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Exploring the Theatre for Community Development: The Ajolagun Experience

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Abstract:

Theatre has always been manipulated through the ages. Essentially, the use of theatre through the generations has been to answer the salient questions; Theatre for what purpose and for whom? Thus, the essence of this paper is to assess how the potentiality of the theatre could be explored for rural and urban development. More importantly, the paper is a report of how community theatre has been used to develop Ajolagun, a major community in Ikere-Ekiti Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. The method used in the research is participatory theatrical performance, whereby the members of the community in conjunction with the students of College of Education, Ikere Ekiti collaborated in building a drainage to forestall the flooding of the area by rainfall. It is believed that if such collaborative efforts could be encouraged by all and sundry, much development would accrue to our communities, instead of waiting endlessly for government intervention.

Keywords: Collaboration, Communication, Community, Development and Theatre

1. Introduction

Deploying theatre to nurture and nudge the citizenry is an ancient art from the time of ancient Greece. Attendance at the city Dionysia, an annual theatre festival, was viewed as a civic responsibility. Theatre thus became a tool to tame the rustic populace and retract the untamed proclivities of the subaltern classes and expose the excesses of the aristocracy through the subtle use of satires. The liturgical drama of the medieval era enunciated biblical injunctions through entertainment. Liturgical drama during this period began as an elaboration of the Roman Catholic Mass. The Miracle, Mystery and Morality plays were performed in churches. With time, performances moved out of the churches and theatre was brought to the audience on a succession of pageant wagons. The wagons were moved through different locations. The clergy thereby counselled the vast members of illiterates on their civic responsibilities and the spiritual essence of man with the aid of the theatre (Adegboyega, 2012).

By its very nature and particularly because of its communality and fictionalized nature, theatre provides a forum whereby communication between members of the same community and the outsiders who intervene in the community's lives can take place without the attendant antagonism which would normally occur in a directly realistic situation. Byram

et. al.(2001), affirm that theatre could be deployed to serve a two-way communication process; (1) serving as the catalyst for involving people in discussion and(2) taking action on their problems through entertainment.

Development in the Third World generally is perpetually characterized by conflicts and oppositional pulls which are very often blurred by narrow perceptions. Perhaps the oppositions are sharper still when we talk of rural development. The opposition and pulls operate on several levels. One of the very fundamental aspects of rural development is problem identification. The success or failure of any project hinges on proper identification and the choice of the most biting problem for attention. The issue of 'proper-ness' raises the question of who identifies the proband who finally decides what development a particular community needs.

Very often, the identification and the final development project to be embarked upon are made the prerogative of the bureaucrats and technocrats in urban centres. This may very well embody the disaster for many botched rural projects, because the technocrat who is far away from the villages is removed from the hard realities of rural communities and their problems and therefore what the priorities of the disenfranchised rural dwellers are likely to be.

The human touch to development which of necessity results from consultation with and, more significantly, participation by the rural people has been lost. Having thus lost out the human factor in the development process, the management and implementation are bound to run aground. The people are not likely to identify with the project since they have not been part of setting it up. Hence, they will resent and resist being treated as Marionettes (Abah, 1990).

According to Colletta (2005:19) development can best be described as "a process of positive socioeconomic change in the quality and level of human existence which is aimed at raising the standard of living, quality of life and human dignity". This definition is in line with the United Nations concept of development which is based on the following principles:

- The realization of potentialities of the human person in harmony with the community should be seen as the central purpose of development
- The human person should be regarded as the subject and not the object of the development process.

- The human person must be able to participate fully in shaping his own reality.

It is evident in these principles that, (one), the development planner as the focus of development should be decentred, and (two), participation by the beneficiaries must become a *sine qua non*.

2. The Concept of Community Theatre

The focus on the human person in the development process, and the need for him/her to participate in shaping his own reality lie at the base of the concept and practice of community theatre. It is the practice by which theatre is put at the service of the disadvantaged rural and urban poor for the purposes of discussing and working out strategies for dealing with their socioeconomic conditions. This kind of theatre practice may be variously referred to as Theatre for Development (TFD), Theatre for Integrated Development (TIDE), Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (THIRD) or Community Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (CTHIRD). They all refer to the same practice, although, some of these nomenclatures have their limitations, but in broad terms, they are all talking about popular/peoples theatre.

This kind of theatre speaks to the people in their own language and idiom, and deals with issues that are of direct relevance to their own lives. It is a practice which builds the people's artistic modes of expression (song, dance, etc.) into the process of discussion and performances. In all of these, the rural people are put in the 'driving seat' of the drama. They are allowed to control the dramaturgical process; provide material for drama, isolate through discussion and analyze the issues which the drama will focus on. Normally, these rural people form the core of the improvisation and performances.

In the context of development, community theatre functions as a medium of articulating problems by the poor. Theatre is essentially important as a medium of articulation in the lives of the disempowered groups because the main organs of communication such as the radio, television and the newspapers are media outside their own control for two reasons; in nearly all of the developing countries, both the electronic and print media are controlled by the government. Secondly, approximately eighty percent of the people at whom development is often targeted are illiterates.

It is for these reasons that community theatre for development becomes not only a medium of articulation by the poor, but also a process which the people can control. It does not require any formal literacy, nor does it demand professional skills to be able to do this kind of theatre. What is required are the body resources of the people, and these are already present in their traditional abilities to sing, dance and drum. A little more co-ordination and restructuring into dialogue and what you have is total theatre- a theatre which is a hybridization from both the Western-type-dialogue-drama and the traditional performative arts.

The community theatre for development that we have in Nigeria appears to have descended from the experiments of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire through their East African experiments in Kenya, especially, the Laedza Batanini Campaigns in Botswana and the Chikwakwa travelling theatre in Zambia. The nascent attempt to include Theatre Arts as a teaching subject in many tertiary institutions' curricular in Nigeria is not without demanding challenges. However, the idea of Augusto Boal, seems to have been an impetus in the drafting of the curriculum. Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire, Latin-American drama workers and theorists emphasized theatre as a discourse, where, instead of polished performance presented to popular audience by an elite cadre of artist, the theatre team actually collaborates with the audience in the creation of the drama. Boal and Freire were interested in the upliftment of theatre for development.

Putting this fact more succinctly, Kidd (2009:48) affirms; "if people are left out of the creation and dialogue in the play, it is difficult to turn them on like a tap when it is all over"

3. Process of Community Theatre

Community theatre for development is a theatrical style/practice which stresses participation, dialogue, critical consciousness, etc. The practitioners of this theatre are committed to social transformation through rural action, using the theatre. Through its practice, they hope to involve the rural people in finding solutions to their common problems through research, dramatization, analysis and follow-up action.

A closer look at the International and domestic manifestation of theatre, shows a polarity between the theatre that domesticates and the one that liberates. For the people to take over the process of their own development, and also for it to happen from within their cultural matrix, we are beginning to witness integration.

The integration one is talking about here is distinct from adaptation. For as Paulo Freire (1973:4) argues;

Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his discussions are no longer his own because they result from external prescription, he is no longer integrated.

The process of this integration is part predicated on interpersonal contact when members of the community come together to discuss issues concerning them. In this regard, the sense of communality is enhanced and group consciousness is developed. The people may then begin to debate and devise common strategies to effect changes in their own lives.

In the context of participatory theatre, what has just been outlined corresponds to the phase of problem identification and analysis. This collective identification and analysis is what informs as well as provides material for the community drama which discusses problems, explores options and through concretization discovers the limits of certain suggestions. The drama is usually created through improvisation. This is a dramatic process by which the dialogue and action in the drama are formulated by participants themselves in an atmosphere of give-and-take, of trial-and-error. The focus of participatory or community theatre is therefore

participation and change. Its concern is to demystify the misinterpretation and protectionism of the elites and development planners. Its essential characteristic is openness.

Broadly speaking, the process of community theatre as enunciated by Abah (1990:19) follows these eight steps:

- Researching community problems
- Prioritizing the problems
- Problem analysis
- Story/Scenario development
- Improvisation
- Performance
- Post-performance discussions
- Follow-up

4. Community Theatre for Rural Development: The Ajolagun Experience

One of the required Courses for the award of the National Certificate in Education (NCE) in the Department of Theatre Arts, College of Education, Ikere Ekiti, is a course titled Community Theatre. The course is divided into two parts: Community Theatre I and Community Theatre II.

The Introductory part of the course-Community Theatre I (Tha 214), which is taken in the second year is based on the theory and practice of Community Theatre. During the final year, everything that has been taught and learnt at the introductory level will be put into practical experimentation in Community Theatre II (Tha 314) which is a final year course.

At the inception of the semester, students would be divided into groups. Each group, operating in synergy becomes the catalyst whose duty is to go to a nearby village of their choice, identify the people's problems and organize a play-let to proffer solution to such problems. Each group is expected to work along the following lines of action within a period of one semester:

- Visit the village to gather information on pressing challenges within its domain.
- Interact and intimate with the community head, who in turn will inform his community members about the mission of the students.
- Invite other stake-holders; the local government Chairman, Councilors and chiefs of the area.
- Educate the community members on how to prioritize their problems.
- Educate them on how to organize a playlet based on the most-pressing problem that needs urgent attention.
- Cast them into roles and prepare them for rehearsals.
- Actual performance at a set date with all the stake-holders in attendance.
- Evaluation and follow-up programmes.

As the head of the department, I was in charge of Community Theatre. Prior to my arrival in the department, the course was being taught only at the theoretical level, but due to the experience I garnered from the Ahmadu Bello University experience, of which I read from a journal, I decided to venture on how we can explore Community theatre to improve the lives of the people around us, who have been abandoned and neglected by the government for so long a time.

One of the communities we chose was Ajolagun village inside Ikere Ekiti in Ikere Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. The people itemized several problems including lack of pipe borne water, erosion problem which has terribly destroyed their roads, lack of health care facilities, electricity and poor road network. After a thorough examination of these problems, we prioritized them and the problem of erosion was unanimously chosen to be tackled by the villagers as it was increasingly becoming difficult for them to bring their farm produce to town due to bad roads, and more importantly, the problem could be solved without involving too much money and government's intervention, which most of the time, was even non-existent.

So the villagers with the help of the students, created a story on how they have toiled on their farms and had good harvest, but vehicles were not available to help them convey their products to town because many of the vehicles have been damaged beyond repair by the bad roads. Hence, most of their farm products got spoilt and wasted. Rehearsals based on improvisation, took some days. The villagers provided the costumes, drums, sang their native songs and acted as it pleased them.

After the performance, the whole village got the message, mobilized themselves and set out to construct a drainage as well as rehabilitating the roads through communal efforts. Where communal efforts could not solve the problem, especially where the problem was capital-intensive like provision of electricity, we appealed to the government functionaries that were present at the performances (the Councilors and the Chairmen) to help convey the plights of the people to the government. Surprisingly, by the time we went for follow-up the following month, government presence was visibly manifested in the area. Electricity poles have been deposited in the area, signaling that work has begun in earnest on the electricity project.

From the experience of the students sent to the field, it becomes apparent that some communities have the potentials to solve certain social and infrastructural challenges without waiting for government's intervention. One discovers that some communities that claim to have problem of non-availability of portable and clean water could purify the available sources of water with chemicals that are not too exorbitant to purchase. Many of the play-lets stimulated by students of the department of Theatre Arts in several other communities like Ogbese, Ayedaade, Ise, etc. have done a lot to sensitize the people. Where government's intervention is inevitable, the representative of the local government that have been invited are sensitized and motivated to appeal to the right quarters in addressing the needs of the communities as it was done in Ajolagun.

5. Conclusion

From the above, it is apparent that theatre helps to stimulate and motivate the stakeholders in community development, particularly in areas of self-realization, self-actualization and self-development. Educational institutions have the moral obligation of contributing their own quota to the development of their host communities through their corporate social responsibility programmes. The responsibility in this sense has to do with motivating the residents of such communities to contribute to their own development. This is carried out through theatre programmes where the members of the community are participants. As Clifford (2005:81) rightly observes:

...community theatre is in a unique position to help extend the cultural influence and benefits of a high school, college or university into the community. It can do this through its public performance programmes by offering quality theatre to the entire public.

If therefore we are talking about genuine rural development, we should be advocating a structure and process which consider the beneficiaries as subjects and above all, that which allows them to participate in the process.

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