

TEACHING THE PERFORMATIVE ART IN A PANDEMIC-PRONE ERA: CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS AND PROGNOSIS

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Abstract

Performance is an aggregation of people who are drawn together to enjoy the communion of life which is the theatre experience. Their appetite for art and the insatiable quest to communicate, educate, entertain and provide useful information requires that they must come together, interact physically, engage in rehearsals and associate with the audience. Indeed, it calls for many hands, for teamwork during which everyone involved feels, thinks and utilizes the imagination to bring results. This interaction and comingling are not without risks and challenges, especially given the number of persons and materials involved in the pre and post-production processes. An investigation by the writers reveals that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, performative studies have suffered a setback. Rehearsals are no longer conducted effectively as there are mutual distrusts amongst everyone. Scepticism has set in, the fear factor has increased and the confidence to practically come together again has been at the lowest ebb. Even the use of face masks as advised by the government and international agencies has not done much because of its potential to affect the respiratory efficiency of actors as rehearsals are usually vigorous and involve energy-sapping activities. However, it is the opinion of the writers that new approaches and innovations such as digital theatre and online teaching with segmented

rehearsals, expansion and well-equipped classrooms, reduction of new intake and total overhaul of the teaching methodologies should be employed. These in the long run will provide the magic wand that will revitalize the performative art and ensure its continuous survival.

Keywords: *teaching, performative arts, critical issues, prospect and prognosis*

Introduction

Whether theatre arts, creative arts, communication arts or performing arts, we refer to a discipline of creative artistry and performance. The nature of performance involves a conglomeration of people who are saddled with the responsibility of harnessing artistic talents through rehearsals and productions for the satisfaction of the audience. Nwamuo (2006:p.14) argues that:

a theatre audience is a group of people drawn to a theatrical event by the appetite for art at a certain time and place and that is aware of itself as a homogeneous group of art lovers. The theatre audience is drawn together by the social as well as the artistic experience called the theatre and is a group that has come to the event of the live performance.

As a collaborative art form, it “produces artistic goods and services” (Ekweariri, 2014. p. 96) and further concerns itself “with the presentation of the real or imagined event by actors to a specific audience at a specific place” (Nwamuo, 2017: p. 10). Through this process, mutually beneficial ideas are shared for artistic gains while serious attention is given to knotty theatrical issues. Going by the above, artists and collaborators come together freely without inhibitions and engage in diverse pre and post-production processes. Within this period, artists’ imaginative impetuses and creative abilities are stretched to the limit in an attempt to authenticate or reflect societal happenings and challenges. Most times, rehearsals drag for weeks

depending on the nature of the play and the calibre of artists involved.

However, the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic changed very many things in the performative art discipline. Indeed, the COVID-19 insurgency has placed very serious constraints on the coming ability, associability, collaborativeness and practicability of performative courses on one hand and the involvement of audience members on the other hand. Such constraints have not only become antithetical and debilitatingly suffocating but have also posed a great obstacle to the survival of live productions. Nowadays, rehearsals are no longer conducted effectively as there are mutual distrusts amongst everyone. Scepticism has set in, the fear factor has increased and the confidence to practically come together again has been at the lowest ebb.

Be that as it may, this paper is poised to find ways possible to navigate these constraints and probably channel them to better advantage of the performative arts. For this research, therefore, performative, creative, communication and theatre arts are going to be used interchangeably.

Theoretical framework

This paper is anchored on the Theory of Constraints (TOC). It was propounded by Dr Eliyahu Goldratt and introduced to a wide audience through his bestselling 1984 novel, “The Goal”. Since then, it has continued to evolve and has influenced manufacturing processes and production. The core concept of the Theory of Constraints is that every process has a single constraint and that total process throughput can only be improved when the constraint is improved. A very important corollary to this is that spending time optimizing non-constraints will not provide significant benefits; only improvements to the constraint will further the goal (achieving more profit). Thus, the Theory of Constraints seeks to provide a precise and sustained focus on improving the current

constraint until it no longer limits throughput, at which point the focus moves to the next constraint. The underlying power of TOC flows from its ability to generate a tremendously strong focus towards a single goal (profit) and towards removing the principal impediment (constraint) to achieving more of that goal. Goldratt considers focus to be the essence of TOC. The Theory of Constraints takes a scientific approach to improvement. It hypothesizes that every complex system, including manufacturing processes, consists of multiple linked activities, one of which acts as a constraint upon the entire system (i.e. the constraint activity is the “weakest link in the chain”). Indeed, the ultimate goal of every manufacturing company is to make a profit – both in the short term and in the long term. The Theory of Constraints provides a powerful set of tools for helping to achieve that goal, including The Five Focusing Steps (a methodology for identifying and eliminating constraints); The Thinking Processes (tools for analyzing and resolving problems) and Throughput accounting (a method for measuring performance and guiding management decisions) (<https://www.leanproduction.com/theory-of-constraints/>).

One of the appealing characteristics of the Theory of Constraints is that it inherently prioritizes improvement activities. The top priority is always the current constraint. In environments where there is an urgent need to improve, TOC offers a highly focused methodology for creating rapid improvement. Constraints are of course anything that prevents the organization from making progress towards its goal. In manufacturing processes, constraints are often referred to as bottlenecks. Interestingly, constraints can take many forms other than equipment. Indeed, it has always been argued that every process has a constraint (bottleneck) and focusing improvement efforts on that constraint is the fastest and most effective path to improved profitability. It argues that the most common form of constraint (by far) is the policy constraint. Since policy constraints often stem from long-established and widely

accepted policies, they can be particularly difficult to identify and even harder to overcome. It is typically much easier for an external party to identify policy constraints since an external party is less likely to take existing policies for granted. When a policy constraint is associated with a firmly entrenched paradigm, a significant investment in training and coaching is likely to be required to change the paradigm and eliminate the constraint.

Theatre is a manufacturing plant where artistic goods and services are produced. These products may not be in tangible form as espoused by Gondo (2008. P.11), yet, they are aimed towards satisfying the audience, who are often regarded as the better half of the performance. With the prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic, there have been serious constraints on the production of artistic goods and services. The situation is further exacerbated by the policy of the government that social distancing must be observed, face masks must be worn and constant washing of hands strictly adhered to if performances must take place. Theatre involves the gathering of actors in a confined space called theatre, and with the above directives, coupled with the way most theatres are structured, it becomes practically difficult to engage in rehearsals without running into problems. However, this paper desires to find ways possible to navigate the constraints and ensure the survival and sustenance of theatre practice.

The Nature of Performance in the Pandemic Era

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic was a serious and challenging era not only for the artistic discipline but also for every aspect of humanity. It ravaged the economy and ridiculed the ingenuity, expertise; intellectual sophistry and mental prowess of the world elites. It demystified the meaning of existence as there appeared to be no meaningful ways to combat it. At a point, people felt tired of staying indoors amid lack, hunger and deprivation, and in a desperate act of survival,

decided to take their destinies into their hands. This act of survival also manifested itself in the performative discipline. Therefore, it will be illogical to argue that theatre productions died completely during the pandemic era, rather the point of argument is that the frequencies with which performances were mounted were on a lower ebb. The injunction that events involving a larger number of persons should be jettisoned while smaller crowds should maintain physical distancing and ensure the adornment of face masks affected the production of artistic goods and services. In the words of Gondo (2008, p. 2)

The theatre produces artistic goods and services and this comes in the form of performances. A performance is a service consisting of a bundle of intangible attributes that satisfies the audience and it is received in exchange for money... (this bundle) gives the theatre audience certain psychological satisfaction that may even be more important than the functional satisfaction... a performance is the cornerstone of any theatre organization.

Indeed, most departments downed tools and lecturers and students merely came to the department for coming sake. Those who defied the odds temporarily and engaged in rehearsals did so skeletally and with scepticism and were equally very conscious of the perilous circumstances of the time. Feelers on the ground and from personal experiences indicate that the adornment of a mask during such rehearsals presented huge respiratory challenges to the actors as rehearsals involve laborious activity. Rehearsals “call for many hands, for teamwork during which everyone involved feels, thinks and utilizes the imagination to bring result” Nwachukwu-Agbada (2011, p. 133). During such skeletal rehearsals, the face mask became a jaw mask because most actors and actresses preferred to put the mask on the jaw instead of having it cover their mouth

and nose thereby increasing the chances of theatre workers infecting themselves. On account of this, many rehearsals and productions were called off and those that continued simply left their chances of contracting the virus to fate.

However, some departments succeeded in mounting some productions but very many of them were not successful because of the absence of an audience. Indeed, the success of any theatrical production is dependent on the number of persons who have come to watch such a performance. Nwamuo (2003, p. 24) affirms that "...theatre is a performance in which an actor and audience are physically present and sharing the events at the same time, it uses live actors who impersonate and who must be physically present." As earlier stated, the period under review had debilitating economic challenges and potential audience members were busy trying to provide food for themselves and large families, and as such, did not care much about entertainment. Of course, they were expected to adorn face masks which they must buy. Regrettably, face masks that used to be sold at the rate of fifty nairas, one hundred naira or less before now, became a luxury and a class thing. There was also a serious restriction on movement with military and police roadblocks here and there. Those who were caught violating this directive were not only beaten up, humiliated and made to part with huge sums of money but were equally quarantined for two weeks. Social media then were awash with cases where people who were guilty of this infraction were thoroughly dehumanized and given a beaten-off life. The resultant effect of the above was that government succeeded in instilling fear in the people and made them become withdrawn and recluses in their homes. This also affected the patronage of live performances because there was this understanding that it's only a man who is alive that thinks of tomorrow. Audience members, therefore, became reticent and aloof to anything theatrical and amusement. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic

presented a crisis of opinion on the future of live theatre in Nigeria and the need to keep it afloat.

Navigating the Constraints for Survivability and Sustainability

Theatre is one of the performing arts but differs by its particular relationship to time and space, its principles of organization, the nature of its audience, and course, its mode of presentation. It is a business enterprise and every business has its downturns which the owner must navigate to survive and make appreciable progress. In the face of the present reality occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, theatre practice needs to be “repackaged if it has to breathe a breath of fresh air in the realm of artistic entertainment (Ayakoroma 2016, p. 5). What the theatre needs, especially in this post COVID-19 era is “a new renaissance in the creation, distribution and sharing of information, knowledge and creative work” and a “move from industrial content production towards community-based inter-creativity (that) holds the potential for severe and controversial disruptions to the established status quo” (Bruns, 2008, pp.16-17).

Overhauling the status quo entails a marriage of the old and new methodologies of wooing the audience to the theatre. It has often been said that one cannot be using the same method and expect different results. Stakeholders in the artistic discipline must think beyond the box and innovate. Innovation has always been a very important survival strategy in business, particularly in a period such as this. As stated by Albert Einstein “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (cited in Downey, 2016). Innovation is business, and creativity which contributes to organizational value. This value may be cost savings, increased profit or doing the same thing differently, greater market shares, or new ways of marketing a product. There is an imperative for

Nigerian theatre artists to innovate particularly at the level of packaging the product for greater appeal and effective marketing. Part of the innovation being talked about can include the use of new and emerging platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and other publicity approaches with new communication devices. Indeed, the surges in Social Network Sites (SNSs) have transformed information sharing in today's society...the social network site or social media is one part of the technology-driven media that have witnessed great patronage in the past ten years (Udenze, 2018, pp.117-118). Furthermore,

If the theatre is not patronized by the people, it is therefore expedient of it to explore other measures that will attract the people to it thereby getting the wherewithal to be able to carry out performances and earn a living. One of the surest ways of generating patronage for the theatre is by synergising with new media to attract people and possibly sell theatrical products to them using new media platforms such as social networks (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn), media sharing networks (Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube), Social shopping networks (Polyvore, Etsy and Fancy), and sharing economic network (Airbnb, Uber and Tasrabbbit) (Asen 2019, p. 67).

In this way, theatre can be in a better position to interrogate societal issues dispassionately and accommodate a wide audience especially those who are technology-driven. For instance, as part of the awareness of the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Theatre Arts, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri did a three-minute film skit which was posted on the college portal and Instagram page. The department received ovations for it, and this could be

further explored to serve as a money-making venture for the department. Exploring the dynamics of video games and animation will also broaden the perspectives of new methodologies in the teaching of the performative arts in the post-COVID-19 era. Esuh (2016, p. 107) writes that “video games offer virtual reality experiences and are becoming a more popular advertising medium.” Indeed, digital theatre can reach a wider audience across the globe at once through the deployment of technology.

Even with the seeming decline of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is however a dire need for artists to be cautious in the conduct of rehearsals and other activities related to teaching and learning. Part of the ways to navigate this challenge is to ensure the segmentation of rehearsals especially where very many persons are involved. This segmentation is different from special rehearsals because it does not concern itself with problematic scenes which special rehearsals accommodate. Rather what is espoused here is a system of ensuring that crowd is minimized which will at the same time make us become responsible adults and comply with the COVID-19 protocols. However, this segmentation requires a well-equipped and spacious studio for interaction. With this arrangement, good and effective distance will be maintained between and amongst actors and the sweating of several bodies, synonymous with rehearsals with its inherent hazards (Ekweariri 2015, p. 103), would have been reduced thereby making the use of face masks during rehearsals compatible.

Furthermore, theatre as a course of study needs to be effectively taught to dispel the myth and misconceptions surrounding it. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic was antithetical to the effective teaching of the performative art, and indeed, made many persons redundant. To keep the system going and stakeholders busy, institutions in Nigeria, within the period, adopted online teaching which these writers applaud as

a welcome development and a right step in the right direction. Even with the obvious difficulties associated with online teaching, performative art should sustain it and make it part of its curriculum. This has become necessary because of the peculiar nature of performative art which requires constant interaction and cross-examination.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a quasi-inevitable phenomenon given the fact that it has ravaged countries that ordinarily have the proclivity to combat it. Based on this, most informed people and experts view COVID-19 as a kind of fatalism or the end of the world but also as another challenge to overcome, through appropriate survival strategies. The theory of Constraints implies that every process has a single constraint and that total process throughput can only be improved when the constraint is improved. Indeed, the underlying power of TOC flows from its ability to generate a tremendously strong focus towards a single goal (profit) and towards removing the principal impediment (constraint) to achieving more of that goal. The paper has identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a constraint to live performances and has outlined viable ways of surmounting this challenge. This, therefore, justifies the choice of the theory for this research.

Therefore, in times like this, players in the theatre business should think outside the box and come up with innovative strategies to remain relevant and survive the pandemic. Rehearsals should be repackaged such that they will accommodate fewer persons. Pockets of rehearsals in the form of special rehearsals should be maintained in the interim. Online teaching and Google classroom opportunities should be vigorously pursued as this encourages students and lecturers to become computer-compliant which is necessary in the 21st century teaching methodology. Artists should not wait for audience members to come to them; rather they should take

their products to the targeted audience. This should be done through streaming their plays online using the myriad of advertising platforms available. Every theatrical idea must be developed and channelled into a productive venture in the theatre. In the words of Fosudo (2008, p. 265) “...the theatre is validly an idea, and ideas can be transformed into valuable services which can be provided to satisfy the needs of a segment of the consuming public.” Therefore, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be seen as an end to live theatre productions but rather as an avenue to broaden the horizon of theatre practitioners and students alike through ethical reorientation, innovative thinking and practical application of acquired skills.

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