

The Vicissitudes of Covid-19 Pandemic and Theatre's Preparedness to Survive Inauspicious Circumstances

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Abstract:- Like many live events, live theatre suffered untold privation during the COVID-19 Pandemic. A contagion that brought death to many in virtually all parts of the world for many months; prompting the use of Social Distancing and Total Lockdown as preventive measures. Unfortunately, this era witnessed a dramatic twist from cluster to dispersion, which invariably affected, not only theatre practice, but other live events that hitherto required large gatherings in single locations. However, lack of preparedness for such an inauspicious circumstance apparently led to global debates among scholars in different fields, especially, as it regards preparedness in case of future occurrence. In view of the above, this paper examines theatre's preparedness to subsist subsequent inauspicious situations that may arise in the near future. This paper used secondary sources to generate data and deploys theatre adaptation as conceptual framework. The paper found out that Although, COVID-19 pandemic has caused major shutdown of theatre facilities across the world, theatre practice has not completely eliminated, but has been able to survive through strict adherence to various safety measures and the use of live streaming on the internet. It concluded that theatrical performances may not be able to thrive effectively on the internet and thus, all the active partners should give priority attention to reducing the risk of COVID-19 while audience can still continue in the culture of live theatre.

Keywords: -*Vicissitudes of Covid-19 Pandemic, Live Theatre, Theatre's Preparedness, Inauspicious Circumstances.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is no longer newscast that COVID-19 has come to stay. At least for now the world has recognised its impact positively or negatively. The issue at hand now is how the world can live with the vicissitudes of its untimely and perhaps, unannounced visitation. COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected aspects of livelihood around the world, but has equally initiated new changes whether at the level of individual relationships, institutional operations or international collaborations (Stanford Social Change Innovation Review, 2021). The global community has however, imitated several safety measure, including the recent finding of vaccines to mitigate the spread of the disease. The submission of Stanford Social Change Innovation Review (2021), points to the fact that for Covid-19 to have decimated families, overturn governments, crush economies, and tear through the social sector despite the

seeming complex and highly advanced technologies of the world, means that our world is vulnerable to the "unknown". It also shows that something far worse that covid-19 could occur in the nearest future and the world must show absolute readiness for any inauspicious circumstances.

The crux of the matter for this paper is the adverse effects of major or minor restriction of movement and interactions of people across the globe which has further given birth to the several other unexpected human crises that are undoubtedly uncountable. This paper takes a look at the preparedness of theatre to survive through a period where social gathering has become challenging and far from being abated. Lack of social gathering threatens the very essence of theatre practice as audience centred profession and the entire creative or entertainment industry. This paper makes use of secondary data from journals, dissertations, thesis, articles and internet materials to discuss the subject matter. This, essentially is because several debates have been ongoing since the concept of social distancing and global lockdown measure came on-board. Thus, harvesting those debates would give this paper the onus to situate its argument and arrive at a tangible suggestion as to the way forward for theatre practice in Nigeria and beyond.

Furthermore, the paper deploys theatre adaptation as conceptual framework to discuss the subject matter under study. The concept posits that "it adapts itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution. Theatre, however, does not reshape its coordinates simply to remain alive or to remain itself through time, but also to change the world around it. Theatre, one could say, never stops adapting its features to the world and the world to its features (Margherita, Laera, (2014). although this concept emphasised theatre adaptation in terms of stories retold, rewrites history, relationships, and rules, it also focuses on theatre adapting to social and situational changes. thus, using this conceptual framework is basically premised on the fact that COVID -19 pandemic initiated several changes that are socially motivated and thus, deploying it is of benefits to the subject matter.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

A. Theatre

Theatre has always been a social art from time immemorial and a live performance for that matter and any attempt to make it otherwise is tantamount to a disruption of a "Methuselahic" art. To corroborate this position, Mimi & Terver (2020 p. 317) submits thus:

Theatre is a collaborative form of performing art that uses live performances, typically actors or actresses, to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place, often a stage....modern theatre includes performances of plays and musical theatre.

The above assertion shows that theatre cannot be devoid of live audience and must be so practiced. And for there to have a period where is restriction ensued means dearth to theatre practice. The African society itself cannot do without congregation of people. Theatre itself takes its lifeness from it. According to Mimi, Awaan Terver, A. (2020) “the idea behind live performance can be linked to the origins of theatrical performances of festivals, myths and rituals which are synonymous in history with every society for onward development which in the past where to appease the gods and, fear of the unknown”. Thus, theatre is part of the people, a social process that cannot be stopped without hurting the society. However, maintaining live audience is fast becoming challenging. As Mimi & Awaan (2020:316) observed:

...live theatre was the earn performance in most cultures worldwide. However, with the current trends of civilization and modernization, most activities of the theatre are modified to suit the need among other development in the 21 century. This leads to the gradual and aggressive spring into action of the film and movie industries in the world.

The statement above, insinuates that globalisation has brought along with it changes to theatre practice, or perhaps that theatre has experienced circumstances that instigated certain adjustments, which invariably has made film a welcome idea to many other than live theatre. The struggle between film and live performance has been ongoing and several debates have ensued whether theatre should be as rich as film or poorer. The argument is that film is versatile and malleable to accommodate several technological innovations more than stage performance. There is also the aspect that films can be accessed right in the comfort of ones room without going to a movie theatre; an argument that finds credence in the public domain based on the seemingly frequent insecurity challenges in Nigeria and other developing worlds. Even at the level of other challenges, the incursion of the lockdown protocol as a result of COVID-19 made it a far greater challenge to all performative arts because of the absence of live audience.

B. Corona Virus (COVID-19)

Coronaviruses belong to a large family of viruses causing a wide spectrum of illness, ranging from very mild i.e. Common cold to severe illness such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). Numerous other Coronaviruses circulate among animals, including camels and some bat species. Rarely, some animal coronaviruses can evolve to cause illness in people. Sometimes Coronaviruses may develop the ability to spread from person to person, for example MERS-CoV which was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012, and the SARS-CoV, first recognized in China in 2002. The COVID-19 is a new strain that has not been

previously identified in humans (Ministry of Health Malawi, 2020).

Novel Coronavirus signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death (Ministry of Health Malawi, 2020). The incubation period, that is, the time interval from infection with the virus to onset of symptoms is up to 14 days, but this may be subject to change as the disease evolves and new information is discovered. People are infectious when they are showing symptoms of the disease and very few cases have been identified in people who have mild symptoms amongst their very close contacts (Ministry of Health Malawi, 2020).

C. Vicissitudes of COVID-19 Pandemic

The vicissitudes as we are trying to see here is not about the variants that we know novel covid 19 to have evolved into, but we are looking at the changes that it has brought to the world’s population in different ways be it on the economy, social integration and etc. It is about the drastic alterations that came as a result of the encounter with the Pandemic in 2020. Invariably, COVID-19 has affected almost all spheres of human endeavours, altering so many the social stratum of humanity and several of such alterations have been acknowledged.

It is pertinent to note that COVID-19 is not the first epidemic that the world has experienced. A quick look at history shows that about a dozen notable pandemic have been witnessed since the Middle Ages including COVID-19 (Backus, 2020). The first notable pandemic was the Bubonic plague, which killed 30% to 50% of Europeans in the 1300s. This was followed by smallpox in the Americas came in the 1500s. According to Backus (2020), the first global pandemic was declared in 1881 when cholera killed more than 1.5 million people worldwide. Others included the Spanish flu in 1918, a global pandemic, which killed between 20 million and 100 million people worldwide, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which was declared in 1981, is still considered an active pandemic, resulting in 36.7 million deaths (Backus, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year (Backus, 2020).

From existing statistics, COVID 19 has brought more dearth than earlier pandemics. Its impact is based on the fact that it occurred in a highly technical world, where the concept of globalisation has taken deep root. Thus, the idea of international and international lockdown. What distinguishes the rest from covid, in terms of impact is the global crises it has generated. The major reasons why it has these level of impact on all spheres of human endeavour is because of

national and international lockdown, border closures, social distancing and trade restrictions. Lockdown within countries and of course trans-border trades led to severe crises such as food security, public health, and unemployment.

According to ILO, et al, (2020), "millions of enterprises face an existential threat. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods". They further state that:

International lockdown and the effective suspension of civic and commercial activity across entire countries has thrust up a mirror on how our economic, social and political systems operate and forced the beginnings of a global conversation on how they may need to change. Covid-19 has revealed the shaky foundations on which much of what we take for granted in the developed world is built...

How has the creative sector responded to the evolving crisis? It seems that the existence of live theatre is being threatened by so many factors, which has posed a big question as to how prepared is theatre in most auspicious circumstances. Theatre has always had inauspicious times over the years. As society evolves, unfavourable circumstances arise, which leave many practitioners to manoeuvre steep terrains to make sure that they have their heads above waters.

Before the pandemic, live theatre (stage performance) was getting threats from various sources such as insecurity, economic downturn, stiff competition with film, etc. because of insecurity in various parts of Nigeria, theatre audience gradually dwindled to the point that theatre culture became very marginal. University became the platform for the sustenance of theatre in Nigeria, partly because of the regular churning out of play performances as an academic exercise. At least the university campuses that house university theatres are considered safer compared to commercial theatres, which are more at risk of kidnappers, armed robbers, molesters, etc. Because of this development, many theatre goers, decided to fall back on in-home entertainment such as videos, film, online games, etc. It is as good as saying that in-home entertainment is reaping from the gradual decline of live theatre because of the challenges. Again, the issue of economic challenge to low income earners, which made them not to be able to afford the burden of gate fees. All these challenges, were some of the things that live theatre managers and practitioners had to spend sleepless nights to solve; a puzzle that was never resolved.

D. The Impact of Covid 19 on the Entertainment Industry

The creative industry has been deeply impacted by COVID 19. Although, some of the impacts have negative inclinations, but it is important to also note that a lot of milestones have been reached in terms of rethinking the way forward for the survival of the creative industry. According to Guibert & Hyde (2021),

For some live performances, orchestras and theatre companies have reduced the size of ensembles to provide more intimate environments that are conducive to smaller

crowds. Other adaptive strategies have included frequent COVID-19 testing of artists and staff, maintaining actors and production crew in "bubbles" or "pods" throughout the rehearsal period, and regular consultation of medical experts to inform any reopening plans.

From the above assertion, few measures could be deduced. In the first instance the submitted that orchestras and theatre companies have had to reduce the size of ensembles. Now, this is for performers alone. Reducing the number of ensemble spells doom to many performers. It means some performers would not be able to put food on the table for as long as that measure lasts. It also reduces the quality of performance. This is because, doing away with some performers means that the level of creativity must as a matter of fact decline. It also has effect on the audience, because an audience that have gotten used to full ensemble would have to adjust to the reduction. How this would impact on the audience can only be seen from a negative perspective. Adversely, lovers of live performance would dwindle because the fun has equally reduced. Although, it could be argued that the reduction could create what many would consider as an intimate relationship between the performer and the audience. The hard truth is that for performative arts, the more the number of performers the merrier for the audience.

Secondly, they also assert that frequent COVID-19 test is carried out on artists and staff. This in itself cannot increase the consciousness of actors, which could also limit their level of creative input in the act. Again, it is imperative to note that this measure is new to actors and the implication is that the fear of contracting the virus would consume or take a fair share of their creative space, which is tantamount to reducing the creative process. In performance firmament, it is expected that a performer must give all focus to the task before him or her in order to bring out the best. But a situation that distracts actors, inadvertently, steals from the deep recess of creative wealth. This can only reflect negativity.

Furthermore, "maintaining actors and production crew in 'bubbles' or 'pods' throughout the rehearsal period, and regular consultation of medical experts" can only wear them out. Apart from this, employing the service of a medical expert increases the cost of production. With all these measures, coupled with reduction of the number of audience makes live performance less attractive, not lucrative and perhaps, discouraging to practitioners. To corroborate this position, Alabi (2020) asserts thus:

It feels like when the breath stops in the middle of a race. But while these happy places are isolated, our dear theatre also suffers bitterly, not leaving behind the creative minds that stay sleepless just to make you have zero traumas amidst all worries of life. The cancellation of live performances across Nigeria (and globally) has unprecedented economic consequences and affects an already precarious sector like ours – Theatre.

Guibert & Hyde (2021) submit that: "Given that many non-profit arts organizations already will lose revenue

because of restrictions on large public gatherings, and because more people are staying at home, these additional costs pose further challenges to an already-strained sector". Even the film industry that many have been seen to be feeding fat from the "social distancing" is considered vulnerable also due to the pandemic, as both the production and the consumption of its output require numerous people together in small spaces. The global entertainment industry includes various entertainment venues such as online video streaming, amusement parks, theatrical productions, sports, live events, and trade shows.

E. Theatre's Preparedness to Survive Inauspicious Circumstances

Apart from COVID-19, theatre has experienced and survived inauspicious moments. As globalisation and technological advancements continue to exert influence on the world's society. However, the beauty of theatre is embellished where there is live audience, reacting, naturally to a stage performance. In other words, shutdown measures and all forms of social distancing measures cannot be of any benefits to live theatre. However, if we happen to experience another lockdown or if the restriction of large gathering continues, the question would be how prepared is theatre to survive? Reducing the number of actors, ensembles and carrying out live streaming of theatre performance online seems to be the solution in a situation like this. .

Whether we like it or not, live theatre practitioners must move on. The concept of the "show must continue" must be applied. Millions of theatre workers earn a living from it and the aspect of passion, which many have shown for the profession cannot be jettisoned. Thus, to keep live theatre running amidst COVID-19 inauspicious conditions, theatre workers and patrons have devised few measures to keep the art alive such as: live streaming, reduction of performers, reduction of audience and ensuring that COVID-19 protocol is adhered to strictly.

However, from several postulations, theatre concerns itself with the experience of producing and watching drama, before, during, and after the actual performance of the text itself. This insight provides a new dimension to the issue of inauspicious circumstances. The idea of watching a performance after the actual live experience on stage suggests that theatrical performances can, as well, do without live audience. This suggestion seems to remove the issue of live audience, and equally supports what many theorists tend to submit as a way forward to theatre in the mist of the pandemic, which is the shift to "virtual audience". This culture requires theatre practitioners embracing online or live streaming of their productions. Although, this might take a while to sink into the consciousness of practitioners because they are practically familiar with performing before live-audience. However, for theatre practitioners to depend solely on virtual audience as tantamount to reducing the motivations that actors and performers enjoy before live audience. To what extent this would have on actors remains under the blanket of our imaginations.

III. CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it is pertinent to note that the shutdown strategy and enforcement of social distancing across the globe are certainly inimical to the survival of the entertainment industry especially, theatre and other live performances. Although, COVID-19 pandemic has caused major shutdown of theatre facilities across the world for months and the fact that no one can predict the exact time that the world would return back to normalcy, theatre practice has not completely eliminated, but has been able to survive through strict adherence to various safety measures and the use of live streaming on the internet. Be that as it may, theatrical performances may not be able to thrive effectively on the internet. Thus, it is suggested that theatre practitioners, governments and all the active partners should give priority attention to reducing the risk of covid-19 while audience can still continue in enjoying the culture of live theatre.

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