NIGERIAN FILM TRAINING AND PRACTICE: UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN AS MIDWIFE

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Abstract

The Nigerian Theatre has come a long way, spanning well over a century. On the other hand, this year, 2023 marks exactly 120 years of the first film exhibition in Nigeria, an event which first occurred in August 1903, at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos. Film scholars have argued that film is not indigenous to any country. Nigeria is not an exception. Film came into Nigeria on the heels of colonialism as one of the agents needed to actualise the process. This means that literacy and formal education in film production and all they entail are products of colonial interference. The University of Ibadan is not only the first University in Nigeria; it is also a product of colonial interference as well. It equally pioneered the first Theatre Arts Department in the country. This paper adopts the historical approach to interrogate the evolution of the film industry in Nigeria from its cine era to the advent of Nollywood with emphasis on the training of practitioners. Its objective is to showcase the role the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, played and is still playing as a pioneer trainer in Theatre and Film Studies and as a catalyst to how far the industry has come to its present position. It concludes that Nollywood has achieved a commendable feat in its practice, professionally and academically.

Keywords: Theatre and Film, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Film Scholarship in Nigeria

Introduction

Theatre Arts, as social practice is innate to man. This position is substantiated by the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare, when he says through Antonio, in The Merchant of Venice that he held the world as a stage where every man must play a part (Act 1, Sc.1, 186). Some philosophers also hold that man is a social animal. This means that man must by nature socialize and interact. Because of these qualities of socialization and interaction, which are innate to man, theatre arts, comes to human beings naturally. Theatre Arts has therefore been part of the Nigerian cultural and traditional landscape. But this is as far as traditional and amateurish aspects of the approaches to it are concerned. On the professional side to some extent and academic side to a greater extent, theatre arts came with the interracial relationship between the White colonial masters/missionaries and their Black (African/Nigerian) victims/hosts/collaborators. This paper deploys the historical research method to interrogate these assumptions for the purpose of highlighting the role the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, has played and is still playing, in producing/training of theatre artists, film practitioners/scholars and media arts experts, across the globe.

The question of whether theatre practice existed in Africa prior to the invasion of the colonial masters and their missionary counterparts has long engaged academics and scholars. This is on the heel of arguments that Africa has no theatre just as the existence of its literature was also denied (Emenyonu, "Preface" Goatskin Bags and

Wisdom, ix; Ogunbiyi, 1981). That African literature and or theatre exists is no longer a subject of controversy as such has been proven beyond reasonable doubt. The focus of this paper as already mentioned is to discuss and add to extant literature the role the University of Ibadan, with particular emphasis on the Department of Theatre Arts, has played and is still playing in Media Arts/Film Scholarship in terms of its contributions in human capacity and infrastructural development in the country and beyond.

The year 2023 marks exactly 120 years of the first film exhibition in Nigeria, which event occurred in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos (Opubor & Nwuneli, 1979, Ekwuazi, 1991; Anyanwu, 2002, James, 2007), was said to be at the instigation of Herbert Macaulay, the father of Nigeria's nationalism. These films were merely newsreels one of which according to Opubor and Nwuneli was said to have shown a brief glimpse of the Alake of Abeokuta during a visit he paid to England. The Nigerian film industry presently referred to and called Nollywood, was very much at its infancy. Indeed, there was no officially recognized industry by that name as the industry lacked the qualifications and requirements which constituted an industry. As at 1995, Nigerian filmmakers lacked a recognized, registered umbrella body which characterized the early years of the film industry. This lack of unity through a unified body and which has continued to plague Nollywood climaxed in 1995 during the celebration of the centenary of African cinema in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, when Nigerian filmmakers were disgraced for not having a registered body (Shehu, cited in Anyanwu).

That era has become a thing of the past as Nollywood is currently and practically bursting at the seams with the avalanche of guilds in it.

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan and Film Training and Practice in Nigeria

In August 2023, the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan marked its 60th anniversary as the oldest Department of Theatre Arts and related nomenclature in the country. Beginning in 1963 as the School of Drama, the Department of Theatre Arts was founded around a nucleus of drama specialists formerly based in the Department of English. Ably led by Professor Geoffrey Axworthy, the Department grew from strength to strength. Indeed, Axworthy's relevance in he Nigerian theatre isbest captured by Deji Oguntoyinbo who says, "Any history of the development of Nigerian theatre that does not include the contributions of Geoffery Axworthy, the pioneering head and founder of Nigeria's first School of Drama, would be incomplete," (Oguntoyinbo, 2023: 1). The Department which started under Axworthy with 30 students as pioneers, was run by the Head of Department through a unique leaderships style especially as it concerns funding. Deji Oguntoyinbo further throws more light in this direction when he says:

> In addition to financial grants from Cocoa Funds, Ford Foundation, and the 1962 Rockefeller Foundation, Axworthy was also helped by some of his friends and theatre lovers. They include his

> deputy Martin Banham, Ulli Beier of the School of Arts at Osogbo, and Derek Bullock, then headmaster of Government College, Ibadan. The first groups of staff include Ebun Odutola, a graduate of Rose Bruford School of Drama, Bill Brown, a Harvard trained Technical Director, Demas Nwoko, a Theatre Design expert, and Mary Caswell (Oguntoyinbo, 2023: 2).

As at the time Axworthy was pioneering the academic side of Theatre Arts, Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogumola and Duro Ladipo were setting the stage for the smooth sailing of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre. Thus, the professional and academic sides of the Nigerian theatrical space were running at par and progressing evenly.

The Nigerian film space as noted above is sharply split along two broad divides- the professional cum independent filmmakers/theatre practitioners with Late Chief Hubert Ogunde featuring in the forefront and the academic/literary Theatre, with the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan as its pioneer.

The grandmother-mentor role of the University of Ibadan in global affairs captures the editorial lens of Black Heritage International Magazine editors who dedicated an entire edition to the celebration of the University of Ibadan at 75. The editorial, captioned, U. I. @ 75: CELEBRATING EMINENT ALUMNI OF NIGERIA'S PREMIER UNIVERSITY, captures the leadership role of the university in world affairs thus:

> The University of Ibadan which has produced the movers and shakers of the society has remained a lighting rod for all other universities across the country with the UI products illuminating dark places of the world. The University of Ibadan's achievements over the years are too formidable and numerous to be contested, yet indispensable in the scholastic enterprise. The truth is that this great institution shall continue to live as long as there are those who bear the stamp of its influence. They are everywhere, in and outside the country; research has shown that there is no country in the world without the UI products holding one sensitive position or theother (Black Heritage International (UI @ 75) Issue 3 Vol.11, Editorial, 2023).

The above, no doubt, reflects the quality and calibre of the products who have had the rare privilege of passing through the University of Ibadan, beginning with the literary icon, the celebrated Chinalumogu Albert Achebe, popularly known as Chinua Achebe who was said to be the first student of the premier university as his matriculation number was said to be 001. The assertion of the editorial cited above about U. I. products being significant across the globe is replicated in the microscopic aspect of the media arts and film studies of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University. Indeed,

in 2021, The Sun newspaper online of Saturday, 17-6-2021, had in one of its pages, the caption, "One Class, Four HODs," (https://sunnewsonline.com/one-class=four=hods/). The said Heads of Department were from the 1990/1991 graduating set of the Department of Theatre Arts.

They were Dr, Alphonsus Oshireku Orisaremi, who was heading the oldest and premier Department of Theatre Arts, his Alma Mata, the University of Ibadan (U. I.), Ibadan, Oyo State, as at then. Professor Adediran Moses Solomon Ademiju-Bepo, was heading the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Jos (UNIJOS), Jos, Plateau State. The third was Dr. Tochukwu Okeke, heading the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, (UNIZIK), Awka, Anambra State. The last but not the least was Dr. Joseph Oghenetega Umukoro, who was the Head, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo (UNIUYO), Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. By sheer fate of academic coincidence, four of them wear classmates! No university in the country or anywhere in the world has had such record or is likely to have in the nearest future! Incidentally, at that same period, two other alumni of the Department from the year after, 1991/1992, set were also heading other Theatre Arts Departments across the country. Dr. Adebisi Ademakinwa was heading the Theatre Arts Unit of the Performing Arts Department of the young Dennis Osadebe University (DOU), Asaba, Delta State, while Dr. Boniface Chukwuma Anyanwu was heading the Department of Theatre Arts, Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, Delta State. This is a feat unrivalled and difficult to beat.

It must be noted that prior to joining the academia as a full-time lecturer and academic, Orisaremi had been the pioneer lighting director at Africa Independent Television (AIT) where he set an all time record of media lighting and set design. Like his Media Arts mentor, Professor Hyginus Ozoemena Ekwuazi, he is still a consultant at AIT. Also, Ademiju-Bepo, spent years at the Nigeria Film Institute/Nigeria Film Corporation (NFI/NFC) (1993-2002), before moving into full time teaching. At the film in he met other colleagues from the same Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan who were involved in media training and teaching. Such schoolmates include Jovi Okpodu (Head, Academic Planning at the NFI and former Head, Planning, Research and Statistics, NFC); Yomi Olugbodi and Ranti Nfi (nee Babatunde), lecturers. They have continued to blaze the trail in media arts/film studies in the tertiary institutions in the country as well as in Nollywood through teaching and research.

The role of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan (U. I.), in film training and practice in Nigeria and beyond cannot be quantified. Growing up, we were erroneously made to believe that a tree could not make a forest. Nobody told us that such assertion can only be true if the tree in question is barren or sterile. If on the other hand, such tree is fruitful and productive, then, it is a matter of time before such tree becomes "Nollywood". While not attributing the creation of Nollywood to this one tree, the impact of this tree in this direction is enormous. The testimony below which is deliberately lengthy is germane and self explanatory.

Film studies in Nigeria had a similar

> history. Professor Hyginus Ekwuazi was central to that history and to the development of media and film studies in the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan. His contribution in this regard travelled quickly after he set an enviable example at the University of Ibadan. He did this in the area of teaching and research in media studies. Predictably, his former students became happy proselytisers. He replicated his dedication to the field when he was appointed the founding Director of the National Film Institute, NFI, Jos, an institution that has produced competent and versatile filmmakers such as Kenneth Gyang, whose film, Confusion Na Wa! (This Confusion is Overwhelming) has won accolades all over the world (Okome, 2016: 5-6).

It is important to add that Professor Onookome Okome is the first of the troika, (triumvirate, if you prefer) among the pioneer doctorate students of Professor Ekwuazi. The others being Professor Marcel Okhakhu and Professor Elo Ibagere. These first products of Professor Ekwuazi (currently Vice Chancellor of Dominican University) Ibadan, Oyo State, have produced thousand of filmmakers and scholars around the globe. The scholars are also as noted above replicating the experience and the journey is still gathering momentum. Here, then, is a tree making a huge forest. Both Okome and Ibagere confirm that the history of cinema had

suffered from indifference and inattention and this culminated in the need to reposition film studies in order to make it attain the level of art and discipline that it deserves. In the words of Ibagere:

> Media studies crept into the academic curriculum mainly through the various departments of Theatre Arts in Nigerian universities. Studies in film had actually commenced in the 1970s. But most notable was the collective effort displayed in the film industry which culminated in the book, The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria (1979) edited by Alfred Opubor and Onuora Nwuneli. The seminar was actually an examination of the film industry with the aim of repositioning it for better performance (Ibagere, 2016: 491).

It must be noted that the narrative of the poor attitude to film which heralded its evolution has since changed for the better. The change was made possible by the synergy and union of common interest of concern between the Town and Gown- the collaboration between the professionals and academics which births conferences such as the maiden cinema conference referred to above. In such conferences and festivals, filmmakers showcase their "new babies" as it were while the film scholars and critic name such babies. It is the film scholars and critics who situate the films; criticising, classifying and categorising them for the greater pleasure of the viewers.

While lamenting the sad and deplorable state of deterioration prevalent in the Departments of Theatre Arts across the country and their impact on the film industry, Bankola Ola-Koyi nonetheless attests to the outstanding contributions of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan. As he puts it, "In the seventies and eighties, the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan handled the production of Soap Operas with modern electronic gadgets sourced from within the university," (Ola-koyi, 2003: 217). Though Ola-Koyi's argument that the teaching and preparing of media arts and film students for the professional job of film and television production suffers from many shortfalls, including shortage of funds and a not-too-rich curriculum is true to a large extent, the situation is changing. Moreover, theatre arts and film production as academic discipline and professional practice are generally driven by interest. Thus, the blame may not necessarily be on the identified issues alone. Some of those who studied theatre arts in school were products of forced into it when they were unable to get to their choice courses of Law and Mass Communication but were unable to meet the cut-off requirements in the Universities Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) examinations. This category of students and subsequent graduates are never comfortable with their lot and end up disparaging the discipline.

Be that as it may, the point has been made that the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan stands tall as the grandmother cum pioneer in the area of media and film studies in the country. The film industry has no doubt gone beyond the era of theme and

plot recycling (Anyanwu 2007/2008) and has created a niche for itself in the global film space. All these are attributable to the efforts of one man, Professor Hyginus Ekwuazi, who on his part was prepared for this legacy by Professor Joel Adeyinka Adedeji. Ekwuazi does not come across in the regular run of lecturers. His teaching style is friendly and he exudes that leadership quality which sees leadership as, "doing all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the time you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can," (cited in Anyanwu, 2017: 37). The above leadership style which Ekwuazi inculcated into his students at all levels has continued to reverberate and the fame of the Department of theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan soared from place to place around the world. Indeed, this impact is so strong that there is hardly any university in Nigeria that offers theatre/performing/media/creative arts in Nigeria that does not have his students, either taught directly by him or taught by his students in it. The same applies to those who are not in the classrooms but opted for the professional practice in Nollywood or the media organizations that dot the country. The advertising industry and the print media are not left out as Professor Ekwuazi's impact there is equally daunting. His books, and indeed, the publications which the Staff of the Department, and their products, have produced, and are still producing, bear testimony to the position of the Department in both academic and professional fields of media arts training and practice around the world. One cannot just escape them.

This article is not designed to pick on individual staff, previous heads or alumni and students of the Department of Theatre Arts since that would require an encyclopedia to accomplish. Notwithstanding, mention must be made of Professor Dapo Adelugba, who traversed the theatre world from stage to screen; from professional to academic divides of the discipline. Writing about him and describing him as, "a distinguished professor of Theatre Arts quintessential teacher who served the University of Ibadan meritoriously for thirty-seven years, and supervised well over thirty doctoral candidates, including my humble self," (Umukoro, 2019: 9). Citing himself in an earlier work where he had written about his doctoral supervisor, Professor Dapo Adelugba, Professor Matthew Umukoro further says:

> The history of modern Nigerian theatre would be patently incomplete without due acknowledgement of Dapo Adelugba's outstanding contributions in his various capacities as teacher, scholar, playwright, and director...One of the first few African professors of Theatre Arts, DApo Adelugba bestrides the not-so-narrow world of Nigerian theatre scholarship like an intellectual colossus whose theoretical postulations and critical observations carry significant weight in both academic and professional circles. The Nigerian National Order of Merit (MNOM), for more than thre decades of unbroken

meritorious intellectual service to the nation, should be an appropriate epilogue to such a glorious professional career (Umukoro, 2019: 9-10).

What Umukoro said of Professor Dapo Adelugba can be said in slightly different ways to virtually all the alumni of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan beginning from those who succeeded Axworthy. The likes of Professor Wole Soyinka, Professor Joel Adeyinka Adedeji, Professor Dapo Adelugba, Professor Femi Osofisan, etc have carried on the tradition and there is no going back. In terms of media and theatre arts studies in Nigeria, the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan leads, others follow. The special edition of The Heritage Magazine (supra) dedicated to the celebration of the University of Ibadan, testifies to the overall significance and impact of the University of Ibadan in the general scheme of world affairs. The Department of Theatre Arts of the university, as the oldest and pioneer department of theatre arts in the country, has its share and contributions particularly in the area of theatre and media scholarship and training in the country and beyond.

Conclusion

The paper has interrogated the role of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan in the overall scheme of world affairs with particular focus in media arts scholarship, film studies and professional theatre training and practice in Nigeria. Using a historical approach, the authors were able to trace the involvement of the Department of Theatre, media arts and film

studies in Nigeria in the last sixty (60) years of the existence of Theatre Arts as a discipline and a profession in the country. The staff and students of the department have blazed the trail of media arts scholarship and training in the country. Although there are grey areas that need improvement as it is with human beings, things can only get better. The paper admits that the role, significance and impact of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan in the training and practice of media arts scholarship and indeed Nollywood, the Nigerian Film industry is in-exhaustive and cannot be effectively captured in a single article, this effort is nevertheless significant. There is no doubt that the legacy of the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan in media arts scholarship and training is enduring and will continue to resound as long as students enrol in the Department and graduates are produced and become scholars, trainers and professionals.

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