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Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA] Further Dimension in Trends of Alternative Theatre Practice in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study is sequel to “Trends in the Development of Alternative Theatre Practice: The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria Example”. Unarguably, development in trends in the practice of Alternative Theatre in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria has been established from the foregoing study to have been dictated and directed by emergent constraints/limitations in the process. It is this transitional development, therefore, which was initiated on the platform of the Samaru Project, and then progressed into the Community Theatre, that ultimately gave rise to Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA], a Non Governmental Organisation [NGO] that is not, however, bound by the university thrust to work with communities, using theatre as a tool for development. This study, therefore, focuses on Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA] as a further dimension in trends of Alternative Theatre practice in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, to examine its role in the vanguard of Theatre for Development in a culturally pluralistic nation like Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance, Further Dimension, Trends, Alternative Theatre

Introduction

Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA] is a full-fledged Non Governmental Organisation [NGO] which is not bound by the university thrust to work with communities, using theatre as a tool for development; its emphasis being communication and development through alternative means for the rural and urban populace. The organisation which is a branch of Union of African Popular Theatre Alliance [UAPTA] – an off-shoot of International Popular Theatre Alliance [IPTA] – was inaugurated in March 1989 in a workshop sponsored by Canadian University Services Overseas [CUSO]. NPTA has its principal organisational and operative base in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and is mostly manned by the ‘collective’ in the University, with representatives at the zones. Considering Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA] as a development in trends in the practice of Alternative Theatre in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria, emphasis on this study will centre on

examining its role in the vanguard of Theatre for Development in a culturally pluralistic nation like Nigeria.

The Role of Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA]

As an initiative in this solemn task of examining the role of NPTA, the researcher will be letting Professor Oga Steve Abah who happens to be the foundation president of the organisation to guide us.

“I see several roles for NPTA in National Development. First of all I think that one of the problems of Development in Nigeria is the participation by the people at whom development projects are targeted. Development planning and implementation which are often done by the bureaucrats and technocrats nearly always grumble as a consequence. The role of NPTA in this regard are[sic] twofold: One it should identify and cooperate with grassroot organisation working as change agents within their communities. This will encourage enlightenment and participation. Secondly, the NPTA has as one of its programmes theatre for development workshops. Each workshop should discuss development problems of selected communities. Such workshops will provide the forum for members of NPTA and the communities to share ideas on, discuss the communities’ problems. Overall these workshops are meant to suggest levels of collaboration between the communities and appropriate agencies. It is also to suggest solutions, where possible, to the problems”. (*Networker*, 1989, p. 31)

In carrying out the above mentioned roles, Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NPTA] is also projected to forge a profitable relationship with other development organisations/agencies in a good working partnership. One level of this relationship is at the community level where it is expected to cooperate with grassroot organisations functioning as base groups in carrying out community development. The other level in the relationship is at the national level. In the latter regard, the collaboration between Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance and the defunct Mass Mobilisation for Social and Economic Recovery [MAMSER] in its Community Theatre project is worthy of mention, though not without its limitations. This collaboration became necessary as government came to realise “the problems of isolated development planning and the need for involvement by the grassroots in debating not only development projects but also the politics of development” (*Networker* Vol. 1, p. 1). Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance has also forged a profitable working relationship with Canadian University Services Overseas [CUSO] operating in Nigeria among others. The collaboration with the Development Research Centre [DRC] of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, whose work in Nigeria is being housed and coordinated from the Theatre for Development Centre [TFDC] – the research arm of NPTA – in ABU, Zaria is also testimony in the above regard. TFDC’s mission is geared towards promoting participatory development through the use of TFD, and other research and communication

strategies; while aiming to build the capacity of non-governmental organisations [NGOs], community-based organisations [CBOs], women's groups and institutions through training, research, community outreach workshops and publications (Abah, 2003, p. xi). Abah further notes that the publication, *Geographies of Citizenship in Nigeria*, is "a major output" of "its first major activity", that of researching on 'Citizenship Participation and Accountability', to dissect the different aspects of citizenship question in Nigerian polity.

The researcher considers the foregoing background necessary as it will help to direct our consciousness in keeping track with the underlying indices that has shaped this particular epoch in the discourse of trends in the development of Alternative Theatre practice in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria and to appreciate the more, the inherent *process* at this stage of its development; because as earlier stated, the emphasis on trends in Alternative Theatre development has always been on the accompanying *process* of the emerging trends, *process* that has always conditioned and directed such trends as well as their various transitional and evolutional outcome. Considering these transitional and evolutional outcome on the background of development in trends so far from the Samaru Project and later Community Theatre, Abah (2008, p. 87) informs us, therefore, that:

"On the bases of operating an NGO, we've been able to work with two communities and go beyond the two weeks of the theatre project within the community to be able to source fund for them to actually put in place project. ... one of those communities is Kwanga in Plateau State where a multi-purpose grinding machine was provided for them by the Canadian High Commission. The same thing was done in a community in Benue State, and if you read my book, *Performing life: Case Studies in the Practice of Theatre for Development*, it's a very detailed analysis of one of such workshops in which the NPTA embarked upon. And it was our own way of saying, beyond the academic theatre practice which has its own limitations, where can we go?"

Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance has also embarked on several other community projects [refer to *Networker*. Vol. 1. n/d, and Vol. 2. No. 1., April, 1997], among which is "Building Bridges: Promoting and Consolidating Peaceful Co-Existence In Nigeria", both in Kaduna and Kano States and which has also been published in *NTQ*, the *New Theatre Quarterly* of the University of Cambridge, May 2007 edition (Kafewo, 2007). These projects which have continued to explore the instrumentality of Alternative Theatre practice in its increasing role as a participatory medium in the "democratisation of the processes of development" (Abah, 2005, p. xiv); especially when 'x-rayed' from its transitional and evolutional phases as development in trends in ABU, Zaria, only reinforces Alternative Theatre as a continuously crystallising process rather than an end product. In this continuum, therefore, Alternative Theatre is not only a *process*, but also a viable communication tool. Two critical issues emerge here. First, it is a process; and second, it is a communication tool. The process of doing theatre, therefore: the process of gathering

information, doing analysis and building a play now becomes an empowering process for the local people; that in doing theatre, you are also developing skills of consciousness, of critical awareness of situations that at the end of the play instead of the people saying they need water, they need electricity if those are their problems, it becomes rather how will they use their resources and their capacity as a people to access those things from whatever available source/s.

This emphasis on Alternative Theatre as a process and a means of communication focuses, therefore, on what Okwori (2008, p. 93) calls “the original ideology that articulated it, the fact of generating education for critical consciousness”; that what now happens in the practice, therefore, is that at the end of every of workshop:

“We end up with what we call CAP, Community Action Plan. And the Community Action Plan is, if the community themselves have articulated five ... six ... ten problems., and the communities themselves have exhaustively discussed these problems, some of these problems are amenable for solution at the local level, some ... beyond the communities to deal with, so these are then separated into categories. The ones that are amenable to solution at the local level, what are the strategies for addressing those things? So the community is then left to the responsibility of ... developing the strategies for dealing with the problem, putting a time frame within which that problem can be addressed, putting those who will be responsible for carrying out the problem, what resources will be needed? What will be the means of verification that such a project has been done? What are the possible costs, and who will bear those costs? So this is simply ... what is called the Community Action Plan”.
(p. 93)

The current trend is such that the methods of research and investigation in the field has experienced a marked shift from other previous experiences and experiments to what he says Abah has effectively tagged, “Methodological Conversation” (94); which means that drama, which in itself is a method takes on other research and other participatory methodologies. In other words, there are other methodologies which will have to link with drama to produce a more effective result. So now instead of just drama alone, drama is now cohabiting and collaborating and partnering with Participatory Learning and Action, PLA, or PRA, Participatory Rural Appraisal which are a body of tools meant for action research; so that a mixture of both drama and PRA now provides a more comprehensive and more effective provocation of community consciousness. The implication, therefore, is that while NPTA adopts “methodological conversation” as a research method, analysis of data from the research, rehearsals, play productions and post-production discussions still remain integral to the practice, as well as follow-through, all in the bid for the ultimate realisation of Alternative Theatre goals.

Prospect/New Challenges

In February 2008, a conference was convened at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria as a forum to brainstorm on issues that border on Alternative Theatre practice. The conference had brought scholars and practitioners from far and near who among other considerations attempted to appraise the over three decades of the practice in ABU, Zaria nay Nigeria on the background of its inherent and emergent challenges.

Based on the above background, therefore, arises yet the exigent need to attempt a predictive prospect of Alternative Theatre practice in the 21st century against emerging global socio-economic and even technological challenges. To this effect, Okwori (2008); Daniel (2008) are unanimous in locating the new challenge in the global information and communication technology or in other words globalisation, as well as finance/funding. They cite the rapid progression into the internet/GSM generation as posing a great threat to the oral medium and inter-personal relationship of live performance situations in attracting people to them and even in the time they take.

Regina Ode (2008) on her part has viewed the continued negotiation of development through *alternative* theatre for Africa generally in the face of these technological challenges with so much consternation. She cites the fast extinguishing local cultures (which serve as the main tools of operation of this theatre) due to the increasing velocity of globalised information and communication networks as a serious issue of worry. She queries, therefore, to sum up her deep consternation: “What are the chances of TfD negotiating development for Africa [generally] when the very tools of its functionality are being seriously challenged by globalization” (p. 14).

Okwori, however, proposes the need to incorporate such technological devices into the system as a tool in its campaign; and to domesticate the technology and bring it to the service of theatre for development as a possible way of escape; what Daniel rather called “glocalisation” (p. 125).

With regards to the challenge of the global information and communication technology, the researcher also locates documentation as another major challenge that confronts Alternative Theatre practitioners in ABU and the nation at large in the 21st century. The initiated efforts in the past few years at proper documentation of Alternative Theatre activities should be accelerated while embracing these new technologies, and made assessable too to appropriate bodies like conventional and university libraries and other research centres – both in and outside the country – to mention but few.

For Kafewo (2008), the burden to continue to make itself relevant in the face of potential threats, is the greatest challenge of Alternative Theatre in the 21st century, to which he prescribes increased advocacy. Talking from the perspective of a playwright who is weighed down by the burden of society, Yerima (2008) infers that “the twenty first century will still be one for re-encountering sets of predictable and not so predictable social problems within society” for Alternative Theatre; even as he shares some of Owkori and Daniel’s views. He further highlights that “its characteristics therefore will [have] to be consistent with a theatre that is aimed at

probing and correcting social ills within society”; and whose plays “must be better focused ... richer in content, and must be more persuasive in message communication” (p. 6).

Dwelling on ‘development’, which has remained the focal point of Alternative Theatre practice, Yerima advocates for inward reflection on the part of ABU Alternative Theatre practitioners in order to find the basis for socio-political essence in incorporating cultural analysis towards a plausible methodological tool for analysing the process of protecting the forces of changes and development happening not only around them, but the entire nation at large. He calls for an expansion of definition wherein “the word ‘development’ must acquire new meanings”, to “go beyond socio-economic development”, and where ABU Alternative Theatre projects “must embrace politics as a topic [if they have not already] ... to become more ... relevant in the twenty first century”. The projects must also redefine their meaning of ‘culture’ which he locates as “the key to all development” (p. 9). This he says is because, quoting him extensively:

Culture has gone beyond the ‘totality of the way of life of a people’. It has become in recent years, the only remaining element of originality of existence. Cultural differences have themselves become tools for unity. The process of hegemony and counter hegemony have become recognized as tools for development - as products of inter-relationships among peoples. New problems arise through the process of inter-relationships, and so the ABU theatre projects must be ready to assimilate these problems and pass them through its established process of analysis, development of ideas, play making, and performances. The ABU practitioners must be ready to deconstruct and reconstruct old cultural ideas which they think they have perfected over the years, because culture is subjected to constant influence and changes. The practitioners must note that the influences on culture create a form of hybridization with its own peculiarities. And they must therefore be prepared to achieve the basic aims and objectives of the popular theatre practice. (pp. 9 – 10)

On a summary note, the greatest challenge confronting Alternative Theatre practitioners in ABU and Nigeria at large in the 21st century, still guided by Yerima, however, is helping the nation and her citizenry to come to terms with the basis of their political reality given the exigencies of the over fifty years of her independence experience, in which she still gropes in the search for a definition of the meaning of democracy. The gory post-election violence experience in Nigeria in April 2011 polls, in which at least 800 people lost their lives according to an international human rights group, is an eloquent testimony on the import of the above statement. Although the April elections were heralded as among the fairest in Nigeria’s history, but they also were among the bloodiest,” said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. Reason being the unacceptable stance which supporters of a former military ruler and main opposition candidate in the presidential election took over the pronouncement of incumbent president,

Goodluck Jonathan as the winner, in taking to the streets of the largely Muslim Northern region of the country, building barricades and burning properties. One would definitely not agree less that we are still groping in the dark in the search for a definition of the meaning of democracy; and therefore yet to find our political/democratic bearing as a nation in the face of such despicable and most condemnable experience. This really, is a big challenge; which Alternative Theatre in its ever catalysing nature, the researcher believes, also has the potential to dare.

Recommendation/Conclusion

If the nation and its citizenry, therefore, are to be helped by Alternative Theatre practitioners to appropriately dissect the basis of these enumerated socio-political realities, the process of persuasion and action outside of dramatic and theatrical parameters should of necessity be appropriately harmonised and concretised. This is also where the effort of the Theatre for Development Centre [TFDC]'s initiative deserves commendation; it is no doubt a step in the right direction. However, its structures in its noble aim of building the capacity of NGOs and CBOs and other groups and institutions through training, research, community outreach workshops and publications need to be prettily expanded and sustained too. Similar bodies also need to rise from other regions of the nation as to actively collaborate in forging a formidable force in fostering and accelerating the positive tenets of development which this theatre preaches, such that could truly foster a unified march towards the logic and attainment of our collective development aspirations as a nation.

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