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# The Nigerian Theatre Director and the Search for a New Audience in the Twenty-First Century

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**Abstract**
*The process of a dramatic production involves many creative minds who must work together for the utmost satisfaction of the audience who although is outside the production process but is ably represented by the artistic director. This process involves the producer, the director and other creative minds such as the costumier, stage manager, set designer, lighting designer, properties manager, music director and others. All these artists copulates their creative efforts to interpret the written text of the dramatist in order to entertain ,inform, sensitize or educate the audience, who also comes to the theatre with his own imagination which is put to test by the lighting, projected images, dialogue, and set, which is used to represent different locales in the drama. This paper examines the live dramatic performance and the essential roles of the audience. It observes that although the audience determines the success of the creativity of the dramatist through his appreciation and understanding of the director's interpretation, it is the director's artistic creativity that forms the precept for the audience understanding as well as enhances his interpretation. It concludes that the Nigerian audience needs to appreciate and recognise the artistic director who represents his interest in the course of a dramatic production.*
Keywords: Theatre director, Search, Audience, Theatre

## Introduction

The process of achieving a meaningful and an exhilarating live dramatic performance begins with the planning stage which involves the producer and other crew members. It is the platform where salient factors that are crucial to a successful live performance are discussed. These factors, which include funding, players (actors and actresses), play text, stage, and socio-political situation of the state or nation is incomplete without meaningful deliberation on the audience who is a determinant factor behind the chosen script or text especially in a profit-making theatre organization. Aside profit however, "all types of dramatic performance require an audience, because it is in the mind and imagination of the spectator that the final step in the creative process occurs" (Oscar Brockett and Ball, 2004: 21). However, Edwin Wilson (2004: 21-22) is of the opinion that "sometimes an audience may not be in tune with the characters on stage but will react violently against them. In either situation, though, members of the audience are participating emphatically. They might shed tears, laugh, pass judgement, sit frozen, or literally tremble with fear. But they participate through their imaginations while separated from the action." However, the reactions and positions of members of the audience to the dramatic performance may not be the same since they come into the theatre with different levels of imagination and understanding which the live performance

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must appeal to in order to get the desired response. This is probably one of the reasons why a play is not a play until it is performed before a live audience who stimulates the live performance with his own experience, knowledge, imagination and interpretation. Vera Mowry Roberts (1971: 283) in her book titled *The Nature of Theatre* is of the opinion that:

> *theatre is made where an actor meets an audience and with it lives through an experience in which both are interested and involved. The actor and director constitute the living component of the theatre arts. It follows that, the designer and architect supply the environment, the playwright and critic supply the words, the idea, the philosophy and the form. It follows, then, that since theatre is the art form of virtual life, the living components are the most essential, without them theatre does not exist.*

Robert's opinion gives a brief but vivid clarity of the functions of the various artistes that are involved in the line of play production, as well as a clarification of the director, actor, and the audience essentialities. Nevertheless, it is the director who designs, supervises, coordinates and offers the audience an interpretation which however may not be the only possible interpretation of the script. Thus the theatre director is the playwright's creator who gives life to the inanimate characters and images created in the story as well as composes pictures with the playwright's intent which reflects through the plot. It is apposite to know that "the initial task of the director is a solitary one: he chooses the play he wants to direct. However, if he is working with an established theatre group such as a repertory house, a community or college theatre he is likely to have a fairly free choice in this matter" (Vera Mowry Roberts, 1971: 315). Oscar Brockett and Ball (2004: 21) submit that:

> *intended. There is no guarantee that a spectator's interpretation will accord with the playwright's or the director's or that one spectator's interpretation will be the same as that of other spectators. Nevertheless, shaping the theatrical medium to arouse the desired audience response is the primary challenge that playwright, director, and other performers seek to meet.*

The submission of Brockett and Ball above should be the important and ultimate goal of the theatre director.

Every dramatic performance attracts different categories of audience which is a fractional part of the society, whether paying, special or gathered at random to witness the show, The paying audience is invited into a live performance through jingles, advertisements, and publicity; the random members of the audience are gathered at random to see a show which may be free of charge while the special audience may come into the theatre by invitation to watch the performance on the opening night. This may be a group or individuals representing the interest of the sponsor or producer while the communal audience is a member of the community who in cases of

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community festival or rituals views his/her presence as a communal obligation. One common feature of these types of audience is the fact that they are representatives of the society who come to the theatre to observe the society as mirrored or portrayed through the performance.

Although the dominant factor to the audience interpretation is the actor who serves as the mouthpiece of the playwright, the interpreter of the costumier, props manager and others creative artists, it is the artistic creativity of the director that influences the actor's movements, rendition and interpretation. Hence, theatre becomes an art that concerns itself exclusively with live performances in which the actions are precisely planned to create a coherent and significant experience that must appeal to the audio visual senses of the spectator. It is necessary to state that the interchange in the use of spectator and audience in this discourse is due to the fact that both are relevant to a live performance. The word spectator is derived from the word to view while the audience is derived from the word to see. However, both the audience and spectator come to the theatre to witness six major aspects of a live performance - innovation, style, historical period, level of abstraction, social class, and given circumstances which in most cases are not strange to them. Nevertheless, the issue of affective fallacy may arise when the audience responds to his own perception, his own experience when social issues relating to divorce, suicide, child abuse, kidnapping, insurgency, justice, child adoption and other societal or communal issues are the focus of a play. These are societal ills that affect the emotion and psychology of an audience who sometimes have had a traumatic experience from one or any of the menaces. Once the emotion is arrested however, the understanding of the audience is negatively influenced and the play thereby loses its desired objective. Suffice to say that in the theatre, spectators must usually be separated from the performance in order to see and hear what is happening onstage. This is achievable when the audience detaches his imagination from the influential factors of the production in order to fully absorb the experience. This according to Edwin Wilson (2004: 196) is called "aesthetic distance." The issue of affective fallacy or aesthetic distance is a sort of addendum to Brecht's alienation theory of performance. Brecht asks, "how do you expect the audience to understand life when all that happens on stage masters him?" (Mitter Shomit, 1979: 37). Hence, it behooves the artistic director to either raise his level of creativity in order to boost the issue(s) surrounding his concept or give equal treatment to salient issues raised in a play production.

**The Theatre Performance**

Every dramatic performance is a display of the creative instincts of theatre artistes and the collaborative efforts of various theatre practitioners. All the features of a live performance which the critic or the reader views literarily is displayed before a live audience where the questions of garments for the performance, set design, locale and setting, the period as well as the style and convention of the period as woven into the plot of the play is interpreted. The first contact an audience has with a live performance is the set which is placed under a warm illumination that prepares his mind for the performance, and there and then the actor. Like a dream, the live performance removes the garment of naturalness from the audience until probably the curtain call when the audience regains his consciousness. This is the magic of the theatre and one of the experiences that make the theatre a house of dream.

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> *When you enter a theatre, you may feel you are in a different world, where earth-time is suspended for the duration of the play, until at the end you return to normal existence, just as, when you wake from a dream, you take up your life again; you remember something of what you experienced in the dream, and even what you do not remember may affect you unconsciously. The live dramatic performance has the power to express something or situation beyond the common sense world. This is the impression that the Balinese theatre had on the French director, Antonin Artaud who uses the phrase, theatre of cruelty to describe how theatre can and should break through the trappings of ordinary local experience to confront people [audience] with a psychedelic (mind blowing) experience* (Diana Devlin, 1989: 202).

The theatre remains an artificial phenomenon since the actor feigns to be what he is not. He lives in an ephemeral situation that distinguishes him as "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then he is heard no more" (Shakespeare, 2002: 24). However, theatre remains truly a magical enterprise, that induces the audience towards the state of suspension of disbelieve.

**The Theatre Audience**

The theatre audience is a group of people or individuals who are gathered through publicity, advertisement or invitation at a certain time in a designated place for the purpose of seeing a performance which could be a dance, an opera, a concert, or dance drama. It is a group of individuals who have the artistic awareness of being in a theatre, the conventional agreement about what to accept or reject and how the story will be told. However, their response is determined by factors such as the physical structure of the theatre (place), the social environment and the cultural ambience, while their response is influenced by the play and style of presentation. It is a group of contenders making the play, the evening and the emotion. It is a group of playmates who build a structure of appreciation or condemnation of the playwright's message. A dramatic performance depends on this group for its authenticity as the group engages in collective behaviour that subordinates their separate identities to that of a crowd as they lose their power of independent thoughts when unexpected reserves of passion come into play. In a profit-making theatre organisation, the attendance determines the success or failure of a performance as a full house means profit while a half-full or an empty house means a loss. The theatre audience has the freedom to align or reject the thematic intent or essence of a play. This is because a play may be too intellectual for one type of audience or too vulgar for another. Its message may be unacceptable to some, while a topical play may quickly lose significance in its own community. Nevertheless, "the role of the audience is significant to the success of a performance, as the understanding of the theme of the playwright's intent should cohere with the audience understanding and interpretation" (Diana Devlin, 1989).

**The Artistic Director**

Since the emergence and the recognition of the status of the artistic director in about the 20th century, his role and contributions to the modern theatre cannot be

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downplayed. Despite this recognition however, members of the audience most times forget that there is a master planner whose artistic contributions are responsible for their satisfaction as well as germane to the realisation and projection of the playwright's intent. They fail to realise that behind the scenes which provoke them to laughter or makes them to ponder on their existence as a member of the society especially in plays that satirise societal ills such as corruption, armed robbery and political vandalism, is an artiste whose roles aesthetically elevate the production beyond the ordinary. The audience often forgets that there is an artiste whose imagination coupled with that of the playwright's arouses his consciousness as he sees himself portrayed in the story. The roles of the artistic director in the course of realising a dramatic production superimpose the roles of other artistes. Some of the roles according to Oscar Brockett and Ball (2004: 319) are that "the director decides upon an interpretation of the script and a production concept; casts and rehearses with the performers; works with the designers; and integrates all the elements into a finished production."

The French director, Ariane Mnouchkine compares the role of an artistic director with that of a midwife whose essential role in the labour-room towards child delivery cannot be waived aside. Suffice to say that the importance of the theatre director to the realisation of a play can be equated to the inestimable value and role of a midwife during child birth. He enunciates that:

> *I'm like a midwife. I help to give birth to the production. The midwife doesn't create the woman, and she's not the husband. But still, if she's not there, the baby is in great danger and might not come out. I think really good director is that. Let's say I am a good director when I don't fail to be that'* (Oscar Brockett and Ball, 2004: 321).

Despite the importance of these enumerated roles to the realisation of a live dramatic performance and the playwright's intent, none requires the physical presence of the artistic director on the night of performance. Thus professionally speaking, the role of the director ends at the dress and technical (dress and tech) night where final corrections are made and the responsibility of taking the play to the audience is transferred to the stage manager who like the director has been part of the production since the first rehearsal.

**The Search for a New Audience**

One common feature exists between the artistic director and the audience in the theatre; they both share the characteristic of seeing the performance. However, while the director sees the performance for the purpose of creating artistic balance, the primary aim of the audience is entertainment where other functions of the performance become secondary. While the director represents the eyes and minds (interest) of the audience, the audience, albeit a representative of the society, is mostly concerned with the level of entertainment and the message the play can offer. It is important to state however that both are essential factors in the theatre even during the experimentation era of the twentieth century. It is the message of the play and how it is aesthetically plot to suit the time and the period of the performance that creates the intimacy between the two essentials of the theatre – actors and audience.

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Aside the similar characteristic earlier mentioned in the foregoing the audience, like the performer, changes in his attitude as the performance progresses or opens night after night where a certain level of familiarity must have been achieved between the performers and the audience. It is this recognition that results into a direct flow of feeling between the performers and audience which sets apart the live theatre from the video, film and cinema. Marsh Cassady (1997: 15) reminisces that:

> *there is an unknown quality in every theatre presentation: the direct contact between artist and spectator. Even with the same script, setting, and performers, a play differs from night to night. Not only do the performers' attitudes and actions changed, the audience changes as well. Each group of theatergoers brings new expectations and perspective…In a theatre production, there is a constant flow between the audience and the actors.*

Despite this familiarity, the audience must as a matter of necessity develops the responsibility of getting acquainted with theatre in order to understand it as an art form. The summary of the earlier discussion in this aspect of the discourse is to reiterate that the audience is an inseparable factor in every live dramatic performance. For theatre to occur two kinds of involvements are necessary – participation and observation.

The Nigerian theatre audience plays an active role in the theatre, observing the plots as it progresses and reacting to issues and antics of the performers especially when the story is culturally woven to suit his interpretation and understanding of the performance. What can make him to be passive is only if the performance is a display of a culture that is alien to his understanding. A good example is the performance of a Western play on the Nigerian stage. This requires his attention in order to acquire the understanding and interpretation of the play. Ola Rotimi, a versatile director with vast experience of the nature of the Nigerian theatre audience submits that the "Nigerian audience is what I called the Polaroid audience, if you are good, they tell you right there. They talk back to you. If you are bad, they verbalize their displeasure as well. They hiss and even throw paper-balls at you, which are participatory criticism" (Uwatts, 1990: 179). Most displeasure is visited on the artistic director who in the eye of the critic must have been responsible for the inadequacies in the production being the overall supervisor. A similar treatment meted to a football coach when his team losses an important match.

However, despite the active participation of the Nigerian audience, a lot is still requires of the theatre director today, when we wake up each day to face various social maladies and hazards that are inimical to the peaceful existence of the citizens. Although he is a creator of the playwright's intent as composed in the play text, the director is responsible for the artistic balance that gives life to the inanimate characters of the playwright's work. Therefore, if any of these social vices rocking the nation is projected via a live performance, it rests on the shoulder of the twenty-first century theatre audience to see the performance beyond entertainment but as stimulant to the sense of creativity of the director. This sort of appreciation encourages the director as well as boosts his ego. The playwright, who confabulate the story, and the director, who uses the confabulation to aesthetically

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compose pictorial images and supervises the realisation and interpretation of the story, deserve commendations. The twenty-first century Nigerian theatre director is in search for an audience who would rise up and be active in responding to plays that confront him as well as call for his response to such societal issues as corruption, mismanagement, armed robbery, terrorism, rape, child abuse, kidnapping, abduction, ritual killings, drug abuse and other social vices.

The audience may come to the theatre and be presented with plays from the past, especially traditional plays that re-enact important historical or political events. Such play induces the conscience of the audience as it challenges his present with a retrospect into the past. This is when and where the role of theatre as a conscientising tribunal and a weapon for change is probably achieved because theatre is endowed with the power to make its audience experience the past in order to have a better present that may lead to a greater future. Therefore, the modern audience should observe his first task of coming to the theatre in order to depart with a meaningful resolution since the playwright may decide to open the aspect for the audience's judgement. Whatever the play offers, it is an onerous task that places several questions before the audience. Sometimes the tasks relate to the meaning of the play. Are you being asked to judge? Are you being warned? Is your sympathy being demanded? Are you being invited to identify with one or more characters? Are you being asked to pretend the play world is real or that it symbolizes something? These questions if adequately answered may guide as well as enhance the audience full understanding of the play production.

Most times, the Nigerian drama consciously addresses the mind of its audience by projecting his concerns. The Nigerian theatre director often times artistically project the works of Nigerian playwrights such as Bode Osanyin in *Shattered Bridge* (1992) and Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* (1980) and a host of others. These are plays that consciously dramatise the concerns of its audience – the society. Every live performance of these plays seeks to free the audience from the tyranny of oppression and the pain of insecurity. It is not a gathering to feel for the performers in any way but to be able to find a way out of the menace that faces the audience in real life. The director in interpreting the playwright's idea attempts to reawaken the spirit of the members of the audience to societal issues and expects them to embrace it with required responses. This is one of the purposes of a director. Nevertheless, it is the degree of interestedness which the performance imparts on the mind of the audience that determines the audience flow, that is, the extent to which an observer or a spectator remembers the content of the performance. However, it is the director who chooses the audience and therefore deserves more appreciation, respect and recognition.

**Conclusion**

The essence of any live dramatic performance is to be staged before an audience. The audience determines the extent of the success or failure of a live performance. The fact however remains that every performance has its followers and that every form of theatre cuts out as many as it attracts. Every dramatic production remains a presentation of a particular society as perceived by the playwright. However, whether the playwright's perception is right or wrong depends solely on the judgement of the society which is being ably represented by the audience and whose

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perception of the society is more important. The audience should always recognise the position and roles of the artistic director as well as appreciate his contributions to the success of the dramatic performance that in most cases amuses, provokes laughter and awakens his consciousness towards seeing himself (his character) in the play in as much as the director places the audience's satisfaction on the pinnacle of his mind when working on a play. Thus every dramatic production is a "cultural performance, showing ourselves to ourselves, and also capable of being reflective, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves" (Meyerhoff, 1992: 234). Although the impact of every dramatic performance is ephemeral in nature, the audience is expected to go home with the message and live with it, especially in a century when theatre is adequately and gradually supplanting religion. This is achieved by giving the required response to a performance which can only come through an open mind. The twenty-first century audience should be able to pass rightful judgement as requested by Fred Agbeyegbe in his play *The King Must Dance Naked* (1986). He should sympathise with the protagonist in Kole Omotosho's *Shadows in the Horizon* (1976), Queen Ojuola in Rotomi's *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), (an adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex), as well as identify with one of the characters in Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1995). In a nation besmeared with political upheavals, militancy, kidnapping, rituals and insurgency, this is the nature of the theatre audience a Nigerian director will prefer. Moreover, in an obscure or a challenging play, the audience in responding to the tasks before him must search hard to discover what he is being asked to do in the process of watching the production.

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