

**ECONOMIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN NIGERIAN  
UNIVERSITIES AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN A  
RECESSION AND POST-PANDEMIC ERA: A STUDY OF  
UNIPORT AND UNIZIK THEATRES**

**Chukwuemeka Onuoha**

**&**

**Alex Asigbo**

<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm.v.15.1.3>

***Abstract***

*The economic viability of the Theatre ought to have redeemed Educational Theatres in Nigeria from their economic plight and limitations. But surprisingly, the economic potentials of Educational Theatres in most government owned Universities within Nigeria have not been fully harnessed for the generation of funds for their growth and survival. This is conditioned by the focus on theory, instruction and training of artistes within these Educational Theatres with little or no attention paid to the business aspects of the Theatre. The present economic crisis and recession faced in the post pandemic era which has seen poor funding of education by the government and lack of sponsorship of Educational Theatres by the host institutions, should engender the needed attention to the commercial aspects of the Educational Theatre. The huge creative human and artistic resources available to Educational Theatres in Nigeria if harnessed, will not only help Educational Theatres scale through this economic crisis by creating internally generated revenues for the smooth running of their affairs, without solely depending on whatever sponsorship that comes from the host institutions or the government as the case maybe; but will also raise the economic consciousness of the students within the various Departments of Theatre and Performing Arts to the wide range of opportunities available to them as Performing Artistes, Theatre Managers and Administrators. The*

*content analysis and personal observation approaches of the qualitative research method were adopted for the realization of the objectives of this study. The study seeks to engender needed attention and actions to the economic plight of educational theatres in government owned universities in Nigeria and suggests a blend of theory, practice and commerce in the development and review of the curriculum of educational theatres.*

## **Introduction**

The effects of COVID-19 cut across all areas of human existence and have resulted in an unprecedented change in the mode of operation of various organizations. This situation does not leave out the economic damage caused by the pandemic due to the long shut down of business activities and transactions. This state of affairs saw a lot of organizations lay off some of their staff and cut Workers' salaries all in a bid to avoid economic bankruptcy and fight for their survival through this challenging time. The government is also not left out in this mix as there are claims that the government is short of resources owing to their efforts in providing relief materials and palliatives to citizens during the lock-down period. This is worsened by the fact that there was little or no economic activity ongoing at the time and invariably, the government had no inflow of funds. The theatre business like all other businesses also had its share of the challenges ushered in by the economic recession occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the impact of recession on the theatre business even before the pandemic, Nwamuo posits that "even though one may need very broad methodologies to research and measure such an impact, it remains clear that the recession has come to worsen the already sorry state of theatre practice in Nigeria by giving birth to an environment which does not fully favour creativity" (14). He goes further to point out that the recession has weakened government's capacity to fund important projects such as the Arts and Culture industry. In the words of Nwamuo, "the recession has thus intensified some of the problems which for years have plagued

the theatre profession in Nigeria. Some of the problems include: Institutional challenge (such as irregular review of curriculum for theatre courses, extreme politicking, finance, institutional bureaucracy and low motivation of artist)” (22). Still on the same premise, Yacim also affirms:

That like in all sectors, theatre practice has been equally affected by the economic meltdown. There is insecurity, breakdown of infrastructure, lack of maintenance, lack of support for the arts and the birth of and rise of modern electronic video-viewing technologies and Nollywood – all have affected theatre practice so much that live theatre going, is going, if not already gone (17).

With the gradual phase-off of the COVID-19 and all the economic and social challenges that it came with yet to be erased, it is therefore a time to understand compliance, adjust expectations, renew focus and reposition in the wake of the new normal. In this new normal, theatre organizations are not left out. Nwamuo supporting the above assertion states that:

Ironically, it is when the economy is in a mess and there is general unemployment even for graduates: when there is mass retrenchment, downsizing and rationalization, and about 62% of the people are poor, then is the time for real structural adjustment if the people and artists must survive...paradoxically, this is the time that theatre artistes must work hard to market their products effectively otherwise, they will fold up and theatre practitioners will die of hunger. This period of survival of the fittest is the appropriate time for commercially-oriented theatres (43).

Educational theatres in Nigeria in the face of the new normal should as a matter of urgency adopt new innovative strategies to sell their artistic goods and services by harnessing their huge creative human and artistic resources towards the generation of funds for their growth, development, survival and self-sustenance.

### **The Construct and Functions of Educational Theatres in Nigeria**

Educational theatres within the realm of this study are theatres that exist in institutions of learning. They are supposedly sponsored by the host institutions and usually having the staff and students serve as cast and crew for theatrical productions. They can exist in a university, college of Education, Polytechnic and even secondary schools. But this study mainly concerns educational theatres in Nigerian Universities.

Most educational theatres in Nigeria by nature focus on the training and instruction of artistes with little or no attention to the commercial angles of the theatre. While some scholars hold this practice as ideal, some others counter this practice as limiting the potentials of the educational theatre. One of such scholars who hold dearly to the focus of educational theatres on theory and practice is Langley. According to Langley, “educational theatres are designed with the responsibility of producing high quality innovation for the development of the artiste and the nation” (187). Within the same line of thought, Adora and Agba opine that “educational theatres in Nigeria as part of its social commitment are expected to generate ideas and provide capacity building through the acquisition of knowledge and making of professional artistes” (52). Countering the above positions and assertions is Bankole Ola-koyi who believes that educational theatres in Nigeria should look beyond theory and classroom work and harness the economic potentials of educational theatres for the generation of funds. Bankole Ola-Okoyi avers that “many of these departments have resigned to literary

teaching rather than commercializing some of their practical productions or reviving their various performing companies that could and should take the theatre to willing audiences as it was done from the sixties up to the eighties” (216). He further argues that” the problems of financial incapability would continue to deter the progress in the Department of Theatre/Performing Arts in all institutions so long as the huge creative human resources are underutilized” (216). Supporting Ola-Koyi’s views is Samuel Kafewo who argues thus; “while it is true that most educational theatres are first and foremost centres of instruction, should it be devoid of sound management?” (63). He further stresses the importance of proper management and profit making in the educational theatres when he queries; “By the time we hide under instruction, are we teaching students for instance that running a production at a loss is normal?” (63). Furthering the argument, Ayo Akinwale states that our educational theatres are potential business ventures but their economic viability is yet to be fully harnessed. He articulates this assertion when he says;

Within the Faculty of Arts of Nigerian universities, the only professional discipline is the Theatre Arts discipline. This is because one can train as a theatre artiste and establish his own company. But because of lack of enough awareness coupled with lack of vision and the zeal to work hard by the practitioners; we do not have enough theatre companies in Nigeria today that are founded and operated purely on commercial basis (94).

From the perspective of this study and in the face of the present economic recession ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic which has seen a poorer funding of education by the government and consequently, poor sponsorship of educational theatres by the host institutions, there is a heightened need for the Departments of

Theatre and Performing Arts to harness their huge creative and artistic resources by constantly staging Departmental productions outside their classroom work in order to generate resources for their survival, growth and self-sustenance.

### **The 4Ps marketing Mix theory**

In the words of Jerome McCarthy, the Marketing mix refers to “the controllable variables which the company puts together to satisfy the target audience” (64). A target market is the group of present and potential customers that the company aims its product at. Organizations often deploy their marketing strategy as effectively as possible. According to McCarthy, “marketers can draw up a good marketing plan and improve operating results visibly by using the right combination and variables” (80). Thus, the marketing mix refers to four broad levels of marketing decisions namely: Product, Price, Place and Promotion.

The product should fit the task consumers want it for, it should work and it should be what the consumers are expecting to get. The product mix applies to both physical products and services. In the words of Singh, “product is defined as a physical product or service to the consumer for which he is willing to pay” (19). The price is an important factor for both the supplier and the consumer and is mainly determined by the proportional relationship between the supply and demand. The product should always be seen as representing good value for money. This does not necessarily mean it should be the cheapest available. One of the main tenets of the marketing concept is that consumers are usually happy to pay a little more for something that works really well for them.

Place includes both the geographical location where the product is offered and the distribution channel. The product should be available where the target consumer finds it easiest to shop. The place in the Marketing Mix theory is also referred to as the distribution Channel. The distribution channel is an integral part of the service, which involves the service provider, intermediaries

(agents) and the same service user (in most cases). Therefore, in order to control and manage these processes, companies need to develop an appropriate marketing channel, to coincide with the company's goals. Uzniene as cited by Isorite, states that “for the creation of the distribution chain, it is necessary to, analyze consumer needs, determine the distribution chain objectives and possible obstacles to achieve them, identify the key distribution chain alternatives and assess these alternatives” (36).

Promotion, the last of the 4Ps marketing complex element helps to increase consumer awareness in terms of their products, leads to higher sales and helps to build brand loyalty. Thus, the promotion of the marketing mix is a tool that helps disseminate information, encourage the purchase and affects the purchase decision process. Promotion is an activity that makes the target customers aware of a product or service and their advantages when they buy the product. It is the element of the marketing mix, covering decisions and actions provided for groups of people that are informed and encouraged to buy products.

Relating the 4Ps Marketing Mix Theory to the theatre, the product in the Marketing Mix Theory refers to the performance which should meet the needs of the target audience and should be of good quality. The choice of a play to be produced is dependent on the type of audience it is meant for. Play selection is a very important aspect of the preproduction stage as the reception of the performance by the audience whom are the consumers is largely based on whether they can relate to the actions of the play. That is to say that there are performances (products) for various classes of audience members ranging from Students, business people, academics, traders etc, and their appreciation of the performance is dependent on whether they are able to relate to the actions on stage. Performing a play meant for an academic audience for a business-oriented audience might grossly be uninteresting to them and they might not show up for subsequent performances. Price within the realm of commercial theatre practice is equivalent to gate takings

(tickets). The ticket price for a theatrical performance is often fixed based on the direct and indirect expenditure incurred in the course of planning the play production. The ticket price for a production should not be too high or too low, there should be a balance between the quality of the production and the price as the production should always be seen as representing good value for money. In commercial Theatre practice, the place in the Marketing Mix Theory represents the theatre building where the audience (consumers) come to get the product which is the performance. The Place (performance venue) should provide maximum comfort for the audience in order to ensure they call again. The theatre should be located in an area where the audience can easily access. Promotion is a variable which is applied in the theatre in form of publicity in order to influence and draw the target audience to a named theatre production. This is often done through the medium of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, internet, social media etc.

A creative manipulation of the variables of the 4Ps Marketing Mix theory by educational theatres will guarantee increased audience patronage and profit maximisation which will help them generate the desired funds for the smooth running of their affairs and survival in the post-pandemic era.

### **Innovations and Strategies towards Economic Consciousness and Survival of Nigerian Educational Theatres in the Post-Pandemic Era**

Although the construct of the curriculum of government owned university theatres in Nigeria are not wholly designed for profit maximization, they would benefit from adopting the framework of partial commercialization where they would be required to sell their artistic goods and services for profit to generate funds to cover their operating expenditures and meet other challenges especially in the face of the present economic quagmire in Nigeria heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Partial commercialization is achieved through proper theatre management

taking into cognisance the ambits of theatre management ranging from the box office, house management, marketing, publicity, audience engineering and so on. It is important to note that the traditional methods of theatre management should be improved upon to meet the modern demands and taste of the audience and also address the present issues and challenges the theatre is faced with in a dwindling economy. Therefore, in times like this, theatre practitioners and the flag bearers of the theatre profession should think outside the box and come up with innovative strategies in order to remain relevant and survive the recession. Nwamuo proffers solutions which generally may be relevant in such context of economic recession. He states them as follows:

- a. Reduction of expenditure and increase in savings.
- b. Efforts to avoid the use of debts and borrowing as much as possible.
- c. Maintenance of liquidity to use as operative finances.
- d. Ability to set long term business goals.
- e. Effort to concentrate on customer service among others (17).

He goes further to state that “Nigerian artists should see their profession as a bread-winning instrument and thus a profitable venture” (17).

Innovation has always been a very important survival strategy in business and other spheres of life. Albert Einstein as cited by Downey states that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (35). There is a heightened need for new theatre innovations in terms of management and other related areas involved in engineering the audience to the theatre especially educational theatres. In view of the gradual return of events and business activities after the pandemic, it is Pertinent that educational theatres in Nigeria which are the worst hit by the turn of events should harness their artistic and creative resources to make economic gains. With the claim of the government that there are limited resources at its disposal due to

the pandemic losses and consequently, poor funding of education and lack of sponsorship by the host institutions, the departments of Theatre and Film Studies are expected to seize this opportunity to stage regular productions to raise funds if they want to remain financially solvent and be able to take care of internal challenges without always having to depend on the host institution for aid.

This innovation should be particularly geared towards repackaging theatre products for more appeal and to meet the demand and taste of the ever evolving theatre audience. Good packaging can help woo more audience to the live performance. According to Nwamuo, repackaging can include such considerations as

- a. Whether the audience should be shown two plays in one night for the price of one.
- b. Whether there should be an exhibition before the actual performance.
- c. Whether there should be pre-production sales before the show.
- d. Whether there should be light refreshment in addition to the main production (52).

The adoption of the multimedia style of presentation and theatre variety shows are also innovations that theatre practitioners can adopt in order to give the audience a more exciting experience. The multimedia style of presentation blends a good number of media in the presentation of a theatre show and this provides the audience with what looks like a cinematic experience and affords them the luxury of viewing the live and pre-recorded show all in one sitting.

With the world being a global village, the internet medium should be fully utilized in marketing and advertising theatre shows which reach a larger audience in a short period of time as against the traditional use of hand bills, posters, notice boards etc. These

theatre performances can also be streamed live through the various internet platforms and have the audience who cannot come to the theatre for personal reasons pay and view these performances live from the comfort of their homes.

The aforementioned measures and innovations if put into practice, will sure help theatres especially educational theatres survive the post pandemic and recession era by helping them generate enough resources for their activities and remaining financially solvent and whatever comes from the government, host institution or other sources will only add to the already existing inflow of income and this way, the departments will always have something to fall back on with or without sponsorship. With the quest by people all over the globe and Nigeria specifically to ease stress, relax and find escape routes to the emotional and mental discomfort that accompanied the pandemic, the theatre comes in handy for such kinds of emotional ease and relaxation. Hence, the post-pandemic era even though considered by many as a time for organizations to rebuild losses and damages looks quite advantageous for theatre organizations especially the departments of theatre and film studies that already have stand-by audience members in the form of students and lecturers whom are not left out in this search for emotional and mental release of tension. Therefore, the constant innovative staging of performances within the University by the Departments of Theatre and Performing Arts will serve the needs of the potential audience and also help the Departments to generate funds which invariably becomes a win-win for all parties involved.

### **The Level of Economic Consciousness in UNIPOINT and UNIZIK Theatres: Before and After the Pandemic**

The Uniport Theatre popularly referred to as The CRAB since its inception has always been awash with theatrical performances. The Crab is a place of relaxation for the lovers of live theatre performance who visit the theatre to be thrilled by the

spectacular theatre experience the Crab is known for. These performances are not just limited to practical exams by students, but also include departmental and individual productions by both staff, students and theatre practitioners from within and outside the university. The Uniport theatre can be said to be a hub of theatre performances. One observes that the Uniport theatre offers staff and theatre practitioners the avenue to make money from the theatre by harnessing the huge creative and human resources available to them as an educational theatre by constantly staging productions. This state of affairs from the researcher's observation has raised the consciousness of students and practitioners in training within the department to the economic viability and employment opportunities available to them as theatre practitioners.

The student's practical exams within the Uniport theatre which follow strictly the host University's academic calendar is different from departmental or individual productions. The practical exams are strictly classroom work for grading the student's performance and knowledge of the theatre. However, the practical exams also generate significant financial resources for the department. This is as a result of the adequate pricing of the department's artistic goods which is sold to willing audiences. As at the time of this research, the least price for a ticket in the Uniport Theatre is Five Hundred Naira. These performances are also staged in the evening when staff and students of the University are through with academic work and they stroll to the theatre to be entertained and for relaxation after the day's stress.

The departmental productions on the other hand are organized by the department which often involve the lecturers and students. These performances are put up by the department to generate money which serves as internally generated funds which the department makes use of to take care of internal financial obligations and the development of the department. The departmental productions are timed properly in order not to distract the students from their practical exams. Usually, the rehearsals for

the departmental production take place after the students must have concluded their practical exams.

Individual productions are also part of the practice and culture in the Uniport theatre. Lecturers and theatre practitioners within and outside the department of Theatre and Film Studies make use of the Crab to stage their productions. These productions are staged with the consent of the department and a certain agreed percentage is paid to the department by the individual(s). Thus, the department still makes money. It is also worthy of note that a good number of graduates from the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Uniport, have gone on to own theatre troupes and companies based on the level of managerial and business angles of the theatre they saw as students. These graduates presently make money by staging theatre productions and managing them adequately.

Before the pandemic, one could observe the frequent staging of productions outside classroom work or exams. These productions are properly priced and publicized in order to reach the target audience that are willing to watch these shows. Some of such theatre performances staged before the pandemic are *Things Fall Apart* (Prose to play adaptation), *Sunrise from the Ghetto*, *Obaseki*, *A Taste of Violence*, *Rogbodiyan*, *Venom for Venom*, *Grama don do* and so on. After the pandemic, the culture has remained the same and may even be said to have overtaken what it used to be. A good number of stage productions have already been staged in the Uniport theatre after the pandemic. Performances like *The gods are not to Blame*, *Mad Manners*, *Alaafin Kanran*, *The Harvest of Plays* (which is part of the student's practical exams), etc have been staged between the end of the pandemic lockdown and the time of this study (September, 2021). This practice within the Uniport Theatre in the spirit of economic consciousness proposed for educational theatres especially in the post pandemic era has helped the Department to solve some of their economic challenges and still remain solvent.

The Unizik Theatre which is cited within the Faculty of Arts in Nnamdi Azikiwe University has over the years witnessed tremendous growth in all ramifications. From the times when there was no theatre building and performances were staged in the open air, to the times when the Department made use of the University's auditorium for her performances. These stages have shaped the Department and resulted to the level of tenacity and doggedness of the staff and students of the Department even in the face of some seemingly unfavourable conditions. The performance space of the Department is presently located in the Faculty of Arts, popularly referred to as the Arts Theatre.

From the researcher's observation, there is a higher focus on class room exercises for grading the student's performance and knowledge of the theatre in the form of practical productions with very few productions outside classroom work geared towards generation of funds. The practical productions, which are staged every semester in line with the University's academic calendar is often performed by the students a week before the general school exams. These practical exams as part of the department's tradition are staged in the morning and the ticket price as at the time of this study is Two Hundred Naira. Besides practical productions, one would observe that there are limited performances in terms of departmental and individual productions. This lack of performances could be conditioned by the lack of monopoly of the Arts Theatre within the Faculty of Arts by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies. Often times, the Arts theatre is being made use of for other academic activities in the faculty and this situation could deter the Department of Theatre Arts from producing constantly as the Arts theatre is hardly free of activities. Therefore, there is need for a separate theatre building specifically for the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Unizik.

Other productions the Department gets involved in are command performances often during the University's Matriculation or Convocation. Few lecturers in the past have staged performances

outside the usual classroom work but the level of economic consciousness and the lack of consistency observed wasn't enough for what the study proposes for an economic conscious educational theatre in Nigeria. One observes that the practice of focusing only on classroom work and practical exams within the Unizik Theatre have continued even after the pandemic. There has been series of practical exam productions but no departmental production strictly for the generation of resources has been witnessed up until the time of this study. This is without prejudice to the ongoing rehearsals for a Departmental production being proposed for the ending of September, 2021.

### **Conclusion**

Harnessing the economic potentials of the theatre by the various Departments of Theatre and Performing Arts within Nigeria for economic gains is a practice worthy of adoption. Even though it is true that a handful of educational theatres have adopted this practice, a greater percentage of these educational theatres still hold doggedly to the traditional practice of sticking to theory, instruction and training of artistes even in the face of the present economic quagmire in Nigeria. While the reason for the focus on only classroom exercises by some educational theatres is observed to be as a result of various limitations and challenges faced by the Departments, others out rightly haven't keyed into the practice due to cheer oversight or lack or economic insight. It is in recognition of this yawning gap that the study derives its essence and conviction.

Theatre Arts discipline is not meant to be geared towards academic exercises only. It is rather a professional discipline where one can train as a theatre artiste, establish his or her own business enterprise in the form of a production house and manage it adequately as a theatre administrator/manager in order to earn a living. The Departments of Theatre and Performing Arts in their studies should take the lead towards economic consciousness by staging departmental productions outside class room exams and

seeking sponsorship outside the University in order to attain self-sustenance. These departmental productions should be staged regularly to meet the demands of the target audience. The performances should be of high quality, done in an audience friendly and comfortable space, and priced adequately as this will place good value on the performance and also give the audience value for the money paid. The place of adequate publicity should not be overlooked as it will help create awareness about the existence of such performances. The huge creative human resources available to educational theatres in Nigeria should be utilized to produce and sell artistic goods and services. The entrepreneurial skill of each department could be developed, harvested and maximised to serve as financial reservoir. This if done, will assist financially in the development of the department and also raise the entrepreneurial consciousness of the students to the economic viability and the wide range of employment opportunities the theatre profession offers especially in the present economic crisis in Nigeria which was made even worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Works Cited**

- Adora, Charles and Agba Michael. *Management and Engineering* Vol.4. No2. Kogi: Kogi State University Press, 2010.
- Akinwale, Ayo. "The Theatre as a Business venture in the New Millenium". *Nigeria theatre Journal* 5:1, (1991): 94-100.
- Downey, J. Davis. "Innovation: Your Key to Success and Survival". *Business Journal: The Forum of Executive Women* Vol 23. No.1, (2016): 15 – 23.
- Isoraite, Margarita, "Marketing Mix Theoretical Aspects". *International Journal of Research – Granthaalalay*, Vol.4. No 6 (2016): 25-37.

- Kafewo, Samuel. "Managing the University Theatre: Ahmadu Bello University Studio Theatre as Paradigm." *Nigerian Theatre Journal*. Lagos: Society of Nigeria Theatre Artistes, 1994.
- Langley, Stephen. *Theatre Management in America: Principles and Practice*. New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1980.
- Mc Carthy, Jerome. *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*. Homewood: Illinois Irwin, 1981.
- Nwamuo, Chris. *Theatre, Economic recession and Survival Strategies*. Calabar: Optimist Press Nigeria Company, 2017.
- Nwamuo, Chris. *Towards National Building; Excavating Bassey Andah's Framework for arts and Science Administration in Africa*. Calabar: Calabar University Press, 2016.
- Ola-koyi, Bankole. *Theatre Arts Programme and the Video Film Industry: Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera*. Manzini Swaziland: Academic Publishers, 2008.
- Singh, Meera. "Marketing Mix of 4Ps for Competitive Advantage." *IOSR Journal of Business and Management* Vol.3, 2012.
- Yacim, Roseline. "Theatre Going, Going, Gone". *Theatre Studies Review* Vol.7. No.2, 2011.

## **AUTHOR'S NAMES AND ADDRESSES**

### **Chukwuemeka Onuoha**

Department of Theatre and Film Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

**&**

### **Alex Asigbo, PhD**

Professor of Performance Studies  
Department of Theatre and Film Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria