, the Folk Media School, the Semiotics School, the Documentary School, and the 'Drama/Theatre in Education' School. The practitioners of the "Freirian School", he observes, base their practice on Paulo Freire's theory of 'codification', which advocates adult-literacy learning. "For Freire, the educator's role is to pose problems by means of codifying the existential reality of the learner in order to help him or her arrive at a more critical view of reality" (10). Freire's theory challenged educators unto a doctrine of liberation, a doctrine of equal mental capacity aimed at encouraging creativity amongst students. It encouraged "a dialogic exchange between teachers and students, where both learned, questioned, reflected, and participated in meaning-making" (Conrad 89). This level of relational existence is what Conrad would further refer to as a "subject/subject, and not a subject/object" kind of relationship (99). It embodies a more healthy and liberal atmosphere for teacher-student relationship, and tends to break the barrier of an existing norm that implied that the teacher knew it all. This hampers creativity on the part of the students as they tend to depend so much on their teachers. This theory of Freire's has however, been described by some scholars as "textbook ideologies" (Chinyowa 12). "It is best to think of Freirian pedagogy first and foremost as an ideology—a mode of thinking that invariably affects the subject's perspective of education" (1999:30).

This same "textbook" concept would eventually graduate to have a remarkable impact in the practice of theatre art. "Freire's...education methods were developed to help people question the nature of their historical and social situations by not only reading the word, but reading their world, with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a more just society" (2004:89). It is an "ideology" which creates an enabling ground for a healthy practice of theatre for development, as it provides room for the audience to be able to de codify the mindset of the actor and be able to introduce audience-based solutions to issues being raised in the drama. According to Paulo Freire "...the actors' experiences are codified" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 70). But with the equal opportunities embedded in this practice there is a leveraging ground for negotiation over situations or subjects being treated in the dramas. "Performance", according to Richard Schechner, "is both symbolic and reflexive" (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* n.p.)

The second school, according to Chinyowa, is the Folk Media School, which he observes uses such grassroots methods as "ritual, narrative, music, song, dance, poetry", and so on (12), to achieve effective communication during theatric performances among rural communities. Michael Etherton opines that the genre is "a term, used mainly in UNESCO publications, to

refer to a variety of live traditional performances as communication media; and to differentiate these from film, radio and television which are referred to as mass media." (13) On a similar note, Dale Byam, quoting Ross Kidd on the same subject, states that the concept is an effort "... by development communicators to use people's media for propagating the ideas of modernization" (12). Government development projects funded by such agencies as UNESCO or the World Health Organization, aimed at disseminating information on health or other related social issues, are usually discharged using this medium. Wikipedia encyclopedia, lauding the priceless advantages of this medium, appraises its relevance owing to its proximity to target audiences, as it states:

Being close to people at the local level, these channels are potentially useful in the service of social concerns, as determined by local, provincial or national authorities themselves. They are, moreover, abundantly present in areas where mass media technology has not been fully or effectively developed to capture sustained interest at local, provincial or national levels. Folk media are personal forms of entertainment and communication.... These forms of art are a part of the way of life of a community and provide acceptable means of bringing development issues into the community in its own-terms. They are capable of reaching intimate social groups, thus making use of already established communication networks in the audience (Wikipedia Assessed 02-21-2010).

The works of many a theatre researcher and practitioner such as Jacob Srampical Kees Eskamp, David Kerr and Stephen Chifunyise, Oga Abah, Michael Etherton, Kees Eskamp and Ad Boeren, Owen Seda, Ross Kidd, Penina Mlama, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, belong to this genre of theatre practice. While one would agree with Chinyowa in the opinion that "the folk media is a means of expression which enables the grassroots to assess their needs and fashion their priorities..." (13), one however, stands to question the extent of participation which this style of practice affords the indigenes. The folk media approach is by nature a hand-out mode of communication where practitioners dish out perceived solutions to existing community problems, with little or no direct involvement of the target audience. Little wonder that Kerr would suggest a theoretical discourse which would be based on people's performance forms (*African Theories of African Theatre...* 3- 23). Poor participation by target audiences will be tantamount to poor representation of interest, and its impact many a time will be short-lived. A case in point was a performance for a local community in the Northern part of Nigeria. It was captioned "Wasan Manoma" (The Water Play), and was performed by the students of Ahmadu Bello University of Nigeria. Reporting the experience, Byam records:

Wasan Manom began with the university staff identifying community leaders in Soba and creating opportunities for dialogue between the Soba farmers and the students. This established, the students spent a day with the farmers in order to understand their daily problems, which included poor health care, education.... Later, the students discussed among themselves and conferred with agricultural experts at the university in order to develop a play for the Soba village and later returned to Soba and the neighbouring village...to present the dramas (62).

What the students above did, though good and highly commendable in its respect, however, suffers a lack in managerial skills, and also risks a lack of sufficient ingredient which stands to not only sustain its presentation, but also enable it to make a lasting impact on the target audience. It is about getting the communities to participate actively as 'spect-actors' (Boal 126) to seek solutions to their problems, and not just be relegated to spectator status. They should not just observe, they should be engaged actively because it is only then that they will have a deep-seated grasp of their problems and also be in a better position to proffer first hand solutions to their needs. When you fail to let them participate (actively) you may run into a hitch, just as the students above eventually did. Continuing in her report, Byam observes:

...the students inadvertently addressed their (the students') own issues when they were unable to develop a play on the problem of water shortage... But as the drama aimed to present the issues of the community, it more effectively highlighted the alienation between the students and the communities in which the plays were performed (67).

Development-oriented performances should be with full community participation in order to avoid the risk of alienation. "This feeling of alienation moved the youths (in the community above) to confront the students with several questions, like "Now that you have shown us the plays what happens next? Does anyone of you suffer from this shortage of water," and "are you people therefore not mocking at us." (68) When those directly hit by particular challenges enjoy the privilege of participation, it will have far reaching positive consequences on, not just them, but also on the course being pursued. Where this is not the case, it will only fall within the context of radical drama, which, according to Gbilekaa, merely takes the drama to the people (*Radical Theatre in Nigeria* 211). "People," according to Philip Taylor, "should be allowed to apply the art form to assist in reconstructing their identities." (xviii) What should actually be desired, in this context, is what Oga has referred to as "Theatre by the people". Oga opines "This stage is...the desired destination/goal in the practice (of theatre for development). It is the stage at which the people themselves begin to make theatre, about their own selves and their problems. Theatre at this point becomes an integral medium in the development process..." (28). Community-based theatres should "stimulate a process of critical thinking (among such communities) and create sufficient momentum for an organized and collective response to the problems." (69)

The youths should not have their situations x-rayed by others; they should excavate it, explore it, and suggest ways such situations could be managed. When others are left to manage their affairs for them, so to speak, it would be devoid of desired depth of attention, and bring about psychological distancing suggestive of aloofness, which will only do them little good. The theatre for the youth is but one in the array of such groups whose major aim is some sort of positive revolution among the practitioners. Boal posits "I believe that all the revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the

theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should wield it" (122).

The third category of theatre practitioners identified by Chinyowa is the Semiotics School. "Semiotics as a theory of communication originated from the Prague Linguistic Circle in Czechoslovakia whose members included Ladislav Matejka, Irwin Titunik and Jan Mukarovsky (1931/1976) during the early 1930s. It was elaborated by other semioticians like Charles S. Peirce (1959/1986). Roland Barthes (1977, 1979, 1984), Keir Elam (1980) and Martin Esslin (1987)..." (13). Semioticians focus their study on how literary forms and conventions affect the meaning of language. In marketing research, semiotics is used to identify and evaluate the true meaning that underlies consumers' linguistic responses, to decode their cultural frames of reference and behaviours. Theatre semioticians, on the other hand, "regard theatre as a set of signs that serve to characterize and advance the dramatic action" (14). The basic objective behind the practice of semiotics is the achievement of effective communication through representational objects or conventional ideas, all of which could be summed into one word 'signification'. "Pierce, the American logician and founding father of modern semiotic theory, explains that as soon as an object is put on a platform and shown to an audience, it loses its original nature as mere object. The framed object assumes a signifying function that is determined by its context. It has become a semiotic sign... 'something which stands to somebody for something else' " (14). The use of signification in community-based theatre performances risks being a major object of distraction, and that, owing to the nature of such target audiences. Elam, one of the major proponents of semiotics argues that "...when the audiences arrive for a performance, even if they remain passive receivers of the theatrical message throughout the performance, they have initiated communication, and are therefore active participants in the communication process" (qtd. in *Manifestations of Play as Aesthetic in African Theatre for Development* 14).

The essence of communication in theatre performance is not aimed at encouraging passive receivership but unto active participation. Little wonder Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal will both encourage a theatre of liberation and revolution, respectively. The audience of a theatre performance ought always to be mustered to activity; anything tending towards passivity should be discouraged in its entirety. More so, an ideal theatre for the youth should not meddle with the intricacies of signs and symbols; it should be a theatre whose communicative prowess is embedded in plain and expressive dialogue. Anything further than that will simply enshroud it in unnecessary mystery and ambiguity. This researcher wholeheartedly agrees with Jed Davies, when he says "A play is told through dialogue" (124). It should be plain, simple, unblemished and untrammelled dialogue fleshed out with action.

The last but one perspective identified by Chinyowa, is the Documentary School. This class of TfD practitioners devotes much attention to project or workshop-documentation, instead of embarking on the supposedly more tasking venture of critical analysis (15). A deficiency, he claims made Guarav Desai in his essay titled "Research Resources on Popular Theatre and

Development in Africa" to posit that there is a paucity of effort on theoretical interpretation of Africa-based developmental performances. Unfortunate enough, Chinyowa also fails to proffer or suggest a way out of the quagmire; instead he proposes what he calls a conceptual framework for investigating this form of theatre. "My belief was that a cultural practice that relies on mobilizing people for action such as theatre for development cannot afford to separate itself from an understanding of local knowledge systems" (15). While this researcher does not disagree with Chinyowa's opinion of a basic understanding of indigenous conventions in African theatre for development, he tends to agree more with Michael Etherton in *The Development of African Drama*, when he quarrels with the issue of documentation as a tilt towards western tradition, which, he claims, often ends up attracting accolades of 'great works' to such practitioners (23). For the researcher much emphasis should be devoted to studying audience psychology in order to ascertain the best mode for interactive and riveting performances aimed at effective communication. Etherton notes that our indigenous (African) performances are typically live performances "which find a particular audience speaking a particular language and at a particular time" (23).

The last school, according to Chinyowa, was attributed to practitioners whose primary interest lies in result-yielding performances rather than artistic embellishment, or better still, "aesthetics". That such result-centred performance is inclined to extolling positive outcomes instead of inventive challenges associated with the results. From the perspective of development-based indigenous performances, Chinyowa praises the concept of Drama/Theatre in Education, observing that it "has come to be viewed as not only a means of reproducing culture and identity but also an empowering force for social change and development..." (17). In another setting, Greg Wetterstrand lends voice as he lauds this form of theatre, while he tries to answer the question 'Is cognitive engagement a valid justification for including education drama in Canadian elementary schools?' He agrees with 'Hornbrook (1991), who posits that drama educators have "embraced" seven justifications for using drama in the school apart from theatre. These justifications are based on the assertion that educational drama: provides a medium for the healthy release of emotion, is an art form, develops individuals, can be used as a learning medium, can increase understanding, can be used to teach job skills, life skills and socialization processes, can be used to encourage critical thought, to empower and to emancipate (in IDEA 2004:159).

One totally agrees with all the benefits of educational drama as outlined above, as it largely concurs with Freire's liberating doctrine as articulated in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It also rightly fits into Boal's view point of an effective weapon in the hands of the people. An ideal theatre for the youth should be a theatre whose primary objective advocates the emancipation of the youth from the precarious challenges which daily stare them in the face. They need a theatre that would empower them, a theatre which would engineer a motion for social change, a revolutionary kind of theatre.

As lofty as the salient benefits of this mode of theatre practice may be, this student shares Chinyowa's view when he observes that "...a few questions remain unanswered" (18). But rather than bother with popular modes of signification with regard to communicating development from a people's point of view, as well as the theoretical paradigm that forms the basis of popular performances, as he has criticized, the researcher will rather concur with him when he feels inspired by Ahmed (2002), who "appeals" in the concluding part of his article, thus 'let us at least have just plain and simple theatre—theatre that never ceases to develop, theatre which allows debate, dialogue, reflexivity, dreaming the impossible and the flight to infinity'(18).

Augusto Boal's concept of Theatre of the Oppressed

Boal's notion of Theatre of the Oppressed emerged during the 1950's and 1960's. Prior to this, Boal had perceived the traditional theatre performance as a one-sided event, since everything had revolved around the actor. For him it was suggestive of a monologue and not an interactive (dialogue-based) relationship between audience and stage. In order to achieve this Boal tried his hands on a variety of interactive theatre forms. His quest was based on his belief that the normal, healthy communication mode of all humans is through dialogue. More so, that every human being enjoys the interactive convenience of dialogue, otherwise the situation would indicate oppression. Theatre then becomes an amazing instrument for altering monologue into dialogue. And, according to Boal, "While some people make theatre, we all are theatre."

The Emergence of Boal's Spect-Actor

Before Boal's experimentation, and following existing tradition, his audiences were invited to discuss a play at the end of the performance. And this, according to Boal, enabled them to remain viewers and "reactors" to the action before them. In the 1960's Boal, however, developed a process whereby audience members could stop a performance and suggest different actions for the character experiencing oppression, and the actor playing that character would then carry out the audience suggestions. But a remarkable occurrence took place once when a certain woman in the audience was so outraged the actor could not understand her suggestion that she came onto the stage and demonstrated what she meant. For Boal that gesture marked the birth of the spect-actor (not spectator) and his theatre was altered. He began inviting audience members with suggestions for change onto the stage to demonstrate their ideas. In so doing, he discovered that through this participation the audience members became empowered not only to imagine change but to actually become catalysts for change, reflect collectively on the suggestion, and thereby become empowered to generate social action. His theatre then became a practical vehicle for grass-roots activism. And the medium for these presentations are Boal's Forum Theatre

The Forum Format and its appeal for a youth-based theatre

The Forum Theatre is an interactive form of theatre that encourages audience interaction and explores different options for dealing with a problem or issue. Forum Theatre is often

used by socially excluded and disempowered groups" (people and participation. net). The foremost ingredient of forum lies in its interactive format, as it wields the instrument for vocal expression and suggestive action for peculiar challenges. Communities or sub-sections of communities such as the youth class or other such units of society stand to find this (forum) method a ready tool for alternative solutions to existing needs.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, the researcher has argued against the existing community-centered practice of theatre for development which, though embracing the primary interest of meeting the needs of communities tends to defect in its approach, as it lacks sufficient tactics in its mode of communication. Also, the chapter has equally put forward the view that the same concept of theatre for development is deficient when considered as a possible tool for designing an ideal theatre for youths. Finally, the researcher has posited that a youth theatre should ideally be an expressive and highly participatory theatre that is aimed towards personal and social emancipation, with the potential to "draw on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means" (89). The above view has, therefore, qualified Augusto Boal's designated approach of Forum Theatre, which evolved from his general concept of Theatre of the Oppressed, as a commendable approach towards designing a viable theatre for youths.

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