

COMMUNITY THEATRE AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: THE UKWU ORJI BUS PARK PROJECT

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Abstract

Environmental issues in recent times are gaining greater attention globally. Every community is witnessing one form of the environmental problem within its locality. These environmental problems include but are not limited to the following; water pollution, Erosion menace, oil spillage, desertification, and flooding. Various environmental policies have been put in place by the government and its environmental agencies to tackle these problems but the menace remains persistent because the target has not been reached. To achieve the targeted goal, there is a need for the public to be duly educated on environmental protection using appropriate media that can easily impact the grass root. This paper advocates that community theatre should be used to educate the public on the dangers of environmental degradation and the benefits of its protection. The paper is anchored on Bertolt Brecht's Theatre of the Oppressed which emphasises theatre that propels the spectator to action. Using qualitative research for data collection and analysis, the paper explores community theatre as a means of educating the masses on environmental matters. The paper concludes that for the government to win the war against environmental degradation, a medium of information dissemination that involves the people is needed. It, therefore,

recommends the use of community theatre in this regard to take the message of environmental sanitation closer to the people.

Keywords: Environment, Environmental education, Community theatre. Environmental awareness,

Introduction

Every community in Nigeria is battling with one form of environmental problem or the other. As the arid part of the country is battling desertification, the wetlands are battling flooding and erosion. The cities are not left out, as industrialisation has ushered in air and water pollution due to poor waste disposal and other human activities that contribute negatively to the environment. The importance of the environment in man's life is so much so that it affects his dress, occupation, what he eats and drinks, where he lives and how he lives, and where he goes. It even affects the manner he worships and relates to his creator. Putting it more succinctly, Yaki and Babagana see the environment as "the total of all conditions, living and non-living that surround man at a given time. It is the common heritage of mankind" (1). The state of the environment is the basis for man's survival in the physical world, hence the need for its protection. The importance of the environment is further highlighted by Alami and Adekunle when they stated that "the quality of the environment affects the quality of our lives. Our actions as producers, consumers, voters and procreators have a cumulative impact on the quality of the environment that sustains it" (25).

Agenda, 21 of the global agenda adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, advocates for environmental education that will reflect the need for sustainable development in the 21st century. In

line with the above, environmental agencies and stakeholders in Nigeria have been saddled with the task of taking the message of environmental protection to the masses to aid in the control and prevention of environmental degradation in the country. Various efforts have been put in place by the nation's Ministry of Environment, National Conservation Foundation and other environmental stakeholders towards solving the environmental problems in Nigeria. Despite all the noticeable efforts, the resultant implementation has yielded little or no positive fruits. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness and other factors on the part of the people. Therefore, a need arises for adopting a more effective approach to taking the message of the environment to the people.

Environmental education is a way of enhancing the awareness of people on environmental issues, understanding the environment and the importance of its conservation and protection, to find a lasting solution to the numerous environmental problems in their community. It aims to inculcate the people the skills and needs to handle environmental problems for better living conditions. Thus Tayo and Alaba define it as "a new approach to education which is hoped will bring some solution to the deteriorating relationship between man and his environment."(1326). The above is saying that environmental education creates awareness for people to understand the environment and make intelligent decisions that will take care of it for the good of mankind. For clearer understanding, the UNESCO document defines it as:

A living process that increases people's knowledge and consciousness about the environment and associated challenges develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges and foster attitude, motivation and

commitment to make informed decisions and take responsible actions (52).

Environmental education is primarily, information on environmental issues that are meant to guide the individual to a better understanding, and consequently, better handling of the environment for optimal benefit from the immediate environment. It provides factual information that will lead to an understanding of the environment and its problems, and encourages people to develop concern for environmental protection and safety. Katie Kinner defines it as “a process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem-solving and take action to improve the environment” (np).

The importance of environmental education is that It informs the people of the manner and need to safeguard the environment by imbibing positive environmental habits to sustain the balance of the ecosystem. According to Alami and Adekunle:

Environmental education aims to develop a citizenry that is aware of and concerned about the total environment and its associated problems and has the knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and problems, as well as the prevention of new ones (25).

In the words of William Stapp:

Environmental education aims to produce a citizenry knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help solve them and motivated to work towards their solution (34).

From the above, one can deduce that environmental education creates creative environmental consciousness towards

environmental protection for positive living conditions. It is pertinent that people need to understand the environment and their responsibility towards its safety. Given this, the need arises for people to be educated on matters relating to the environment because it promotes awareness and mobilises the people to action on environmental protection.

Observations have shown that this important education aimed at salvaging the environment is lacking at the grass root hence the poor environmental habits being displayed by the people. Alaba and Tayo attested to this by stating that” the people at the grass root lack environmental consciousness; hence there is a need for more campaigns to help change people’s behaviour at the local community level (1326). Ubong Nda points out that the global environmental problem needs serious attention and calls for “the enunciation of creative ideas that would take the message of environmental salvaging to persons of different classes and ages” (142).

Community Theatre is a creative medium of communication that is informative, educative, entertaining and at the same time works directly with people irrespective of class or age. Dang’a and Kabela define it as:

a participatory theatre in which the people themselves engage issues about their own lives for their immediate consumption and which promotes development by stimulating dialogue within them using their familiar artistic expressions like songs, dances proverbs, mimes, local norms and culture, etcetera (17).

Community theatre is a unique art bound with its originality and readiness to intervene in the developmental discourse by

employing its overwhelming adaptability to social situations. According to John Cohen-Cross, it is a “community-based theatre, a popular mode allied with identity politics and targeting under-represented groups in the quest for creative expression” (115). For Obadiogwu, community theatre is “a practice by which theatre is placed at the service of the people to discuss and work out strategies for dealing with their problems “(ix). This type of theatre is people-oriented hence the general acceptance of community theatre as a theatre for the people, by the people and with the people. Thus Chukwu Okoronkwo sees it as a process of “discussing development as a group and catalysing the discussion rather than presenting a solution to the community” (686). Being a process and not a finished project, community theatre is a continuous project that allows for follow-up visits

The viability of community theatre in educating and informing the masses can be attributed to its uniqueness in dealing with the problems of the host community using theatricalities available within their vicinity. Its participatory nature also gave it an upper hand ahead of other communication media. As Adie Okoro and Orim rightly put it, “One cannot effect change without being involved in the larger process of change” (np). This participatory quality of community theatre encourages collaboration with the host community and allows them to voice out their perception of the issue at hand with a view to proffering solutions. They are mobilised to actively evolve intellectually, and materially to come to a thorough understanding of their problem and in the process, proffer solutions. Eyo (1986) quoted in Adie, Okoro and Orim observed that the “implication of using community theatre as a participatory tool for social change is quite enormous as it allows for discussion, interaction, mobilisation to bring out communal

changes”(np). Through community theatre, therefore, the host community develops new strategies for tackling issues inherent in their community for a desired positive change Okhaku and Evawoma-Enuku observed that:

in community theatre, drama is used as an educational springboard and not necessarily entertainment, through which the community can deal with the issues of concern to its members and associates (np).

On the usefulness of community theatre for development, Obadiegwu observed that community theatre:

is used by development agents as an alternative medium to confront and combat apathy in a given situation. It is also a means of addressing communal problems by motivating members of such a community to change (77).

Aba (1990), quoted in Adie, Okoro and Orim further states that:

Community theatre is not a professional affair and therefore does not require professional attitudes to harness it. what it requires is the collective aspirations and decisions of people wanting to use theatre to develop their environment ... Community theatre entails the use of communal participation from problem identification and research to staging (np).

This paper is specific on the use of community theatre to educate the people on the need for environmental protection for a healthier and wealthier living using “Ukwuorji Minimarket Pallava”, a community Theatre project executed by 2021/2022 300 level students of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, as a case study.

Community theatre helps in conveying sensitive information to a given community. It presents the host community with situations that can easily engage them emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually. The sole objective of community theatre is to stimulate the community into action to address and identify communal problem(s).

This is the objective behind the Ukwu Orji Market project. The Bus Park is a mini park with a flourishing fruit and vegetables mini market located in a residential area in IfiteAwka, Awka South Local Government Area in Anambra state. It is a community of civil servants and petty traders. The park is experiencing serious environmental problems resulting from human activities, such as poor sanitation and neglect. When the crew first visited the community for fact-finding, the following information was gathered:

1. The drainage in front of the park is filled with refuse, thus blocking them.
2. The culvert leading into the park is broken
3. Inside the park is littered with rotten fruits and vegetables abandoned by the sellers.
4. There are pocket heaps of refuse at different spots within the park.

The crew also discovered that the market women are not cooperative hence the dirty state of the environment. They also discovered that the refuse dump opposite the park has not been evacuated for a long time because the community members have been defaulting regularly on the payment of sanitation levy. Hence the area is filled with a pungent odour emanating from the dump

with flies roaming about in their numbers in and around the park. This reduces the number of buyers patronising the fruit market because the fruits are believed to be contaminated. This environmental condition also affects the bus drivers as passengers preferably patronise the Keke (tricycle) drivers outside the park because of the unhealthy condition of the park. On these facts, the students, in collaboration with the community members, weaved a story titled “Ukwu Orji Market Palava”.

“Ukwu Orji Market Palava” is a drama skit with a simple storyline that is woven around environmental protection and its benefits. In the drama, the market women and the bus drivers are dragging over whose responsibility it is to keep the park clean. The drivers insist that it is the traders’ responsibility since they are the ones that litter it with remnants from their stalls. The traders on the other hand are adamant that the park should be cleaned by the drivers because they and their passengers contribute to its dirtiness. The park chairman intervened to save the situation and scheduled a compulsory meeting for all members of the park to discuss a way forward. After the meeting, which also has in its attendance, the representative of the Anambra State Waste Management Agency (ASWAMA), an agency of the Ministry of Environment that bears the responsibility of evacuation of refuse in the state.

After the meeting, both groups were made to understand the importance of keeping the park clean for the growth of their business. They are made to understand that the responsibility of keeping the park clean falls on every member of the community. Through the ASWAMA representative, the government promised to ensure the regular evacuation of the refuse from the refuse dump and urged the community members to be regular with their payment of sanitation levy. They are advised to open up the drainages for free movement of flood and desist from the habit of dumping refuse inside them. A short speech on environmental protection was given by the ASWAMA representative and in appreciation for their

understanding, free refuse bags were shared and safer refuse disposal methods were taught to the sellers. The meeting was rounded off with a dance in appreciation for the new development.

Achievements

At the end of the performance, the salient point made is that if environmental protection is included in the day-to-day activities of the people, they stand to gain more from it. Following this, the Chairman of the park promised to ensure that the environmental condition of the park is improved. The project helped in informing the sellers of the need to keep their business environment clean to increase patronage from customers who are more likely to patronise them if the environment is cleaner. The drivers also promised to open up the drainages for the easy flow of flood. On the part of the government, the ASWAMA Boss representative, invited to the performance by the students, promised to ensure that the refuse dump opposite the park is regularly evacuated.

Conclusion

The project aims to make the park occupants see the need for keeping the park/mini market clean. Though we are aware that we are not in the position to solve the entire problems of the park, as we are not in the position to provide the trash cans or employ the cleaners, we were able to bring to the knowledge of the members of the community that their behaviours and habits contribute either positively or negatively to the environment.

Nigeria, and indeed, the entire universe is facing serious environmental challenges. In the face of these challenges, community theatre can be used to educate people on the extent their behaviours and habits can help in tackling the global environmental problem. Community theatre is participatory in nature. In addition

to this, it also employs dialogue in discussing and working out strategies suitable for handling every problem it encounters in the host community. This allows the people to reflect on their problems and their causes, and then decide on possible solutions. The use of drama as an educational springboard in addressing an identified communal problem stimulates the people to action towards solving such a problem.

Ukwuorj Market Palava is proof that community theatre places theatre at the service of the people for environmental education. Through this theatrical performance, members of the community are encouraged to discard their negative environmental attitude and replace it with a more positive one to ensure the safety of their environment.

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