THE CHANGING SCENE OF THE NIGERIAN STAGE

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Abstract

The world has witnessed phenomenal changes, even development, in the last few decades. What with the internet and the social media with their attendant plethora of opportunities for both positive and negative minded individuals, corporate bodies, institutions and even governments, to bring their reaches within their grasp! Theatre practice in Nigeria has not been left out. However, unlike other areas of the profession, the live stage has not fared so well. Where the others have progressed, the living stage has retrogressed to the point that there appears to be a shift from the production of stage plays to other forms of performance, notably, the one man comic genre which makes appearance on the live stage on occasion, but which is otherwise, a product of the cinematic genre. This paper takes a retrospective historical glance at the reasons for this shift in order to proffer suggestions for a revival, if possible, of the conventional stage production of plays. The writer is of the view that all the stake holders in the industry among whom are governments at all levels, culture ministries and parastatals; academics and professional theatre practitioners, are all liable and as such, should contribute towards a revival because the main of the theatre revolves on collectivism rather than individualism towards which the profession is presently tilting in the name of stand-up comedy. The paper concludes on the note that though stand-up comedy is a theatrical form, it lacks that aura and spirit on which a nation’s cultural and theatrical pride traditionally depend and by which a nation is recognized universally and accepted.

Keywords: Theatre, Stage, Comedy, Culture, Profession

Introduction

African theatrical performance has come a long way since the introduction of literary drama with the coming of the Western concept of theatre. Prior to that, Africa has enjoyed rich performance aesthetics through its folkloric narratives, festivals and ceremonies. Invariably, the narrative voice was usually that of the story-teller, who is symbolically at the centre of the circle, surrounded by the audience/spectator/participant and therefore, at the centre of the story. With the coming of literary drama, there was a change in the performance aesthetics as there was a movement from out-door to the in-door western theatre concept where the performer was alienated from the audience. There was also a shift in language as the indigenous language gave way to the language of the foreigner. This also
affected the overall concept of the theatre ushering in the real audience of spectators in line with the European theatrical practice.

The attainment of western education and the creation of universities along with the departments of theatre, performing, or creative arts saw the publication of plays which must have their teeth of relevance cut on the stage of performance. Thus, the theatrical experience of the period was quite robust. Beginning with the playwright, the theatrical experience is a collective effort which is why experts refer to productions as collective pregnancy which both cast and crew, and sometimes, even the audience, come together to deliver on the stage of performance. The literary drama has its origin in western education and publication of plays. By virtue of the proscenium stage, the fourth wall is removed and the audience becomes more or less intruders into the private lives of those on stage. This alienates the audience and deprives them from the enjoyment which participation gives. Dramatists like Femi Osofisan (*Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*), Sam Ukala (*Akpakaland*), Bode Sowande (*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, adapted for stage from Amos Tutuola’s novel of the same title); among others, try to establish the traditional link between the actor on stage and the audience, thereby returning to the African folkloric tradition of total theatre experience where the story-teller/narrator, is at the centre of the story; is both performer and audience, just as the audience are both audience and performers, too. This makes the theatre a communal experience, a robust interaction, sharing the rhythm of life almost equally among the participants and in all its forms.

Discussing the role the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, played and is still playing as a training ground for theatre artists in the country and beyond, Umukoro cites Geoffrey Axworthy, as follows:

Through its wide-ranging arts programme, Ibadan’s Arts Theatre became, in ten years, not only an important cultural centre, but also a training ground for creative artists and technicians who led the remarkable development of all the performing arts in that country, (11).

The University of Ibadan (U.I.), is therefore, the cradle of theatrical practice, especially literary drama, in the country. It is from this same department that the early theatre practitioners such as the late Professors Joel Adedeji, Dapo Adelugba, Uwazuluonye (Zulu) Sofola, and Professors Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Lanre Bamidele, etc; were mentored and raised. It is a reflection and a testimony to the Department of Theatre arts, (U.I.), that, it is the progenitor of the pioneers of the one man theatrical experience, also called solo performance, as Funsho Alabi and Tunji Sotimirin. It is to this duo that we would take recourse for the present fad of stand-up comedy in the country.
Stand-up Comedy: Origin and Definition

Stand-up comedy is one of the fastest growing theatrical forms of the modern or contemporary times. Its unique form makes it easily accessible to those who consider themselves gifted and humourous. Jim Mendrinos, in an online article, entitled, “History of Stand-up Comedy” from two Drink Minimum, notes: “Both the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary started recognizing the term, stand-up comic in 1966.” He goes further to state that, “stand-up is a decidedly American invention, with its roots going back into the mid 1800s. Up until that time, comedy was the exclusive domain of theater. The unintentional grandfather of stand-up comedy was Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, the man who is credited with inventing the minstrel shows.”

Furthering his argument, Mendrinos submitted that stand-up comedy was less than 40 years old. That is, as at 2003, when the article being quoted was written. He goes on to assert:

Of course, what we do has been around longer than that. That’s the first time we gave it a name. Up until then, anybody who got a laugh in any medium was called a comic. In 1966, the sub-species of stand-up comedy came into being.

The interesting thing about Mendrinos’s submissions is his bold assertion that stand-up comedy was decidedly, American. Interesting, because he appears to have lost sight of the fact that the American culture, is not world culture, or that Americans generally do not hold monopoly of humour. He should have contented himself with the fact that America or Americans popularized the genre, and not claim its ownership as it were. This is because, as Ayakoroma has pointed out, “there is no arguing the fact that stand-up comedians have existed in Nigeria from time immemorial in the form of village spokesmen, especially at ceremonial occasions,” (www.nico.gov.ng).

Indeed, stand-up comedy by another name has existed in various forms and in the various cultures in the form of village jesters, court entertainers and dancers. Its new found fame and recognition, is however, a recent phenomenon. Ayakoroma continues, “but then, comedy did not become serious business until Alleluia Atunyota Akporobomeriere, alias Ali Baba came on the scene.” Ayakoroma says that Ali Baba’s first show was in 1988. But even before Ali Baba, there had been such personalities as “John Chukwu (JC), Tony St. Iyke and Jude Away Away, who were good, great men that were into stand-up comedy, but did not take it to the level Ali Baba has done.” There were also other early comedians especially in the east, such as the self acclaimed “professional talkative”, the redoubtable Uche Ogbuagu who thrilled audiences in the east with his audio recorded talk shows. Another is the recently deceased, Peter Onwuzurike Onyehidelam, alias, Dede One-Day, who,
as a member of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church was very effective in the church and thrilled members with his hilarious and rib-cracking jokes. He was able to join the big leagues before his untimely demise in 2015.

“Today,” Ayakoroma posits, “it is generally agreed that it is Ali Baba that gave comedy, ‘the beautiful face’ it wears in Nigeria.” Inasmuch as Ali Baba can be credited with giving stand-up comedy in Nigeria its glamorous outlook, the man who took it to the present level and conferred on it the block-buster, money spinning and the aspiration-of-young-people status it now wears is Opa Williams. He is the man responsible for opening the doors of opportunity by taking the genre beyond its “one man show” posture to a congregation of talents who come together in a single show. Ayakoroma further reports that, “Opa Williams, on Sunday, 1st October, 1995, at the University of Lagos, Akoka-Lagos, organized the maiden edition of “Nite of a thousand Laughs,” a public show where part of the proceeds would go to charity.” Though the maiden show was said to have been an awful box-office flop, the doggedness and perseverance of Opa Williams paid off in subsequent editions of the production.

This account is basically from a professional perspective as nearly all the names involved in it are solo professional performers. From the academic point of view, one man show as it was then known was pioneered by the duo of Funsho Alabi, who toured University theatres with his performance of Martin Luther Junior’s famous, *I have a dream* speech and Tunji Sotimirin, who ruled the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Greg Mbajiorgu submits as follows:

The growth of the solo theatrical sub-genre seems to have stultified in Nigeria because of the fact that the pioneer soloists (Funsho Alabi and Tunji Sotimirin) did not find it necessary to document their solo performances in print after their production tours, (59).

Mbajiogu further submits that “the performance context of their art has created problems for theatre scholars and aspiring solo performers who have no tangible hold on their ephemeral works,” (59). He then claims that the publication of his solo oriented *The Minister’s Son*, was the remedy and catalyst that was needed to give this sub-genre the necessary life and create room for continuity.

Mbajiogu gets it quite out of context and this is the crux of the contention in this paper: That there is need for the revival of stage drama, the solo performance, inclusive, on the Nigerian stage and that this can be done by understudying the manners and methods especially the publicity techniques employed by stand-up comedians in their shows.
Definition

In his beautifully written book of essays and studies on comedy, Bamidele says that, “efforts to define comedy in dramatic literature often oscillate between making descriptive analysis of its structure and making an evaluative criticism of the cause of laughter,” (1). And he did just that by not providing a definition! He concludes the opening chapter of the book this way. “Since comedy in its pure form can resist definition, let us study its various nature(s) in a table that suggests the terms for it in critical study,” (9). In the said table, there was no mention of stand-up comedy. However, the term seems to have arisen out of its nature. The name probably would have been different if its performative nature had taken any other posture apart from standing. As Lahr has noted, “Stand-up” comic-is “a term which indicates how much movement has gone out of the comic art. Sadly,” he continues, in his review of Comedians by Trevor Griffiths in the Old Vic, sometime in 1975, “the debate, though fair and reasoned, doesn’t have comedy’s theatrical gusto,” (30).

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, says stand-up comedy “is a comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, usually speaking directly to them.” We need to slightly adjust this definition to accommodate the fact that the stand-up comic can also be video and audio recorded for a playback as we have witnessed in Nigeria. And this idea of a live audience and video and audio recording appear to be the end of the similarity between it and live stage/theatre.

Indeed, stand-up comedy is a theatre sub-genre in which a single performer stands before a live audience and, or records before the camera or microphone all sorts of jokes which cover just about any subject depending on the occasion at hand, some of which he creates on the spur of the moment. He is not an actor in the sense of stage or live theatre play production, but a performer since he mimics his subjects, but his central weapon of conveying his jokes is verbal; imitation or mimicry of action is merely incidental and supportive of the verbal force or onslaught of his presentation. Above all, it is simply a display of an individual’s ability to hold the audience. This singular characteristic removes it from the mainstream theatre, which is a collective and team work.

Live theatre/stage today

There is no doubt that professional theatre practice in Nigeria has taken a rather nasty fall, not unlike the nation herself in all ramifications. Ayakoroma notes that, “professional theatre practice in Nigeria has over the years, suffered serious neglect.” He identifies lack of fund, absence of government support, lack of facilities, insecurity, among others, as the reasons for the neglect. The last factor, insecurity, more than any other is the greatest / single negative factor that has affected professional theatre practice. Theatre by its nature is an out of door
business which tends to pick when routine activities are getting ready for bed. People use the theatre to relax frayed nerves and cool off the day’s accumulated physical and psychological grime from work and life’s irritations. Thus, it begins late like night shift workers. The insecurity in the nation has thus affected its patronage even up to the university campuses.

There were years when it was the norm to open the pages of newspapers and see what plays would be opening at the national theatre. Not anymore. Plays, when they come up these days occupy working hours running between 3 – 6pm which are the peak productive hours for the labour force. Even some university theatres where there are paucity of staff and students accommodation suffer similar fate because cult groups make evening stroll a risk, yet in the midst of all these trials faced by professional live/stage theatre, the stand – up comedy thrives. One wonders why and how? Closely examined, there is really nothing spectacular about stand up. It is generally the same wine in the old wine skin which occasionally gets tasty dependent on the wine mixer. As Matt Singer has rightly noted in a review of Kelvin Hart’s performance, published online with the title, “Kelvin Hart: What Now?”

I admire anyone who tries to bring something new to a very stale genre or format. The stand-up movie or special has remained basically the same for decades. The venues change, the material and comedians change, but the general aesthetics don’t; a man or woman and a microphone, a stage, a bunch of cameras, a couple of reaction shots of crowds laughing, and that’s pretty much it.

Yet, it thrives and flourishes! The reason may not be unconnected to the nature of the Nigerian. The average Nigerian finds reason to justify his existence and since he cannot get at the oppressive politicians, he takes pleasure in seeing them exposed and subjected to ridicule. The politicians and their antics therefore, provide the bulk of the fare of stand-up comedy for the comedians who subject them to all manners of parody, and since this is the only means through which the people can get back at them, it sells because the people take pleasure in their exposure. Ordinarily, the Nigerian politicians and government officials are impervious to media exposure, capitalizing on the people’s ethnic, religious and political bigotry, to luxuriate in their corrupt and immoral atrocities. What would make decent officials and people in other climes to resign their positions, tend to make ours gather more steam and become more bloated and puffy in their display of what would make morally upright people recoil in shame.

As Graber has noted, “fear of publicity can be as powerful a force in shaping action as actual exposure,” (6). Thus, the only exposure our politicians get is the butt of jokes from comedians and it has no power to hurt them; and since the people are helpless, they laugh. The laughter, then, is as much to relieve tension as to hide the true or real decay and the people’s helplessness in the face of an organized
debauchery, political gangsterism, conspicuous consumption, over bearing arrogance and all manners of corruption by a cabal of few individuals, masquerading as guardians of the nation. The people laugh in order to hide their weakness, helplessness and complicity in an organized and deliberate criminalization of illegality.

Again, stand-up comedy does not qualify as theatre in the real sense as already noted. It is a solo performance and is, therefore, concerned with the individual display of humourous talent as it were, against the collective of theatre/stage performance, which has a story and plot. In this case, the venues oscillate between hotels, restaurants, conference halls, etc; never in the theatre except on rare occasions. This naturally adds up to two things. (1). It necessarily affects the size of the audience, and (2), It guarantees a measure of security.

Also, stand-up comedy does not parade an array of stars but a star. This in itself helps to control the audience. For instance, if the comedian is not your ‘brand’, you relax and would not bother yourself even when he is performing in your vicinity. They have however, tried to overcome this challenge by organizing such shows as “Nite of a Thousand Laughs” and similar shows which feature different comedians, as already noted. But, as the advertisement of the soft drink brand, 7up has made us understand, if it’s not 7up, it simply cannot be 7up. So, if it is not live stage/theatre, it is not and cannot be live stage. Then, what next? How does one bring back the stage to its glory and stop it from further drifting as it is doing now?

The theatre, and by that, we mean live stage, is a professional business that brings different experts together. It helps to engender team spirit and prepares those involved in it for the world beyond the theatre. In other words, it fosters the interactive intercourse of relationship building, helps those involved to learn how to subdue their over bearing sentiments, even creativity, encourages and discovers leadership qualities and exposes the latent or hidden talents of some who were not yet aware of their hidden potentials. It creates different levels of job in its disparate areas of specialization, from the entrepreneurial to the professional, up to the academic and journalistic.

Beyond that, the audience is exposed to different perceptions of man or a given situation which the dramatic production is prone to offer. The comedy in a play or drama is clearly incorporated to the best menu from the stand-up comedy fare. Indeed, some comic plays on stage have a good dose of stand-up comedy. One easily recalls the productions of The Laffomania Organization, from the University of Ibadan in the 1990s. In comedy, there is a story, which has a subject matter or theme. The central message which is the take-home reward of the audience is available. This is unlike the fare of stand-up comedy which though, rich in laughter, is just a mere stringing together of disparate and unconnected jokes, with no particular central message beyond the evocation of laughter.
Beyond all these, the theatre as performance is an experience. It is a celebration that no quality of stand-up comedy can measure up to. The joy which accompanies a successful performance is infectious and total, penetrating both backstage and the stage itself and most times embracing the audience. A performance is an event, a celebration of sorts. As Edwin Wilson has noted while discussing the central message of a play, the essence of a production cannot be captured in just a few sentences. Though he acknowledges that some plays may have specific messages, he submits that:

The play means much more, and it is doubtful if the meaning could ever be captured in a few sentences or paragraphs. In most cases, a production does not mean anything that specific: it exists and transmits many meanings, impressions, and emotions that add up to an overall experience, (406).

Though stand-up comedy produces laughter and holds the audience bound, the take home message of the audience comes in the form of an isolated joke or expression of humour recalled as a consequence of its manner of rendition, or the cause of the joke. It does not carry themes the way play productions do, nor does it generate the kind of collective response a play has the tendency to generate. To further show that stand-up comedy is incapable of generating any collective response to its exposure of societal evil, you hear some of them say, “Na joke I dey joke oo” thereby underscoring its own un-seriousness. There is need, therefore, for the revival of stage drama, not only for societal benefit but also for the survival and continued growth of the profession as it affects the living stage.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relevance of theatre practice in Nigeria today and noted that live stage/theatre is tottering towards extinction, giving room for the growth of the sub-genre known as stand-up comedy. It submits that though stand-up comedy is doing very well and should be encouraged, it cannot substitute for the live stage, which is a collective experience and by which a nation can be adjudged as being culturally viable as against the solo outing of a solitary comedian. Arising from this, the paper concludes that there is urgent need for the revival of stage drama, not only in the professional theatre sphere, but also in the universities where theatre arts, or preferably, performing arts are offered.

Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in this paper, the following recommendations are made.
1. Practitioners in the theatre should understudy the publicity techniques of stand-up comics in order to learn from them how they are able to command patronage.

2. That there is urgent need to address the insecurity situation in the country and in our tertiary institutions as it affects the activities of cult groups, which factor militates against the future of professional and academic theatre practice.

3. Culture and information ministries of the various states should encourage their staff to produce plays, at least quarterly, if not monthly. This will help to preserve and promote the various cultures; and, lastly,

4. Theatre practitioners should realize that film is film and live theatre is live theatre; to that end, live theatre should be encouraged as it is the precursor to the film industry in Nigeria.

References