

## THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT IN EFFECTIVE ACTOR-AUDIENCE COMMUNICATION

*Joseph Oghenetega Umukoro*

‘Good audiences,’ says Brian Hansen (1991:9), ‘get good shows.’ Conversely, it can be stated that good shows make good audiences. For, just as a good audience will inspire the actors to give of their best, a good performance will in turn bring out the best response in the audience. Whichever way one looks at it, a successful theatre depends largely on skilful management, on the ability to create effective actor-audience interaction for effective communication. Theatre, at its best, involves efficient collaboration between the stage and the auditorium, which are under the control of two different forms of management. As with any good business enterprise, the ultimate success of theatre, whether in the educational or professional scene, depends on sound management. There are as many definitions of management as there are those who care to define it, and there is no need to belabour the issue in this article. However, for the purpose of our discussion, we can broadly define management as the application of the basic principles of human interaction to resolve problems of human relationship in any endeavour that requires one form of collaboration or the other, towards the successful attainment of predetermined objectives. In a practical sense, management is an essential activity, which involves the coordination of individual efforts for the achievement of group goals. Since planning is at the core of all forms of management, failure to plan, as the popular saying goes, invariably means planning to fail. Applied specifically to the theatre, management has many roles to play at the different stages of planning, production, performance and appraisal of any theatrical enterprise, with a focus on the welfare of both the audience and the performers. To that extent, the two complementary areas of production – the stage and the auditorium – fall under different forms of management, working in harmony towards achieving the intangible end-product of theatre which is performance.

A clarification of theatre management and stage management as different but related concepts is apposite at this point for a clearer appreciation of the issues at stake. Theatre management



is a subset of business management which adopts basic business principles in the running of theatre as a business enterprise. For, whether in the professional or educational theatre, the business of theatre is to sustain itself through the application of sound business ideals. Even when, as in the educational theatre, the profit motive is subordinated to the instructional goal, the production should seek, at worst, to break even and keep the theatre afloat. In the professional scene, which is largely profit-driven, theatre management involves the careful packaging and aggressive marketing of theatre as a form of social service guided by peculiar economic principles. Choice of play, the very first step in a theatre production, requires the informed advice of the theatre manager as to its feasibility and suitability or otherwise, through a careful appreciation of the potential market constituted by the target audience. After a play has been decided upon, the theatre manager embarks on the crucial stage of realistic budgeting, coordinating the financial demands of the different production personnel, against the minimum projected income. This requires the application of the basic economic principle of projected minimum income outstripping projected maximum expenditure if a reasonable profit margin is to be achieved. In the educational theatre, it is the business of the theatre manager to seek alternative sources of funding through subvention, sponsorship, donation and other philanthropic gestures, to ensure the successful realisation of the educational project.

The next crucial stage in the management of a particular production is marketing, which comes through publicity – creating public awareness for the production in the making. The aim of theatre management is to achieve maximum impact at minimum cost in terms of time, money and materials. In publicising the play, therefore, the theatre manager must seek to achieve maximum publicity at minimum expense, taking advantage of all possible outlets of free or cheap, but nonetheless effective, publicity. Well-designed and fully informative posters and handbills should be made and strategically distributed for maximum reach and impact. Aggressive publicity goes beyond creating public awareness for a production – it must endeavour to fill up the auditorium by attracting, enticing and encouraging as many people as possible to see the show through all sorts of publicity gimmicks. The audience turnout on the first night of production is a reliable index for



assessing the degree of success attained by the publicity crew under the supervision of the theatre manager. Audience turnout on subsequent nights of performance will inevitably be affected by the impact which that first performance makes on the first set of audience, because a good show has its way of advertising itself after the first night. Since it is the theatre manager who informs and invites members of the public to the show, the audience as a whole are invariably the personal guests of the theatre manager who directs the house manager to take adequate care of them.

House management, one of the two points of focus of this article, is thus the most sensitive aspect of theatre management as it involves the physical interaction with members of the audience whose patronage is crucial for the survival of theatre. In discussing the place of management in effective actor-audience relationship, therefore, the house manager has a critical role to play as he accepts full responsibility for the convenience of the audience and ensuring a conducive environment. It is only when the audience is made to feel secure and comfortable that it will be able to give full attention to the theatre event happening on stage. The auditorium must be managed in such a way that it is free from any type of distraction, and members of the audience should develop a sense of community, being taken through a common theatrical experience. A good house manager is, in effect, an audience engineer who continually services and maintains the house facilities, and regulates the house temperature in the course of a performance, making the needs, safety and comfort of the audience his utmost priority. Professor Chris Nwamuo's Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Calabar on March 30, 2006, focuses on audience engineering which he defines as

The scientific and skilful designing, organizing and implementing of a programme of action aimed at winning large audiences to a named event, and ensuring their comfort and pleasure during the event (Nwamuo, 2006:18).

The total welfare of the audience is thus the ultimate focus of audience engineering. Professor Nwamuo (2006) comments further on the attributes and psychological effects of sound catering conditions as follows:



A co-ordinated and well-organised catering, comprising preparing the venue, providing an intermission, catering to audience needs, will re-assure them of the concerns of the theatre organization and its understanding of human psychology. They will then come to the theatre ready to enjoy the event and socialize with others (33-34).

The role of the house manager in creating this enabling environment cannot be over-emphasized. He should possess a good sense of judgement, and be capable of handling emergency situations with authority and dispatch. In addition, he must be resourceful, hardworking, dedicated and polite, but firm and decisive in maintaining law and order in the auditorium. With a well-managed auditorium, the audience will be well disposed to stimulate the actors to a great performance on the stage, which is under a different management.

Stage management is the critical complement of house management in a theatrical production. It is the art of ensuring a smooth performance without let or hindrance, effectively coordinating the activities of the cast and crew onstage and backstage. According to Effiong Johnson (2001:15), 'Stage management is the creation, maintenance and utilization of the stage environment in a manner conducive to the realization of the theatrics of a given production.' The stage manager is the right-hand man of the artistic director in a production, keeping records of attendance at rehearsals, actors' blockings and other directorial decisions, and capable of taking charge of rehearsals and performances in the absence of the director. In effect, he is the head of the production personnel to whom cast and crew are directly responsible, on or behind the stage. As the director's responsibility ends with the dress-and-technical rehearsal, the stage manager becomes, in effect, a surrogate director during actual performances, taking full charge of proceedings on and off the stage, and maintaining the artistic integrity of the production while it lasts. His prompt book, which serves as a record of all artistic decisions taken at rehearsals, also contains attendant register, cast list and production crew, master cue list and other relevant information on the production at hand. A carefully organised and well-managed stage, not only saves time between scenes and forestalls unfortunate mishaps, but also has a motivating effect on the actors, who are encouraged to give of their



best. On the other hand, a chaotic stage, undue delay in scene changes, or noisy and riotous backstage, are all clear indications of failure on the part of the stage manager. Apart from a high sense of self-discipline, good human relationship and a capacity for crisis management are indispensable qualities of the successful stage manager. It is also his duty to obey and enforce all codes of conduct relating to the theatre, whether onstage or offstage. A good grasp of stage geography and different stage types – the proscenium, the thrust, the arena or theatre in the round, etc. – is a necessary condition for effective stage management since a stage manager should understand the terrain in which he is to operate. This, according to J. R. Taylor (1970:262), refers to the area of a theatre, within or outside a permanent structure, where acting takes place.. As Denys Ladsun (quoted by Judith Cook, 1976:45) observes, different stages offer their peculiar challenges to the stage manager who must be ready to cope with them as the need arises. The stage is critical to an actor because, according to Benedetti (1976:41), it is 'his space, his environment and his world. The space of the stage is not only an environment for his work, it is also one of the materials with which he creates.' This underscores the need for the effective management of the stage to get the best out of the actor as well as the spectator.

In view of the fact that theatre is a two-way communication between the stage and the auditorium, both the stage manager and the theatre manager must work in concert to provide the enabling environment for effective communication. Any valid definition of the theatre always takes cognisance of the presence of the audience. Therefore, everything must be done to ensure their maximum comfort, especially the captive audience of the physical theatre. As defined by Peter Brook (1968), theatre, in its simplest sense, is the utilisation of an empty space by the actor and spectator. He writes:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged (11).

He goes on to identify four types of theatre – the Deadly, the Holy, the Rough and the Immediate – each of which refers, not to a physical theatre as such, but to the fluid relationship between the



stage and the auditorium, capable of changing from one moment to another. 'Sometimes within one single moment, the four of them, Holy, Rough, Immediate and Deadly, intertwine' (Brook, 1968:11). While the Deadly Theatre is most undesirable, the remaining three are capable of generating positive reactions from the audience, offering peculiar challenges to both the theatre manager and his stage counterpart. The Holy Theatre, defined as 'The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible' (Brook, 1969:47), is capable of evoking the greatest climactic response from an enthusiastic audience. According to Brook (1968), 'there are two possible climaxes to a theatre experience.'

There is the climax of celebration in which our participation explodes in stamping and cheering, shouts of hurrah and the roar of hands, or else, at the other end of the stick, the climax of silence – another form of recognition and appreciation for an experience shared (52).

Similarly, Jerzy Grotowski (1968:32) defines theatre fundamentally as 'what takes place between spectator and actor', while regarding 'holiness' in the theatre as an unattainable ideal to which all theatre practitioners should aspire. He comments rhetorically as follows:

Is holiness therefore an unreal postulate? I think it is just as well founded as that of movement at the speed of light. By this I mean that without ever attaining it, we can nevertheless move consciously and systematically in that direction, thus achieving practical results (43).

It is needless to add that management – both of the stage and the auditorium – has a crucial role to play in the ultimate realisation of a 'holy theatre' which requires a relaxed, comfortable and contended audience, in interaction with a well-motivated and high-spirited set of actors. 'At the heart of the theatre experience, therefore,' Edwin Wilson (1991:17) deposes, 'is the actor-audience relationship, the immediate personal exchange whose chemistry and magic give theatre its special quality.'

Writing in the same vein, Stephen Langley (1974:24) recognises four basic components of the theatre event as: a creative raw material, a person to refine it, a place for presenting the finished product and an audience to view it. This, in a nutshell, implies an

actor communicating a message to an audience inside a given space. In coming to the theatre, the audience enters into a social contract with the performers, and it is the role of management to ensure that this contract is not violated by either party. At the end of the performance, actors and spectators should leave with a sense of mutual satisfaction that effective communication has taken place.

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it is logical to conclude that the complementary arts of theatre management and stage management are two outstanding arts in the collaborative act of theatre. While the theatre manager ensures a profitable and comfortable production, the stage manager works towards a hitch-free and memorable performance, thus making effective interaction between actor and spectator possible.

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