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Mixed-Media Directing Technique and the Salvation of Theatre-Going Culture: The Aesthetics of Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The theatre has witnessed several technological modifications, which include the incorporation of mixed-media elements into the live performance, but despite this innovation, the Nigerian theatre-going culture pitiably continues to fall. This is traced to the slow response of directors to the surge in the audiences' aesthetic taste and the delivery of the contemporary live show. However, some directors, such as Bolanle Austen-Peters and Tayo Isijola in "Wakaa the Musical" and Julie Okoh's *The Trials* respectively, have experimented with and prophesied the inclusion of mixed-media elements as a sustainable technique for contemporary theatre directing. This study engages Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre and Oreofe Williams' 'Artotech', which emphasises the necessary connection of the theatre with the changing media of the current century as a theoretical framework. The descriptive study recommends the mixed-media technique engaged in the performances under study as a viable technique to increase audience participation and sustain theatre-going in Nigeria.
KEYWORDS: Directing, mixed-media, theatre patronage, aesthetics, audience attention

INTRODUCTION

Theatre directing is the epicentre of performance. It is attributed the highest degree of importance as far as performance articulation is concerned. Therefore, the theatre director is seen as the *primus inter pares*, who does the job of organising every performance element into an ensemble (Adeoye, 2019, p. 6). Babalola (2017) explains

the theatre directing as "the process of coordinating all the human, technological, artistic and sometimes financial elements of a production, be it in theatre, mass media or performance arts/events" (p. 440). However, the 21st-century theatre director is faced with a greater challenge than the need for artistic expression and textual interpretation. Hence, this has resulted in a paradigmatic shift from the basic need to unify artistic elements in a production by an artistic coordination to the rising need to create the newer forms of communication and expression. Following the example of phenomenal directors like Peter Brooks, Eugene Barbara, Joseph Chaikin, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Ivo van Hove, and Elizabeth LeCompte, these contemporary directors have devoted a huge number of their works to experiments that created the robust performances as an exposition of the original dramatic texts. In their creative interpretation lies an underlying objective to create the performances that would not only possess the proper performance elements but would be at par with the changing expectations of the audience and the society at large.

In the Greco-Roman era, for instance, performance was perceived as a cultural activity with a communalistic essence; however, recently, the commercialisation of theatre coupled with the advancement of media technology has boosted audience literacy and affected the supply of theatre performances. This includes the advent of Subscription Video-On-Demand (SVOD) networks, NETFLIX as a phenomenal example; Computer-Generated Imagery and Visual effects; Extended reality (Augmented reality and Virtual reality); LEDs; Holograms; Artificial Intelligence and the use of Chatbots in smartphones; Social Media among others that now make digital communication, teleworking and cyberspace transmission possible. The exposure of contemporary audiences to these possibilities creates a resultant effect in the delivery of the live show and the drastic reduction in the theatre patronage, especially in Nigeria. Ogundeji (2016) laments the pitiable position of theatre in Nigerian society when she reveals:

> Every day, television stations now run home videos in full, i.e. from the beginning to the end, which makes a lot of people feel there is no reason to go to a 'National theatre' to watch a live performance. If one misses watching a film at a given station, there would always be another at a sister station. This entire arrangement has affected the reduction in theatre goings. (p. 241)

In the same vein, Wilson (2020) explains inter alia, "Why go to the theatre when we could see the same thing much more easily in our neighborhood or at home at such a sharply reduced cost? Surely this overwhelming electronic competition would lead to a sharp diminution of theatre attendance" (p. 40). That is, on the one hand, theatre "competes with a large number of alternatives for leisure, many of them highly attractive technology, but on the other, some of its expressions -especially music -continue to attract enormous attention" (Bonet & Schargorodsky, 2015, p. 184). Akpodiete (2020) puts it succinctly that the decline in the patronage could be linked to the advent of film and technological gadgets, as most audience members prefer to stay indoors and enjoy the vast provision of either their smartphones, computers, or cable TVS (p. 33). Therefore, this has led theatre practitioners, especially theatre directors, to painstakingly conduct experiments to establish a viable method to salvage this problem, resuscitate the theatre-going culture, and also preserve the theatre experience.

Bolanle Austen-Peters and Tayo Isijola belong to the category of such contemporary directors who carefully engaged mixed-media in their production of "Wakaa the Musical" and Julie Okoh's *The Trials* respectively. The techniques engaged by the directors have proved successful as both productions enjoyed the patronage on a large scale. It is against this background that this study examines the approaches of the

theatre directors under study to mixed-media by ascertaining the potency of their approaches as a viable strategy to sustain audience patronage and attention in the media-savvy world.

MIXED-MEDIA THEATRE AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, mixed-media is the use of various media forms within a single medium. As the theatre is a single medium (stage medium) that engages the use of basic elements − actors, costumes, designers, and lights, mixed-media in theatre directing denotes the additional use of technological gadgets and media elements that are external to the stage medium within the live stage performance to aid textual interpretation, enhance performance and sustain audience attention. Wilson (2020) explains it as the process of joining theatre with other arts, particularly film, video, television, video, or other digital media (p. 445). In this case, mixing media allows live performance to interact with sequences on film, television, video, or other digital media by utilising the variegated media available within a singular production for the creation of an enhanced performance with a contemporary feel.

This study engages Hans-Thies Lehmann's 'Postdramatic Theatre' and Oreofe Williams' 'Artotech' as a theoretical framework. Postdramatic theatre allows a more radical approach to the director's interpretation of the dramatic text. Here, post-dramatic theatre, which is an extension of postmodernism, offers a new lens from which the performance can be viewed, understood, and created by connecting it with the vast media innovations. This results in a media-dominated performance that could express the director's intention beyond mere translation of the text. Lehmann (2006) cites an example of The Wooster Group, which is famous for its use of high-tech gadgets, intermedia, aesthetics, film elements, sound effects, and amplifiers, amidst other various media elements, as 'post-dramatic' (p. 10). Conversely, Williams' concept of 'Artotech' maintains a similar perspective on the application of technology in the arts and particularly in performance. It comes from the perspective that technology has permeated every human operation, and as such, it becomes somewhat inevitable to man. Mark and Bell-Gam (2018) corroborate this with the notion that "we are in a digital age where almost everything is automated" (p. 15599). Succinctly, 'Artotech' campaigns for "arts placed on technology" (Williams, 2021, p. 66). It highlights the degree to which the arts depend on technology to function by simply combining the artist's natural talents with the provisions of the computer to generate better inputs.

"Wakaa the Musical" is a caricature of the Nigerian polity and the typical Nigerian society. It mirrors the struggles of youths in the bid to establish themselves in an unstable societal structure. The story lampoons the dangerous polity of the Nigerian political system and its adverse effects on striving youths. Tosan, Ngozi, Kike, and Rex upon their graduation from the Emeritus University share their prospects. Tosan proposes to be a political juggernaut and a patriotic citizen who would give back to his society by contributing to national development through public service, which could save the country from the fangs of corruption and bad governance. Conversely, Kike his lover could only think of going shopping in New York with a limitless debit card. Ngozi thinks of fashioning out a foundation that would revolt against indiscipline and corruption in Nigeria, while Rex thinks of abandoning his medical degree for a dance school in Lagos, since legitimate job employment has become almost impossible.

The Trials, written by Okoh and directed by Tayo Isijola, is a contemporary drama that addresses topical societal and gender issues. Ibiso is married with two kids to Sotonye, who just lost his job as a result of compulsory retirement. Ever since, every one

of Sotonye's attempts to get back to his feet has proved futile, and his wife is left with no choice but to function as the man of the house. She settles the bills and practically functions as the man of the house. Soon, Sotonye starts to feel inferior to his wife's functionality and sense of responsibility, accusing her of calling the shots and indirectly swapping roles with him to settle domestic chores. Though he admits he is financially crippled yet, to defend his ego and regain his position as head of the family, Sotonye bans his wife from going to work and also restricts her to working from home to allow her to resume domestic duties. Conflict breaks out between the two. Ibiso is quite resolute on maintaining her job while Sotonye insists she must bend to his will. The brawl bows to a resolution with the interference of Tamuno (Sotonye's friend) and concerned in-laws.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Mixed-Media in "Wakaa The Musical" and *The Trials*

Austen-Peters's "Wakaa the Musical" and Isijola's production of Julie Okoh's *The Trials* are major mixed-media performances. Mixed-media in this case implies the use of amplified sound, film elements, video recording, digital screens, lighting, and mediation of the performance to an online audience. These directors, in the bid to sustain audience patronage, re-interpret the dramatic text and create performances with a technological feel, engaging external elements like the media within the live drama. Isijola who had previously produced the same play earlier confesses that the latter production enjoyed more technical sophistication and reached more people (about 61,000 in total) with the option of mediation, and he further reveals that his directorial muse was fueled by the ability to communicate more courtesy of the media facility at the performance venue (Interview with Tayo Isijola, 2021, July 5). Austen-Peters explains the muse to use mixed-media to be tied to certain quintessential factors like audience and contemporary happenings. In her opinion, her experiment is targeted at bringing up the standard to be at par with the spectacular Broadway performances on the New York stage, where show business is carried with spectacle and glamour. She believes that in the case where showmanship is without these, the people who want to be taken out of their drudgery and daily life experiences and have come to the theatre to be wowed would have been halfway disappointed (TVC, 2019). To follow Austen-Peters' perspective is to accept the need to prioritise spectacle as a vehicle for effective communication in contemporary performance. Audiences no longer visit the performance space merely to watch the story, but also to experience the aesthetic dramatization, without which the performance may seem plastic, bland and unworthy of their time and ticket cost. The approaches of the directors under study to mixed-media shall be classified mainly into two: sound amplification; and intermediality-live and mediated sound.

Predominantly, sound in the theatre is basic as audiences who visit the theatre come to see and at the same time hear a play. Since the era of classical antiquity, theatre actors have had to magnify their natural voices or leverage the acoustics of the theatre (which is always a padded facility that makes sound reverb) for communication between themselves and the audience. However, with the advancement in technology, there are media gadgets specifically for sound amplification which allow effortless communication and delivery between actors and audience. Both Austen-Peters and Isijola engaged in the use of lapel and head microphones to amplify sound. The performance venue was a long and narrow auditorium, which had an audience overflow.

Interactivity or interactive media, as Georgi (2014) and Saltz (2001) capture it, records the process of unifying other media forms into one to allow a seamless production. Intermediality suggests that the different media forms that are external to the performance be properly connected by synchronising those media elements with the live performance. Isijola unites the external media forms with the basic components. He cites an example:

> I got a live band in the background because there was a character who was going to sing her thoughts on stage… the character had to sing it, while the instruments accompanied. While she was singing, the other character did not just gaze as though it was an interlude; he was interrupting with the song. At the bridge '...take a look at me now…' he goes 'the devil is a liar!' So it was more like a dialogue. (Interview with Tayo Isijola, 2021, July 5)

A perfect use of intermediality in the performance will mean the intentional linking of the live and media elements in such a way that both elements contribute to the creation of a unified meaning, leaving no space for any shabbiness capable of causing a disconnect.

Visuals: Mediation and Film

In the theatre, the actor should be heard as well as seen. As such, the visual elements consist of the scenography, the special effects, media, costume, set and light, and the entire mise-en-scène. Therefore, theatre technology has made a paradigmatic shift from basic flat scenery to digital scenery. Exceptionally, Austen-Peters engaged the projector screen mainly as digital scenery, which displayed the entire basic set while the actors acted against its background. For every scene, an image or symbol was displayed against the background to complement the ongoing live-action. Additionally, she engaged the projector screen to enhance the actor's job by presenting symbols in synchrony with the actors' lines, and other mise-en-scène and providing underlying details.

Conversely, Isijola used a basic set (painted set) and props but engaged the digital screen on two major occasions. First, as a medium of mediating the performance to the large audience who could be disadvantaged by the narrow seating arrangement in the hall (Interview with Tayo Isijola, 5 July 2021), and next the screens flanking the stage were purposely used to unite the audience with the stage, and the live action with the recorded story.

Mixed-Media in Contemporary Theatre

The word 'contemporary' is quite suggestive of the most recent modus operandi, which mainly includes the use of technological gadgets and the generous proliferation of the media. Contemporary theatre, in the words of Pavis (2016), "is quite simply what passes for modern, or even hyper-modern, what presents innovative or experimental forms and works of art" (p. 41). Therefore, contemporaneity offers a wide range of options to the performance and the theatre director. These, amongst others, shall be discussed expressly below:

Mediation, Mediatisation, and Digitisation

Mediation, mediatisation, and digitisation are the realities of the contemporary world. Similarly, these have changed human interaction by allowing people to transcend spatial presence, physical space, or space boundaries (Kho Suet Nie et al., 2014, p. 363). Today, the media forms have provided multiple channels for effective communication,

such as mediation -the act of transmitting through a mechanism that serves as an intermediary between one and the other. In such a digitised and interconnected global environment, Boddington (2012) questions "How can we deal with telepresence and virtual worlds, the newest and fastest evolving communication of our times? Enhanced through speedy data flow, today's communication connectivity… is enabling live video transmission/reception to take place between people at a distance, even within the domestic arena" (p. 77). Mediation could be effectively engaged to target audience members who are not physically present onsite but are actively present in cyberspace through the availability of live transmission. Directors today, such as Bolanle Austen-Peters and Tayo Isijola, could exploit the provision of the media to mediate their performances to the unlimited virtual audiences at a period before the outbreak of the pandemic. In Isijola's case, the production of *The Trials* was for an onsite audience of about 5,000 and an online audience of about 56,000. Similarly, Patrick Jude-Oteh, the CEO and artistic director of the Jos Repertory Theatre, Jos, has created more performances for the mediated audience courtesy of the pandemic, which placed a ban on the social gatherings. The repertoire has created quite some performances with records of success since the outbreak of the viral disease, when theatre performances in Nigeria were overly dependent on buildings. JRT (Jos Repertory Theatre) began mediation of the live drama with Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* in March 2021 and then proceeded to Sefi Atta's *The Engagement*, Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters*, to mention a few. Below lies the caption on his Facebook notification wall: "Zulu Sofola's Wedlock of the Gods performance is next Sunday, 21st March. It's going to be a virtual (Zoom) performance. Just get a ticket and watch from the comfort of your home" (Jude-Oteh, 2021). In the same vein, Yinka Smart Babalola at the Wole Soyinka Theatre, University of Ibadan, carried out a similar experiment with Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* on the 16th of March, 2021. For him, it was tagged a Hybrid performance. His broadcast message is captured below: "Ibadan Festival of Theatre International presents 'A one-of-a-kind performance at the Wole Soyinka Theatre for a hybrid audience (live and online). Click on the link below to register for the LJ code and confirm your seat to watch THE LION AND THE JEWEL in your comfort."

The point of agreement between Jude-Oteh of Jos Repertory Theatre and Babalola of Ibadan Festival of Theatre International was the desire to situate the performance space in a flexible position that would be conducive for actors and accessible to the audience. With these experiments, the performance is sustained as the audiences are not disadvantaged by the closure of buildings and gathering restrictions because the mediated performances have been specially created in such a way that the performance quality is ensured and the theatre experience is sustained.

Conversely, mediatisation is a process of shaping the human perception of modernity and meaning through the provisions of the media. It explores the media technologies (film, lighting, sound, and interactive costumes, to mention a few) to create the aesthetics and performance quality by providing an experience of the world based on mechanical, technological, or electronic media, all of which the audiences are used to (Georgi, 2014, p. 67). Thus, mediatisation in the theatre is a deliberate effort to infuse the media technologies (which the audience interacts with in their mundane activities) into performance.

Social Media and Cyberformance

The entire world today, as predicted by Marshall McLuhan, is a global village that has been sustained by the various provisions of the internet and social media

platforms. Griffin (2021), in his opinion, exposes that the contemporary world is created by "electronically linked media, a place where humans retribalise through their freedom to bypass time and space" (p. 6). Social media functions as a computer-based technology that connects people with themselves through virtual networks, platforms, and communities. In the 21st century, social media has proved to be the fastest means of communication, as businesses depend on it to reach out to the consumers, and the individuals depend on it for the day-to-day interactions since virtually every individual is technically equipped with at least a smartphone or a personal computer. This internet-based communication platform, which includes WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, Snapchat, and Skype, to mention a few, has been effectively utilised for different purposes. Emakunu and Guanah (2018) highlight that "today, the internet is part of our daily life and most cannot do without the internet. Any individual who wants to reach out to the world *must* have a presence on the internet" (p. 435, emphasis added). Deductively, the viewership of theatre performances in contemporary times could be tied to its presence on Social media. Tayo Isijola adds that Social media holds a richer fan base, which connects everyone everywhere quickly to content. Thus, he preaches:

> Social media is the meeting place. Some of the things we capture in the live theatre either with a phone or some form of camera however good they are, the fact that we do not have the sufficient facility, no sound for the transmission; when such video is pushed out, people will not want to come to the theatre for the next. (Interview with Tayo Isijola, 2021, July 5)

Austen-Peters, like Isijola, is famous for pushing her well-made performances (for example "Wakaa the Musical") on YouTube after the one-off performance to archive the performance and also make it accessible to a wide range of audiences. In that manner, the performance is recorded in its original quality and made accessible to prospective audiences everywhere.

Cyberformance, as coined by Helen Varley Jamieson, is a derivative of the words 'cyberspace' and 'performance'. Exceptionally, cyberformance refers to performances that leverage internet technologies to unite performers who are far apart from audience members who are either close or distant. It is an extension of the basic theatre practice by attracting a large number of audiences to a digital environment and, in turn, establishing the theatre in an unlimited virtual space patronised by billions of people (Yasser, 2020, p. 56). Subsequently, cyberspace has become a virtual habitat for individuals across the globe for research, entertainment, and communication amongst others, and these cyber users (which constitutes a wide range of people) have developed what Yasser (2020) calls a degree of 'digital literacy' which could turn an audience into an active part of the performance (p. 60). Therefore, with the increased level of migration to virtual spaces, telepresence, teleworking, and digitisation, to mention a few, what could save theatre patronage in contemporary times? James Akolo's "And Vice Versa" and "The Making of a Day" (staged on Zoom), together with the Lagos Theatre Festival 2020 (which staged performances via stageplayAfrica.tv, a VOD network) are examples of the emerging experiments on cyberformance in Nigeria since the COVID-19 pandemic hit theatre buildings.

The Audience's Role in Contemporary Theatre

The audience is a quintessential factor in the theatre, as the actor or the script. As such, the theatre cannot be complete without the audience who plays the role of consumer (Akpodiete, 2020, p. 35). Thus, it becomes imperative for every performance

to have an audience (even if it is just a person who could appreciate the creative endeavour). In the words of Bennet (2006), "the survival of the theatre is economically tied to a willing audience" (p. 20). This implies that the theatre cannot fully function in its enterprise in the absence of the audience. Observably, the Nigerian theatre in the 21st century is beginning to experience drudgery from the perspective of the audience, which has resulted in a drastic reduction in audience patronage. These reductions could be tied to several reasons. Audiences cannot be as regular as they used to be as a result of the many developments of modern technology, which has affected the audience with a series of shifting impressions, stimuli, and technological awareness (Edum 2017, p. 106; Wilson, 2020, p. 39). The presence of technology has birthed several platforms and tools engaging audiences with a wide range of content, hence meeting them at the level of their aesthetic tastes. The resultant effect of this is that people can now be entertained with aesthetic content in the comfort of their rooms.

Today, technology has taken over major business operations and has also offered easier and better ways to see the world. As such, a lag in the modus operandi and structure of Nigerian theatres with technologised features to allow a media-literate audience to be compatible with the changes. Although the inclusion of electronic media in business operations is not an entirely new trend, notably, its introduction into businesses has proved successful in attracting more patronage, and subsequently, it has become essential for every human operation to get on board as quickly as possible (Hunter, 2017, p. 47). Unfortunately, in Nigerian theatre today, particularly Nigerian theatre directing, the media has not been fully imbibed as a means to prepare and deliver theatre productions. This is more painful because the contemporary audiences to whom these productions are delivered have become more technologically literate due to their encounter with media daily, coupled with the vast provisions of social media, sophisticated electronic gadgets (for digitization and online streaming), and of course, unlimited access to social networks like NETFLIX and YouTube. Hence, "this phenomenon continues to alienate contemporary audiences who are technologically savvy from attending theatre shows, thereby contributing to the decline of live theatre in Nigeria" (Mark & Emasealu, 2018, p. 4), and the failure of the Nigerian theatre to meet up with the expectations of the contemporary audiences who have become exposed to high-tech would continue to lead them to these various media forms as alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The theatre is a unique kind of show business. However, as the world shifts, creativity becomes the new economy as it is no longer news that the media has become a necessity for human operations due to the paradigmatic shifts and technological advancements accompanied by the 21st century. Therefore, by implication, the Nigerian theatre should evolve. This study recommends sustainable ways to salvage the terrible situation through cross-examination of Austen-Peters' "Wakaa the Musical" and Tayo Isijola's production of *The Trials*. It presents the mixed-media technique as engaged by the directors under study as the best fitting approach to continuously create the media-friendly performances in this media-dominated world, for yesterday's performance is by now a failure.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

I hereby wish to declare that I do not have any conflict of interest to disclose. I also declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.

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