

PARADIGM SHIFT IN AFRICAN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE: NEW MEDIA TO THE RESCUE

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ABSTRACT

In times past, the African theatre performance thrives on stage with its electrifying actions and ecstatic response of the audience. The responses and the feedback are immediate while the audience and their emphatic feelings can be seen to generate further actions on stage. All these are not without its challenges and hazards both to the practitioners and their audience. The new information explosion age and its associated technological breakthrough in the areas of new media has come to offer solutions to the myriads of problem and the challenges involved in stage performance for the practitioners and audience in the past. This paper therefore set out to examine the old practices, its challenges, the new media and the opportunities it presents. It will also examine the extent to which the new media have been able to move the African performance forward in the new millennium.

KEY WORDS; Theatre, Performativity, Paradigm, New Media, Electrifying Actions.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of performance engages "the politics of theatre" through its implicit critique of the culturally coded meaning of the word 'theatre' derived from the Greek word for seen and doing. Theatre like theory is a limiting term for a certain kind of spectatorial participation in a certain kind of event. Parker and Sedgwick (1995:46). Performance, by contrast though it frequently makes reference to theatricality as the most fecund metaphor for the social dimensions of cultural production, embraces a much wider range of human behaviours. Such behaviours may include what Michel-de-Corbeau calls "the practice of everyday life" in which the role of spectator expands into that of participant. De Corbeau's "practice" has itself enlarged into an open-ended category marked "performative".

The term performance may be more precisely delineated as what Rachael Schechner calls the "restoration of behaviour" restored behaviour or twice-behaved behaviour, is that which can be repeated, rehearsed, and above all recreated. Performance highlights a distinction between social memory and history as different forms of cultural transmission across time, memory requires collective participation, whether at theatrical events, Shamanic rituals, political rally, demonstrations and traditional festivals.



Figure: 1:0: Untitled assemblage Acrylic on Paper 2011 Photo: AbiodunKafaru

This is a painterly effect in water base medium in a stylistic form portraying a sacrificial performance of the Lagos community. The philosophy behind this work based on spiritual belief that Africa and the entire Lagos state to emerge in the new world as the leading state in Nigeria. The use of colour is abstract in nature with inscription of patterns; signs and symbolism. AsFilani (2005) has pointed out Nigerian art landscapes have a lot of classifications and creative connotations that reflect the hallmark of their specific ethnic artistic settings. However, the indigene have made a conscious reflective representation of art forms and engagements with nature and are characterized by the synthesis of indigenous motifs, aesthetic and in some instances, integrate Western conventions such as perspective and proportion. The placement of colour and imagery is specifically captivating and resonate with a lot of futuristic segmentation.

THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

In Africa, theatre performances is strongly rooted in culture and embedded in social cultural activities, it is associated with key events in the society such as performance at traditional festivals, marriages, naming ceremony masquerade and even reception for visitors at the king's palace,(Ogundeji :2000), at such occasion presentational arts like music, drama, poetry, dialogue chants, dance, songs, role playing, acrobatics, costuming, make-up, masking, spectacle, storytelling among others are engaged in. All these presentation are harnessed primarily for entertainment and aesthetics however as Ola Rotimi observed whether for aesthetic, spectacle or entertainment the inherent mimetic instincts of man was brought into play in the achievement of the purpose of arts.



Fig: 2:0: AbiodunKafaru Social Performance Oil on Canvas 2012

In this painting, the expression of form depicting the peculiarity of Lagos life style such that the human anatomy and colour expression is soothing and captivating reflecting an indigenous life display of the coastal Yoruba social life style and the effect implication is that the array of the arrangement and focal point is geometrical in shapes with conscious use of lines, the peculiar busy environment with people and dynamic daily (weekend *Owanbe*) partying among the people is revealed in this painting filani (2003) once observed that they painted and express themselves in bright colours and display theme, forms, and skills in technique; further concluded, that the people at times reflects on the social life and themes relevant to their social- cultural milieu.



Fig: 3: AbiodunKafaru Coronation Ceremony Oil on Canvas

This is a composition in oil paint in form of a performative art; this picture is a coronation of a new king in a traditional African setting. The imagery under an umbrella crowded with people is well decorated to speak in a set of realism in a painterly hue of chromatic. The foreground is well taking into consideration to reflect the inherent scene of the town centre within a traditional setting.

Rotimi (1976:1) cited in Ogundeji (2000) a fact substantiated by Brochet (1975:5). However, the African theatre performance have been seriously affected by its encounter with western civilisation, education and European thoughts with its basis, according to Parker and Sedgwick(1995) in philosophy taken from Genesis, Plato,Aristotle and proximally posed explicitly by the 1962 publication of the British philosopher J.L. Austin's 'How to do things with words'where performance basis is laid in the concept of 'saying and doing' thus over times, performance is influence to be taken into an hall (Block black box), the confine of the theatre where actions are performed on stage which is in proscenium form or photo frame like outlook and the audience confine to the auditorium where they are fully engaged and enraptured and only respond from time to time. This is in contrast to the African performative art as presented in'BiodunJeyifo's 'the truthful lies- Alarinjo traveling theatre' in which the performers, masquerade, are itinerants artistes, performing from cities to cities at the village Arenas or town centre, where the audience are actually part of the performance or at traditional festivals, where the audience are not only audience but are actually playing key roles,



Fig: 4:0: AbiodunKafaru Ritual Performance Mixed Media on Wood

Also influence is the materials, employed in use for the artist's materials, (props and costume), the actors at such occasions, play out stories that the people are quite familiar with, events that has happened in the past or a commentary on on-going activities in the society. The above painting reveals the impacts of costume and props on the aesthetic qualities of performance.

There are no scripts, all the actions are improvised by the performers who over time have mastered their skills in an apprenticeship with a master performer, however, western orientation favoured formal acquisition of skills through institutional training and most often, the actions to be performed are already scripted and the performers are to be guided with this (play text).

In Africa now, it has been realised that for performance to realise its full potentials of maximally serving the society, it needs to be taken out of the confine of the theatre hall, a fact corroborated by Parker and Sedgwick (1995), while efforts have been channelled along this line. Theatre studies have been attempting meanwhile, to take themselves out of (the) purview of the theatre. Re-imaging itself over the cause of past decade as the wider field of performance studies, the discipline has moved well beyond the classical ontology of the 'black box' model to embrace a myriad of performance practices, ranging from stage to festival and everything in between film, photography, television, computer simulation, music, "performance arts" political demonstrations, health care, cooking, fashion and shamanistic ritual. This performance unlike before is now been extended to embrace many functions that cannot be restricted within the confine of the theatre. The theatre, to be functional must serve

and be relevant to the society an expectation that is only recently made possible with the evolution of new media, and its application in performing arts.

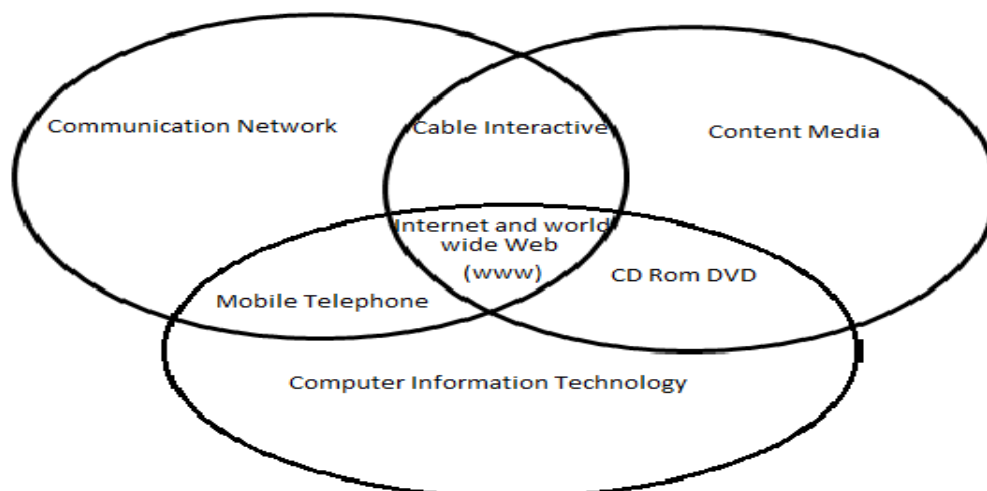
The challenges facing African theatre performance

In pre-internet era, theatre performance takes place on stage, in a theatre hall with strenuous preparation and in front of the audience whose response to the actions are not only immediate but also spontaneous, repetitive and for others not present to see the actions, there must be a repeat performance, with the quality dropping as the actors become tired.

Also the performance whether plays or dance have to be taken around cities this apart from increasing the costs of production risk the lives of the performers through accident on the various bad roads, most often it takes its toll on the health of the performers and their crew members. Although the response of the audience can be spontaneous and electrifying when presented with outstanding performance however achieving this feat possess a great challenge to the artistes who most often endanger their lives to meet the yearnings of the audience. Also, most artistic creations for aesthetic purposes like costume, props, and even scenic sets are improvised and make shift alternatives which cannot stand the test of time.

THE NEW MEDIA

Flew Terry (2000), in its work 'the new media: an introduction' gave a more concise definition of new media as "the mode of communication that encompasses three 'C' computing and information technology (IT), communication networks, and digitised media and information contents. Arising out of another process beginning with a 'C' that stand for 'convergence'. The convergence media combines computing communication and media content as revealed in the drawing below.



Source: Terry flew 2008

Fig: 5:0: Flow Diagram showing The Transformation of Computer from Ancient to Post-modern



Photograph Taken at De-Montfort University 50 Years of computing Technology Innovation 2013

Thus new media can be thought of as digital media. Digital media are forms of media content that combine and integrate data, text, sound and images of all kinds are stored in digital formats and are increasingly distributed through networks such as those based on broad band, fibre-optic cables, satellites, and microwave transmission systems. (Terry Flew, 2000:2).

THE SHIFTING PARADIGM IN AFRICAN THEATRE PERFORMANCE

Paradigm means a set of assumptions about the social world, and about what constitute proper techniques, and perception for enquiring into that world. It is a way of looking at the world. It means a view of how the world can be perceived, and is a broad term encompassing elements of epistemology, theory and philosophy along with methods (Punch: 2000) Thus, in applying this into African theatre and performance one will be looking at the ways new media have been able to impact on theatre and performance bringing about changes in perspective, thoughts and practise and eventually the social relevance of theatre as a professional practice.

Theatre and its performance in Africa is entrenched in the culture of the people, while culture encompasses the people ways of life, their language, norms, tradition and values, their thinking and worldview and the effect on the theatre becomes very marginal giving the fact that theatre derive its raw materials from the society and when it comes in contact with the new media the outcome is better imagined and better explained by Jose Van Dijck(1999) describing the technologies as 'materials and metaphoric wiring of our culture', saying this new media culture helps in shaping our ways of life through its technologies and contents and by extension our theatre and performance since media mirrors and reflects the society.

THEATRE PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATIONS RESULTING FROM NEW MEDIA

.The advent of broadcast media and its development between 1920s and 1930s in North American and Europe performance started featuring though initially with musicals on electronic media, it was not until 1959 when the first television station was established in Ibadan the then western state of Nigeria that drama and other forms of entertainment started featuring in another platform other than the stage, but with the evolution of internet and its associated technologies, the performance terrain changed, the media platform did not only increase, it changes, the internet protocol now offered the entertainment industry many opportunities, making possible all those effects that hitherto have been considered impossible making the performing art industry a bee-hive of activities.

The Creativity Framework

Three useful concepts for examining how new media has impacted on performance, will involve the technological dimension of internet and its nature of connectivity through platform, protocol and interface, precisely because these terms' meanings carry beyond the technological realm into the social and the cultural:

Platforms

Platforms are usually hardware, software or services (or combinations of all these) that help code social activities into formatted protocols and present these processes through user-friendly interfaces. For instance,

Facebook provides the software interface to channel communicative traffic between people; Flickr codes the social activity of exchanging pictures; eBay provides a protocolized environment for selling and buying goods; and Job Link codes professional connections between job seekers and employers all this have its implication for the performing arts industry. The word 'platform' is an inherently ambiguous term, according to Tarlton Gillespie (2010), because it links the computational and the architectural to the social, the political and the cultural.

Web 2.0 platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, present themselves as meeting places as well as performative stages: YouTube, for instance, is both a meeting space for video sharing communities and a space to showcase their creative products or, alternatively, a site to look at videos posted by others. A platform's architecture – its interface design, code, algorithms – is always the temporary outcome of its owner's attempt to steer users' activities in a certain direction. Facebook's interface and protocols push users towards making connections with unknown people and turning them into 'friends' – a concept grounded in the exchange of small talk, self-made content and informal updates (e.g. Facebook's feature 'the Wall').

Protocols

Any platform's connective structure is mediated by protocols: formal descriptions of digital message formats complemented by rules for regulating those messages in or between computing systems. On the one hand, protocols are technical sets of rules that 'encapsulate information inside various wrappers, while remaining relatively indifferent to the content of information contained within' (Galloway, 2004: 52); on the other hand, protocols gain their usability from how they are programmed and how they are governed or 'managed' by their owners (2004: 121). Their logic, then, is determined through interfaces and by institutions – governmental, communal, or corporate– even if these sites appear to be operated by individual users or user communities. Protocols hide behind simple, user-friendly and often symbolic interface features; the complex technology or 'internal interface' is kept hidden from the user who can only see the front end or the 'visible interface'.

Interface

A visible interface has technical features (e.g. buttons, scroll bars, stars) and regulatory features (e.g. the rule that a personal profile is required before entering the site) that help steer traffic, they regulate, remain largely obscure to the ordinary user who probably considers the site to be merely a facilitator of a pre-existing social activity. Thus, the internet does not serve as avenue for transmitting presentation alone to performers but rather it serves as avenue for making them professionally fulfilling.

In conclusion, the study is laid on the basis of conceptualising the new media and its technologies via internet as a modality of cultural transmission. Nevertheless its emergence signals the coming of a new era in the history of cultural transmission that performance signpost. The evolving internet for technologies should be seen as creating a new technical scenario, with varied and complex social technological transformation of theatre performance the result of which we are experiencing today

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