

COMMUNITY CHILDREN'S THEATRE AS A STIMULUS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIAN CHILD: THE IGBINEDION UNIVERSITY OKADA SATURDAY PLAYHOUSE IN FOCUS

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Abstract

The twenty-first century Nigerian child is surrounded by global socio-political and economic challenges which require adequate psychological and educational preparations to surmount. The computerized jet age in which she finds herself is filled with as many opportunities as there are challenges; challenges of demolishing the superstructure of moral decadence, poverty and falling standards of education, built by succeeding generations. This paper posits that community theatre, which is participatory in nature, can be used not only for socialization but as an effective tool for the general development of the twenty-first century child. By using the Saturday Playhouse of Igbinedion University, Okada, as paradigm, the paper argues that the basic principles of community theatre are applicable to children's theatre, with substantial benefits to the community children involved. The paper further demonstrates how this community children's theatre is contributing to the general development of young children in Okada community. By replicating this practice across the country, a sustainable national programme of development for the contemporary Nigerian children could readily be evolved.

Introduction

Even though Community Children's Theatre is yet to emerge as a concept distinct from the mainstream Community Theatre, this paper sets out to advocate its prospect as a stimulus for the development of the twenty-first century Nigerian child. The word "community" can be defined as a people with shared beliefs, ideologies and interests, or a people bound together by the same world views and inclinations, whether physically contiguous or not. Theatre, on the other hand, is a term which connotes vision or the place where performance is done, fulfilling the various functions of transmitting information and education, towards engendering psychological growth and socio-political development. Therefore, community theatre can be described as theatre involving a cluster of people in the same geophysical or psychological environment geared towards communal challenges and collective aspirations. To employ the popular democratic parlance, it could further be described as 'a theatre of the people, by the people and for the people.' In line with the principles of democracy, community theatre is the theatre which the people in a community embark upon to talk about their common problems with a view to finding solutions to them.

In addition, community theatre creates awareness and provides didactic entertainment for the members of the community involved. It makes members of the community to be proud of themselves and their culture. While inculcating the feelings of self esteem in the people of the community, it creates general communal awareness and guides both actors and participants back to their historical and cultural roots.

According to theatre history, the origins of theatre can be traced to ancient communal festivals and religious rituals, while the concept of community theatre is a modern development. In Nigeria, community theatre could be traced to the 1960s, in the immediate post-independence period, when Nigerian intellectuals decided to return to their roots and bridge the cultural alienation

which the Europeans had imposed on them. They tried to do this by taking plays back to the communities. At inception, community theatre served as a meeting of "Town and Gown" (Femi Osofisan, 2005: 2). The concept of community children's theatre being advocated can be used to break down socio-cultural barriers among the children of a given community.

Who is a Child?

At this juncture, it is necessary to spell out who a child is. The Child Rights Act of 2003 says that "a child is a person who has not attained the age of 18 years" (<http://64.233.167.104>). Article 2 of Children and Young Persons Act of Eastern, Western and Northern Nigeria classifies a child as a person who has reached fourteen years but is under eighteen years. Further, under the Islamic penal code, a child below seventeen years is not considered an offender punishable as an adult. This is similar to child labour regulations in which a child under fourteen years cannot be convicted of an offence as an adult would. Also, the Matrimonial Clause Act puts the age of maturity at twenty-one as against the statutory eighteen years.

From the above, we can deduce that there are many definitions of a child, considered from different perspectives. However, all are agreed that the child is that very young human species, physically and psychologically vulnerable, yet to attain the age of discretion, needing special protection, support and mentoring. This is the meaning adopted in this paper. Usually, children are still dependent individuals, shielded within a family environment, and going through a process of formation.

At the same time, children are often filled with a lot of weird or creative ideas, with negative or positive results. Although the child can sometimes be foolish and irrational, it is amazing how much greatness lies within her frail personality, waiting to unfold. Hence, we can rightly describe children as the bedrock of a nation's resources, whose unseen potentials can unlock the door to the future greatness of a nation.

Defining Children's Theatre

Children's theatre is conventionally defined as 'theatre of the children, by the children, and for the children.' Although adult facilitators are normally around to guide them, the children are always encouraged to do theatre by themselves, and for fellow children. This is in agreement with Ngozi Udengwu's (2002) assertion that

the bottom line is that children are responsible for what is shown to the audience. Children by themselves go through the entire process of production with adults there to guide them and help them. By this outlook, child drama becomes one aspect of children's theatre (138).

Accordingly, children's theatre is the theatre which teaches and entertains children by making them create their own fantasy world, drawing materials from the realistic adult world around them. Udengwu explains further:

Like democracy, children's theatre demands the spirit of co-existence, collaborative effort, respect for the opinions and ideas of one another, and tolerance. (It is) the theatre, where people work from different angles to arrive at a unified single production, provides a training ground, more than anything else, for the acquisition of this democratic spirit (Udengwu, 2002: 140).

The need for this spectacular method of interaction among the children cannot be over-emphasized. This is because children, apart from being very active, never forget anything that they see or actively take part in. The following words of Aristotle apply to children: "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember.

Involve me and I will understand..." (<http://www.child>). Accordingly, children's theatre is a means of not only making children aware of their world, but involving them in re-creating the world to suit them.

Why Children's Theatre?

The period of childhood is a period of dreams. Children live in a complex world surrounded by adults whose ways they see as ideal and try to emulate. They have wishes and aspirations which are best fulfilled within their world of imagination and fantasy. Often times, their idealistic perception runs counter to the harsh realities of the adult world, which makes children to experience bouts of disappointment and disillusion. Children's Theatre thus becomes the avenue for the fulfilment of their dreams of a better society.

Unlike most western countries, the Nigerian society is not very child-friendly. There is a high level of child abuse, reckless beating in the name of correction, poor educational system, insufficient health facilities, inadequate social exposure, initiation of children into cultic activities, and high rate of procreation of children who are never well catered for. Elsewhere in the world, children are offered good educational opportunities, good protection and adequate health care facilities. Against this contrast, it is obvious that the Nigerian child faces the daunting challenge of survival in the harsh and oppressive Nigerian society. Community Children's Theatre becomes a viable means of collective exploration of the dreams and aspirations of the disillusioned children in a hostile adult environment.

Community Children's Theatre

Community Children's Theatre is, therefore, all about using drama and theatre to help children in various communities to understand their world as well as prepare them for a better tomorrow. It is a democratic process in which children are encouraged to employ the theatre in identifying their peculiar problems and proffering solutions to them.

The Nigerian child is best advised to resort to Community Children's Theatre in coping with the challenges of a nation in transition. The children must be fully involved in the theatrical experience, and not treated merely "as pawns or objects which must be saved from burning buildings" (Iorapuu, 2008: 5). Rudolph Kansese (2008) aptly observes that the twenty-first century child

has been unequivocally overtaken by a new world of machine. He now spends more time watching television, home video, cable, playing video games, browsing the internet and listening to music. The child's life is now at the complete mercy of these gadgets instead of being in charge of himself (10).

The role of these gadgets in promoting immoralities, necessitates that the ethical standard be raised using the same drama and theatre media which have been heavily abused. In fact, Etop Akwang (2001) bemoans the lack of consideration for children in film productions when he says,

this attitude of producing films that cater only for the enjoyment of adult audiences, and without conscious attempts at incorporating the ideals that belong to "child audience" is what we have nominated as "Child-Audience Exclusion" (21).

The foregoing summarizes the neglect of children's interests in all theatrical performances, not only in films. Indeed, most performances are no more than mere

representations of glossy middle-class temperament, appetites, choices and decadence. Love-making, money-making philanthropy, "fraudsterism", child abuse, drug abuse, the evil of poverty and the power of wealth, evangelization, marital infidelity, and law-agency

brutality...these are agencies that rarely admit or engross children (Akwanga, 22 – 23).

This is an apt summation of the unhealthy theatrical environment to which the contemporary child is exposed, necessitating the need for them to do their own theatre. The paper shall now focus on the specific experience of the Children's Theatre at the Igbinedion University, Okada.

Igbinedion University Saturday Playhouse

Igbinedion University Okada, founded in 1999, is the first private University in Nigeria. It is a citadel of learning where pioneering excellence is the ultimate goal. The Department of Theatre Arts was established in 2005 with only a female student who was later joined by another female student, both of whom graduated in 2009. The department, however, now boasts of fourteen students.

From inception the absence of Theatre Arts activities was obvious resulting in the lack of theatre culture by the campus students and the Okada community as a whole. The establishment of Theatre Arts department has been able to usher in great social changes on the campus and its environs. One such programme that has contributed immensely to this improved social life is the Saturday Playhouse.

The I.U.O. Saturday Playhouse, facilitated by the present writer, is a wonderful and uplifting theatre which exposes Okada school children to the various arts of the theatre. Initially, this project was an internal one, providing improved social life to children on campus. But later, the little project grew into a Community Children's Theatre where children from the village and children of the elites interact to learn about one another and make theatre for themselves.

Furthermore, the Saturday Playhouse which lasts for three hours from 9.00am to 12.00 noon every Saturday provides fun and entertainment for the children and is committed to providing more than just drama to the young school children. The Playhouse

provides things like dance, visual arts, opera, and quiz to the children, to aid their intellectual growth. It also serves as a means of helping children to understand their world and circumstances, develop their creative abilities, and also provide opportunity for interaction among the children from within and outside the University community. In addition, the activities of the Saturday Playhouse offer the children opportunity for self-expression, creativity and preparedness to be able to understand the events in their immediate community.

Again, while serving as a welcome relief for parents to engage in other productive ventures while the children are away, the Saturday Playhouse acts as a discovery ground for young budding talents who come in very useful for children's roles in Theatre Arts departmental productions. The Playhouse has had tremendous impact on the "children's cognitive and affective development" (<http://www.ericdigest.org/2004-1/drama.htm>). By making the children dramatize their experiences and other familiar stories, they learn a lot of morals which often prove indelible in the children's minds. This complements the responsibilities of parents and teachers in the training of these young, impressionable minds.

Additionally, the interaction between the rural children and the children of the elites makes room for the promotion of effective linguistic communication and the building of self-confidence in the children. By this interaction of 'town and gown' at this level, children from both sides learn about the virtues of tolerance, charity and equality.

Again, this interaction also opens the eyes of the rural community children to their deprivations, which subsequently stirs up the aggressive desire for a change of their situations. They question why they lack the basic things of life, and begin to appreciate the social injustice inherent in the system. With this awareness, such children will grow up determined to have a better Nigeria. Theatre is a potent tool for social transformation as

confirmed by many experts such as Emmanuel Emesialu (2005) who observes as follows:

Several authorities have advocated the use of theatre as a tool of social transformation because it is a veritable means of getting men to reflect socio-economic conditions and consequently initiate programme that would pave the way for meaningful human development (157).

This is true as much of theatre for children as that of the adults.

Language and Communication at the Saturday Playhouse

The language of a community is their means of identity. Language, which includes verbal and non-verbal modes of communication, is a binding factor in any community such that even though one is not a native of a community, one's ability to speak the people's language, automatically endears one to the people of that community.

In order to beat the age-long language challenge, the Saturday Playhouse employs the use of both polished and Pidgin English depending on the target audience, drawn from the immediate Okada community, many of whom communicate in these languages. Nevertheless, there is a great utilization of the people's cultural idioms and other para-linguistic elements like

body movement, facial expression, gestures (kinesis), spatial placement, special configuration, spatial relationships, floor pattern (proxemics), colour, costume and make up (adornments) (Bakare, 2002:146).

The need for integrating these para-linguistic elements cannot be over-emphasized. This is because, people only identify with a message that meets their expectations. As Adeseye (cited in Bakare, 2002:143) observes,

People tend to reject the message when their expectations are not met or when they are unable to connect the language and conversations used (143).

This observation of the nature of communication in the conventional adult theatre is equally true of theatre for children. Hence, because the Saturday Playhouse uses the 'people's language' the community is able to relate to its performances, whether in the market square, Okada town, or even within the university community. The Playhouse functions, more or less, like a Children's Community Theatre that has found ready acceptance among the children of the Okada community, holding equal fascination for some adult members as well.

Prospects and Challenges

The Igbinedion University Saturday Playhouse has been serving the numerous functions of:

- (a) being a means of fostering children's personality growth and self esteem;
- (b) acting as a forum for the creativity and the development of the spirit of team work across the different social classes;
- (c) serving as a medium for refining the children of the community and blending them together;
- (d) serving as a problem-solving workshop where the language and communication skills of the children are developed while inculcating in them the feelings of empathy; and,
- (e) serving as a ready reservoir for children actors.

The prospects for this Community Children's theatre are quite high. These include the following:

- (a) It gives the participating children healthy social exposure.
- (b) It equips the children with the skills and knowledge needed to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.
- (c) It enhances imagination and productivity among the children.
- (d) It produces talented children who would ultimately become the artists of the future.

But the challenges can sometimes be quite daunting. These include:

- (a) Shortage of adult facilitators to help in controlling the growing number of children;
- (b) Lack of full cooperation by parents and guardians who still keep their children or wards away;
- (c) lack of adequate funds to provide the children with all the aids needed for better productivity; and,
- (d) language barriers posed by the differences in social backgrounds of the participating children.

On balance, however, the Igbinedion University Saturday Playhouse is serving effectively as a Community Children's Theatre within Okada, a village that is fast transforming into a university town.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the challenges of the twenty-first century, the Nigerian child needs adequate preparation to ensure full development into a worthy and responsible citizen. Children are like today's rejected stone which would become tomorrow's cornerstone. As future leaders, the quality of service they may be able to provide tomorrow is dependent upon the quality of education they receive today. Therefore, the nation should commit substantial resources to

the development of the child. Since children learn better through what they see and take part in, then community children's theatre would be of immense help in the development of the child.

This paper therefore recommends that all primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in the country should have Drama and Theatre in their curriculum with great emphasis on Creative Dramatics and Children's Theatre. Conscious efforts should be made to integrate children of different social classes to nurture a more enlightened citizenry for future national development. For children resident within the campuses of tertiary institutions, the old concept of merging 'town and gown' should, therefore, be adopted as a positive step in blending the country's future leaders through a well-articulated programme of children's theatre, which is fully entrenched into the nation's educational policy.

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