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Business Men in the Arts and the Need for Empowerment of Nollywood Actors and Actresses

Abstract

The advent of “businessmen” in the arts is not a strange phenomenon to warrant the hues and cries over the exploitation of the artists by producers and marketers in Nigeria. Film is a scion of the theatre. The film, a more glamorous vine branch of theatre has overwhelmed the popularity of theatre obliterating the memory of theatre’s palmy days. However, the “business” value of this screen phenomenon is unclear to the practitioners of the arts to take advantages of its financial prosperity by producing their own works or negotiating better financial deals with their business magnate producers. This paper takes into consideration similar situations in showbusiness history. It calls attention of the Nollywood artists’ naivety in appreciating only the psychical benefits of their talents and neglecting the good financial advantage their skills attract. This, the producers are exploiting as the New York theatre syndicate and the Shubert Brothers did in the 1890s and early 1900s. The fact that artists are inept in the “business” of the art and are therefore living a subsistence life instead of opulence is the focus of this paper. The way out is for artist to articulate the ‘business’ in the arts, come together as union, negotiate commensurate fees with producers or raise producers among themselves. By this effort, they would attain good life standards as their counterparts in Hollywood and Bollywood.

Artists and Financial Rewards

Gail Plummer in his book *The Business of Show Business* painfully observes the financial ineptitude of the artists by saying:

That those truly interested in show business should pay more attention to its commonly neglected financial aspect is fully attested

by the plight of the professional theatre today. With the advent of television, thousands of theatre ventures over the nation are having additional worries. Some have failed not because they have poor products, not because theatre is outmoded, but because important phases of business management, public relations, and promotion are neglected. Competition is too keen. Although many legitimate theatres have long been folded and forgotten, it is likely that the mistakes and pitfalls can be avoided if theatre people of today are willing to open their eyes to what has happened face the facts. Facts are hard things to face.

In capitalist and democratic countries of the advanced civilizations in the world, arts are generously supported financially and properly housed. Subsidies are provided periodically to registered organizations as long as they maintain open balance sheet every year. Where there existed over-budget spending on legitimate events, reimbursement is often provided. This is generally applicable to non-profit making organization. But this is not denying the fact that profit making or commercial enterprises are denied of corporate support and sponsorship. For profit making art organizations, productions are always thrown open to the public as shareholding enterprise. Individuals buy shares and are paid dividend.

The Good Book says that "money is the answer to all problems". Artists often neglect the financial aspects of their profession, leaving it entirely in the hands of the speculative and voracious producer/marketers whose main interest is 'money', 'profit' and exploitative business. The naïve artists whose main objective is finding opportunity to display their talents to receive psychological and rebounding psychical remuneration is often regarded as a dud or pawn on a chess board of business. But the modern economy has passed this stage of financial neglect. Example of this is in Hollywood where one contract for a single production can attract millions of dollars to a single artist. Bollywood artists of India are equally thriving, while Nollywood artists wallow in penury.

Theatre, live theatre, is the legitimate theatre because it stages a live performance on stage in the presence of living human audience at a given venue and at a given prize with visible and touchable environment. Live theatre is the progenitor of tape recorded radio,

television, film and video programmes. The advantage of modern technology provides means of motioning animate and inanimate objects in any giving environment, simulating nature in her utmost beauty, reality and authenticity. This could be viewed at any place where their electronically operated machines are available. Television, radio, video and film have gained predominant power over the theatre and have gradually and aggressively too, pushed live theatre into oblivion.

Nollywood Artists Financial Dilemma

In the Guardian newspaper interview of Wednesday April 21, 2010 page 52, Shaibu Husseini asked the leader of Del-York International about their mission in Nigeria. The leader, Linus Idahosa, said;

Del-York International is a creative industries development company. We are precisely involved in providing cost effective solutions to the human capital problems plaguing the creative industries, with special focus on the film industry. We believe that Nigeria deserves a world-class movie industry²

By today's rating, Nigeria is fastly approaching world-class movie production standard. Movie making has become a great income/revenue generating business in Nigeria next to Petroleum. Film making has become so attractive, that almost every street in urban centres are now operating film Schools. Nigeria is rated No 2 in prolific production of films in quantity and not quality and every partakers in film are having good time and financial gains, except the majority of the artists. However, few most creative and imaginative artists who are hard bargainers are financially well compensated. Like its live theatre progenitor, film actors and actresses live on borrowed robes and outstentatious living while their Idumota and Onisha Marketers and producers live in enviable affluence.

Nigerian film artists have improved tremendously in their acting styles and are excelling in costume decency, décor and interactive communication within a production. These have given them intercontinental recognition for the leader of Del-York, Idahosa to say: "For example, it is on the premise of the philosophy of correction

that Del-York took it upon itself to facilitate human capital transformation in our country's movie sector **by inviting** one of the most respected film schools in the world to train our people. And I am talking about the New York Film Academy which is one of the most prestigious hands-on training grounds for film producers, actors, actresses, script-writers, cinematographers and all other film sector professionals in the world...."

I trained at the Pittsburgh Film Institute and Point Park College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States of America and understand fully the implications and consequences of Del-York objectives. When the film artists have received better training and are well groomed in global outlook in film production, would they remain actors to receive pittance from the rapacious marketers and producers? The financial comfort and comportment of the Nollywood artists is the core issue in this paper.

The Artists Management

The performing artistes/artists in Nigeria have a chequered career to confront in a nation which has no stable policy or philosophy on any national issue. Nigeria is a nation that constantly everses her parliamentary and statutory decisions. Despite the glamour of the film industry and show business in general, Nigeria artists must not only be creative and sound in training, they must also learn the arts of buoyant economic survival in a most inclement economy such as prevalent in Nigeria.

Nigeria is famous for precocious development in every aspects of human and material endeavours. Ask Nigeri why she took massive loans all about to establish projects for which she has no competence or servicing personnels and maintenance culture. Ask what has happened to Aladja, Ajaokuta, Osogbo Steel Rolling Mills. What about petroleum Refineries? The Toll Gats, the National Arts Theatre, Nigerian Road Network, Educational System, Securities, Railways, Airlines and Nigerian Film Institute, Jos, are issues in focus to determine Nigeria's economic and political sincerity, commitment and focus.

The artists/artistes and writers are seers, prophets and unappreciated legislators who have every endowment to positively change the society. Theatre and film, its allied industry are onerous

responsibility of rebranding Nigeria positively. But before this could be done, the artists must be judiciously managed and empowered. This would lead us to arts management travelogue in human history. The world has experienced different types of civilizations such as listed by Russel Ash in his book *Whitaker's World of Facts*³ i.e. Mesopotamia, Sumaria, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Empire of Alexander the Great, Chinese empire, Roman empire, Mayan empire, Inca empire, Aztec empire, Ottoman empire, Mogul empire and British empire. All these empires had their forms of entertainments and artists. The artists were efficiently managed in a way that made their continuity and fame possible. In this instance, we would go back in history, to the very root of the modern world civilization – Greece of the 5th Century B.C. Of the Greek artists/performers, Sir William Tarn and G.T. Griffith noted:

In their palmy days, the Dionysiac artists were almost an independent state, sending and receiving ambassadors; on them were lavished honours, privileges, immunity, safe conducts; they were subsidized by Kings and cities and the Athenian association had the right to wear the purple; it would seem that it was better to amuse people than to govern them.⁴

The honour and prestige accorded the Greek artists/artistes were so overwhelming. John Allen in his book – *A History of Theatre in Europe* also confirms the Tarn and Griffith assertions above by saying:

Such was their growing prestige that companies of actors not only toured extensively in Attica but increasingly throughout the Greek world. The more distinguished were granted diplomatic status and carried out negotiations between one city and another. Alexander was particularly enthusiastic about actors and musicians and organized contests and festivals on a lavish scale in the course of his aggressive perambulations.

.....The result of this enormous and widespread demand for actors and musicians was that performing artists were obliged to organize themselves. The first of these guilds was known as the Artists of Dionysos. It was formed in about 280 BC and based in Athens. It was followed by others. Membership included not only actors of tragedy, comedy, and satyr but singers, instrumentalists,

rhapsodes, and bards, and those who trained the choruses.⁵

The ancient artistes were well organized and respected by all and sundry. Their powerful and effective human relations strategies facilitated their comfort. But is this true in Nigeria artists? Particularly how well-organized and united are the Nollywood artists to have the effrontery to demand for better financial provision? There are signs of affluence all around them to boost their ego in production. Producers carefully choose magnificent locations and gardened mansions, provide sumptuous and befitting costumes, sophisticated weapons, posh cars and fair complexioned ladies and handsome guys to embellish their productions. Through these, they curry favour of audience so as to make much profit. Actors live in larger than life affluence on screen which contradicts their natural impecunious life. This is the true situation of live theatre, but film, with all its wealth attracting appurtenances is expected to make screen actors wealthier than stage actors. Certainly, theatre is a world of make – believe, but it should not be taken beyond limit. Nollywood artists must develop a sense of financial acumenism as they strive daily to perfect their artistry.

In films, Nollywood artists live in mansions, wear sumptuous and fashionable clothes, shoes, jewelries and ride posh cars which belie their normal living standard. Let them realize that the time of ignorance has passed and it is now time for them to stand up for their financial rights. Let them also weave round themselves aura of honour and respectability for their producers, and employers to grant them commensurate social and financial ratings.

Although William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, in their book *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* said;

We did not undertake to discover a panacea which would promise to cure the arts of their financial ills. Rather, we hoped to be able to specify objectively the alternatives facing the arts and to describe their costs and the burdens they require society to shoulder,⁶

It is the responsibility of this paper to take the Nollywood artists through the woods and labyrinth of financial enslavement to financial freedom and prosperity.

Significantly, what determines the fee paid to artists are various i.e. amount of money invested by producer, break-even-point, quality and number of actors employed, production cost etc, yet a good manager ought to envisage these and create room for equitable financial remuneration for the artists. Baumol and Bowen in *The Arts Management Handbook* (1970:11-12) propose "reduction in the rate of increase in their unit costs by permitting some deterioration in the quality of their product" which would enthrone shoddiness in production and which to me is very unacceptable.⁷ This is because Nollywood is often criticized for lack of quality and standard in productions.

Producer as Art Manager

The History of Producer or Arts Manager began from the 5th century Greek civilization with the appointment of a CHOREGUS to sponsor dramatic performances during the festival of Dionysos in Athens. Peter D. Arnott describes the "Choregus" as a "backer" – a wealthy citizen whose larger income rendered him liable for special duties. It was his task to pay for the training and equipping of the chorus.⁸ I had earlier referred to the fame of the artists and formation of the Union of Dionysiac artists during Alexander the Great's Hellenistic era. Similar things had occurred in subsequent eras. The duties of producers and managers have since not changed. Producers/managers have always maintained the position and responsibility of "businessmen" in the arts. They have always provided money and coordinated artists and material where withal.

Stephen Langley in *Producers on Producing* 1976 noted the sameness of Producer and Manager by saying:

The differentiation, perhaps, between a producer and a manager, to me, is semantics. How can you do one without the other, or how can you get to be one without having been the other? Managing what? Managing people? Managing a product, which is the ultimate play (film in this instance)? Managing the theatre, the props, or whatever – they're all interrelated. They have a very direct relationship to the actors. They also have a very direct relationship to the audience.⁹

Today film consumers and critics are crying against the Idumota, Lagos producers and marketers for one crime or the other. Among them is monopoly of film production because they have money and they employ artists. Poor remuneration of artists and dishonesty in declaring the number of films produced are parts of the charges. The public always forget that making money in their investments in movies is the ultimate aim why these businessmen are in movie industry. They play all sorts of games and tricks to see that their films hit the market with a bang and make a hundred percent profit. Can we blame them? Particularly when we consider the rate at which films are pirated and the frequency of the violation of Nigerian copyright laws. The dues to Censor's Board, Insurance and other licensing agencies turned film producers into all shades of 'Shyllocks' and 'Scroogies'. Yet the Nollywood artists must survive buoyantly to remain happy and maintain high professional morale which conduces standard.

A peep into history reveals that in the 19th and early 20th centuries A.D., there existed hardcore businessmen in the arts who set the world of show business aglow and monopolized the trade earning all the profits. They promoted theatre most significantly in America and Europe.

The likes of Sam Nixon, Fred Zimmerman, Al Hayman, Charles Frohman, Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger cannot be easily forgotten. These men formed a Theatrical Syndicate in New York in 1896, which controlled all provincial theatre buildings and stock companies. Any performing troupes, playwrights, directors, and technicians who did not come under this management syndicate was suffocated out of business. Stephen Langley in his book *Theatre Management in America* gives us insight into their business monopoly thus:

Less interested in standards of production than in making large profits, these gentlemen set out to gain absolute booking control over the nation's theatres and, within a few years, succeeded.¹⁰

Much as other theatre formations attempted to break and overthrow the syndicate, they failed woefully. Langley further noted that "David Belasco also waged a valorous campaign against the

monopoly, but the people who finally did manage to topple the syndicate were the Shubert Brothers"¹¹ ironically, the Shubert Brothers were not true liberators because they proved to be more tyrannical as Langley noted:

It should be added that while the Syndicate and the Shuberts certainly took advantage of a business opportunity and milked it for every penny it was worth, they did not create opportunity.....They simply grasped an opportunity that few actor – managers saw or cared about.¹²

With the above citations we discover that whatever the Idumota, Lagos, Producers and Marketers of film are doing is not a strange crucifying phenomenon. It had existed in the history of show business development. What the professional or practising Actor-Managers did not see – (the business in show business), the eagle eyes of the speculative businessmen saw and utilized.

The challenge of the future for the Nollywood artists is to stand up for their rights through formation of collective bargaining arrangement or unionized actions. In the alternative, let producers and marketers sprout out among the artists to pursue a profitable future for their career. We in the Association of Theatre Arts Practitioners (ANTP), Oyo State, attempted this in 1984 and succeeded. When Governor Omololu Olunloyo's government refused to pay our fees for drama serials transmitted on the state television, we organized an ad hoc union when negotiation with the management failed.

Our taskforce mounted guard at BCOS gate to prevent further exploitation by using amateur theatre groups to produce television drama. The attempt worked and we were paid our entitlements. We also proposed increament in payment per episode. May the spirit of Isola Ogunsola rest peacefully in his grave. He was the ANTP Vanguard leader. If the Nollywood actors and actresses come together and agree on certain procedural channel of monitoring contracts with Idumota, Onisha, Enugu etc producers and marketers, they would obtain fair treatment and fees commensurate with their skills and expertise. This is the only way to attain the high social profile and professional prestige of Hollywood and

Bollywood.

Finally, the Nollywood artists should endeavour to establish a Newsletter or magazine where they can improve their knowledge, learn more about other artists in the world so that they can compete favourably. The present growth is in fit and start motion, unsteady and unsure of the future.

Perhaps, it is this that makes Hyginus Ekwuazi, a film scholar to observe thus:

So much is happening in the Nigerian Film Industry. There is so much turn-over. But then the argument is would this be sustained. And at what point would quality meet quantity. Somewhere along the road they should meet..... He blamed the dip in production of quality films to proliferation of the industry by inexperienced practitioners"¹³

But the blame of quality not matching up with quantity would continue because of the profit emphasis of the "Businessmen in the arts" whose concern is not quality but the embellishment of film, studded with star artists, spectacles and aesthetics that boost their profit margins. Unless artists form unions and employment methods are articulated and regulated, inexperienced practitioners would be employed as cost saving devices as earlier suggested by Baumol and Bowen. Artists should be encouraged to read information journals and magazines such as *Film and Video* (Nigeria's Authoritative Film and Video Journal), *Film Nigeria* (An International Journal of the Nigerian Film), *National Standard*, *Movietainment*, *TV Guide* etc. Until information is cheaply accessible and artists are properly educated about the immense viability of film and video industry, the "businessmen" in the arts would continue to trample on the financial rights of all categories of artist.

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