
Technical Theatre Practice in Nigerian University Theatres

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Abstract

Technical theatre development is a visible feature of most university theatres in Nigeria. It is a science related and technical oriented area of specialization in theatre arts education that has suffered strangled development and continuous decline of students' interest due to certain militating factors that also affect the general taste of the theatre arts discipline. This problem has for some time now engaged serious attention from technical theatre scholars and key players of theatre education in the country in a view of transforming the situation in line with acceptable standards. This study therefore exposes the deplorable state of technical theatre practice in Nigeria with regards to equipment and human resources available to students in assuring quality training in select Nigerian University theatres. The study utilizes the literary and sociological methodologies. Strategies and recommendation are proposed on how theatre students could be encouraged to show greater participation and interest in technical theatre. The study concludes that to guarantee the quality assurance of technical theatre graduates in Nigeria, adequate modern equipment and technical human resources must be provided in our university theatres.

Keywords: Technology, Technical theatre, Scene design, Scene shop, University theatres

Introduction

It is a proven fact that visual design in the theatre is an important aspect of any theatrical production. Over the years, theatre technology has been so dynamic to the level that theatrical aesthetics has reached an unimaginable height. As a result technology has been used to captivate and astound the audience.

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Thus, McKinney and Butterworth (2009) submits that; "New technologies encourage new possibilities of presentation and expression which are not only central to the development of scenography but are also intertwined with performance as a whole." Therefore, in order to sustain the growth and development of scenography in Nigerian theatre practice, up-to-date, facilities and equipment are needed to train students of technical theatre in the university theatre system. Olateju W. Kareem a professional technical theatre practitioner in Nigeria commenting on the importance of training in theatre design and technology in an interview with Nwakunor (2011) asserts that training has helped me. I am still training. I've enrolled for more training courses. Talent runs out so fast, it runs dry quickly in the modern theatre practice. Training and education are the best things to acquire, which will sustain you.

Hence, Oni and Onyekaba (2007) submits that: "considering the fact that the institutions are normally the centre of research and scholarship, the need for suitable theatre buildings as academic laboratories cannot be over-emphasized." It is on this premise that this paper would assess the state of technical facilities and equipment needed for the designing, construction and storage of set pieces that are available for training in the chosen university theatres for this study. An observation checklist drawn from standard technical theatre books was used to take inventory of the facilities and equipment available in the university theatres, of which remarks were made based on findings. And also, it will be pertinent to mention that the information that form the base of this paper, were also obtained, apart from the on the spot assessment of facilities and equipment, from the technical personnel or theatre managers in charge of these theatres. For the Arts Theatre University of Ibadan this researcher interviewed and was conducted round the scene shop facilities and equipment by Dr. Alphonsus Orisaremi the lecturer in charge of technical theatre and Mr. Adebo Saheed Adeyemi, the technical officer [Set Construction], and, for the Delta State University Theatre, Dr. Martins Tugbukorwei the lecturer in charge of technical theatre, conducted and granted the researcher interview. While, Mr. Ken Njokwu a technical lecturer and Mr. Anthony K. Gyapong the

theatre manager of the University of Port-Harcourt, conducted the researcher round the technical facilities and equipment available for set design and construction. However, it is pertinent to first explore the technological advancement in technical theatre practice.

Technological Advancement in Technical Theatre Practice

Technology is a broad term applicable to nearly all facets of the human society. Technology entails the use of principles, obtained through cumulative exploration and application of control over nature, to solve problems. Everts (1998), simply explains technology as an object which does something that works or helps. According to Nwachukwu (2003), technology goes beyond physical objects to inculcate a body of techniques used to achieve desired objectives with the ultimate aim of meeting human needs.

The influence of technology has an obvious impact on Arts of the Theatre. Visual design aspect of the theatre which includes; scenery, lighting, sound, costume and make-up, has received much of the benefit that accrue from developing technologies. Further inventions of new technical devices have greatly boosted, enhanced and facilitated the design process. Design is an indispensable element of theatre practice and as such, it has employed technology to achieve its purpose. The distinctive paths of Arts and Sciences are clear. Molinta Enendu (1993) claims that theatre summoned technology to support the arts. Sunbo Marinho (2002) also submits that: what goes into a production is science more than Arts because the theatre technician takes the Science form and translates it in to Art form. Ofora (2005) corroborates with Molinta and Sunbo when he reiterates that: one obvious fact here is that for theatre performances to attain a level of optimum satisfaction, the need, help, and assistance of technology is not an outrageous venture but a necessity. Orisaremi (2007) also submits that new methods and approaches to design continue to evolve all the time in theatre design, there is a convergence of Art and Technology, and the dynamic nature of the Theatre allows for the utilization of science and technology, in a composite form.

Mckinney and Butterworth (2009) assert that "theatre practices of different ages have used available technology in order to produce visual transformations, interventions and spectacle". As technological advancement and awareness is created, the evolution changes of the technical devices used on stage became necessary, in order to meet up the needs and requirement of the ever growing society. Before the adoption of the modern technical devices for scene design, the early theatres employed several methods to facilitate scene design for production. From the small hut that stood behind the stage known as Skene used as background and, the employment of various scenic devices such as the Periaktoi and Dues ex machina of the Greek-Roman era, the quest for realism and theatrical aesthetics has called for the total use of technology in the designing, construction and, creation of the locale for a play. Lighting in the theatre also moved from the natural source of illumination and the use of torches, to the conventional lighting equipment such as flood lights, Plano-convex and ellipsoidal spots and the Fresnel spot operated in most cases by the dimmer consoles and combination system, and of recent the automated and computerized light fixtures with the use of the computer aided design (CAD), which enables lighting to fully perform the role of scenery as Adolph Appia had envisaged. Modern technology is an integral aspect of contemporary theatre practice, mostly in the area of design which has been the most dominated aspect of technology in theatre practice. It is no new fact that a lot of changes have occurred. With the incorporation of electronic devices, designers can achieve great ingenuity in transposing the written work of playwrights and the director's production concept onto the stage for visual effects. Nwadiuwe (2006) observes that "with the continuous improvement in technological developments, theatre lighting, sound and scenic equipment have moved beyond the archaic methods to accommodate high-tech Equipment and instruments."

Hence, set design and construction has become a fundamental aspect of design technology. Thus, Huberman, Brant, and Ludwig (1997) attest to the fact that: "Modern theatre has gone beyond the stage where actors are meant to speak lines that suggested location, time and atmospherics". The action of a

performance has to be matched with the environment in which it is taken place because an art of illusionistic scene design has emerged; a situation which very little spectacle is left to the imagination of the audience. Thus, the object has shifted from the imagination of the audience to the skills of the new visual artist known as the "Scenic and Lighting" designers. These new designers rely heavily on the use of quality materials and equipment to see their dream come through. Therefore, the provision of the necessary equipment/tools needed to engender the design process cannot be overemphasized. Hence, Kenneth Parrott cited by Enendu (1993) affirms that; "no degree of skill can compensate for inadequate equipment". The impact of technology vis-à-vis the technical facilities of contemporary theatre practice has aided the creation of reliable and quality stage designs and, its functionality to create the much needed Theatre experience, through the provision of good facilities and equipment. Darwin Reid Payne submits that "if (these) good tools are provided, and conscientiously maintained with quality materials carefully selected can go far and insure for the designer the nearest possible transfer of his concept into practical reality (Enendu. 1993). Relatively, technical theatre practice in Nigerian has not been encouraging. Adegbite (2009) observes that it is saddening to still note in the Nigerian theatre, that, the utilization of technology for set and lights in theatrical performances on stage is being hampered daily because of the inadequacies of technical facilities.

With the practice of professional theatre in Nigeria for over six decades, theatre technology is still in a state of ridicule mostly in the university theatres, considering the level it has attained world over. In the words of Enna (2000), "the practice of theatre design in Nigeria is still far cry from what it should be". This is even worse in the educational theatre that is designated to train theatre practitioners that will improve the level of theatre practice. In a similar study, Adegbite (2009) argues that "the inadequacy has since short-changed the teaching and learning process of design and technical theatre courses in the Nigerian University". Nwadiwe (2005) submits on same note that "the Nigerian educational theatre is in decay and has continued to lack basic facilities and adequate manpower". Technical theatre courses

therefore, are being taught as theory due to the lack of technical facilities for practical. Ododo (2000) maintains that òto train with obsolete Equipment will surely not engender professional advancement. The effect of this on the Nigerian theatre cannot be under-estimated, as Theatrical aesthetics is on the rapid decline. Gbilekaa (2006) comments that:

In Nigeria as indeed most African nations, the practice of technical theatre which involves sets, costumes, make up, sound and lighting is in a poor state of development. In other words, the designer in Nigerian theatre practice operates in an environment that is not technically friendly.

However, it is noted that without adequate tools, materials and other technical equipment to work with, the designer in the Nigerian theatre faces more challenges. And if there is going to be any change or resuscitation, it must start from the university theatre. Thus, a visit to some university theatres and the assessment of their technical facilities in line with the adoption of contemporary theatre technology, confirms the sorry state in which the scene shop, most of which if available hardly house functional tools and useful materials. Consequently, the absence of modern technology in the Nigerian university theatres has created a situation where Nigerian theatre scholars now look for alternative to the sustenance of technical theatre practice. Oni (2005) asserts that:

Some theorists in the Nigerian theatre seem to have taken refuge in the works of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, in their approach to the theatre. They virtually perform their plays in the moulds espoused by Brook and Grotowski in their famous works Brooks the 'Empty space' and Grotowski's 'The Poor Theatre'

The 'Empty Space' and the 'Poor Theatre' may have contributed immensely to the development of the literature on performance paradigms and alternative performance modes, but in

no way has it contributed to theatrical aesthetics. Nwadike (2002) opines that Peter Brook a famous theatre director and experimentalist appear to have had a controversial foundation which afflicts scene design in contemporary theatre especially in Africa. Brook (1977) argues that for theatre to occur; "one could take an empty space and call it a bare stage, an actor walks across whilst someone else is watching him, then the act of the theatre has been engaged". According to Nwadike (2002); "This argument tends to support the de-emphasis, in fact neglect of scene design in contemporary production". Brook's thesis is misinterpreted by his followers because a cursory look at theatre history, shows that the performance space had not been entirely "bare" or "empty" it usually has some form of background design that suggest a particular environment for a performance. Even in the traditional African theatre, the village square or forest setting have trees and living Huts that forms the scenic background to their theatrical performances. However, the contemporary Nigerian university theatre due to lack of technical facilities and equipment, tend to use it as an escapist route to cover up for the lapses, in the guise of an experimental theatre production.

However, professional technical theatre practice by various practitioners, seem to be putting concentrated effort towards the development of contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria. A good example is the Zmirage group of company, set up by a committed theatre practitioner Olateju Wasee Kareem the Managing director and CEO. The Zmirage group of company provides technical services in lighting and set design for stage and television studio presentations. The company was registered with the corporate affairs commission in 1994 and commenced operation in 1996. They have handled well over a hundred productions that consist of lighting design and building of sets for stage productions and television studios, government functions and other events that require technical input when it comes to theatrical design. Olateju Wasee Kareem the Managing director and CEO, has expressed and displayed professional passion for the live theatre sector in Nigeria.

The Zmirage Company also creates the opportunity for technical theatre students to acquire practical knowledge of the craft of technical theatre practice. Hence, for his outstanding

accomplishment and immense contribution to the development of Nigerian entertainment industry, arts and culture sector, Olateju Wasee Kareem was unanimously invested with the prestigious award of International Theatre Day (ITD) distinguished personality for 2011 by the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), Lagos state chapter. Thus, the Book; Technical Theatre and the performing Arts in Nigeria: celebrating Olateju Wasee Kareem was commissioned in his honour. The book containing critical essays by his contemporaries and students that have benefited from his rich fountain of knowledge was edited by Duro Oni and Sunday E. Ododo, the whoø who in technical theatre scholarship in Nigeria. Majority of the essays x-rays the contribution of Olateju Wasee Kareem and his Zmirage group of company to the development of technical theatre practice in Nigeria. According to Fosudo (2011) in one of the essay, he states that: òí he has distinguished himself as a first rate creative scene designer who competently employs the latest tools and technology in the field of multimedia design and productionö. Still on his contribution to technical theatre practice in Nigeria, Adeyemi (2011) in the Foreword submits that:

A few short years ago, you could count theatre designers in the country in one breadth-Dexter Lyndersay, Duro Oni, Sunbo Marinho, Sola Aborisade, Molinta Enendubut now, due in part to the inception of Zmirage and its Academy established to train, nurture and apprentice theatre practitioners, there are a lot more artist in the diversified field of set design and lighting design in Nigeria.

Consequently, from the example of Olateju Wasee Kareem and the Zmirage group of company, it is obvious that professional technical theatre practitioners are not relenting in the effort to develop the area of technical design practice in Nigeria, as most designs handled by the various practitioners can favourably compete with what is found in other parts of the world.

The Scene Shop in Nigerian University Theatres

University theatres are designed for the training of theatre arts practitioners. Hence, for technical theatre students to be taken through theories and practices for all round training in the art and craft of the theatre profession, the University theatres need to make available the necessary production areas/studios equipped with adequate tools to aid the teaching, learning and practice process. These studios include; the scene shop, lighting studio, costume and make-up studio, sound studio etc. They are usually located at the back stage or behind the main theatre structure for proximity to the stage. But according to Ham (2003); "these spaces do not have to be part of the building complex or even on the site as the rest of the building though there are obvious advantages when they are". In line with the subject of this paper, our main focus is on the scene shop and its facilities. According to *Wikipedia Online Encyclopaedia*:

A scenery shop or scene shop is a specialized workshop found in many medium or large theatres, as well as many educational theatre settings. The primary function of a scene shop is to fabricate and assemble the flats, platforms, scenery wagons and other scenic (set) pieces required for a performance. The scene shop is also the location where most of the set painting is done, and is sometimes used to make props.

Ham (2003) emphasizes the importance of the scene shop where he states that; "The first priority in the provision of production spaces must go to the workshop for building and painting scenery". However, the importance of the scene shop cannot be overemphasized. Hence the *Wikipedia Online Encyclopaedia* describes the scene shop as a "specialized workshop"; therefore it has to be adequately equipped with up-to-date equipment and tools for it to function in accordance to its design and objective. Scenery making appropriates diverse

materials which include: wood, fabric, metal, and plastics for the construction of set pieces. Thus, scenery construction undergoes distinct processes towards realizing a good design. It begins with the reading of the script and conceptualization of the scenic design required by the production on paper through draft and sketches before it is constructed, painted and then transferred on stage. The construction of set pieces with any material must undergo the process of;

- É Measurement/marking
- É Cutting
- É Paring
- É Impelling/driving and
- É Painting

The steps above require a well sized scene shop with various equipment/tools to enable the practice of set design and construction to be carried out effectively. Scene shop tools are of two basic types; -Handø and -Powerø tools. Hand tools are handy and easily carried about as the need arises and designed for limited and special applications, whereas, Power tools are bulky, sometimes permanently installed in the scenic shop, and designed to conserve energy and time in executing set construction works. These tools need to be available in their numbers to aid students practice of the craft of set design and construction in a standard university theatre. As earlier stated, University of Ibadan Arts Theatre, University of Port-Harcourt CRAB Theatre and Delta State University Theatre Arts Studio were used as a microcosmic representative of the Nigerian University theatre situation. The main areas explored include; the scene shop and the equipment/tools available for teaching and learning the art and craft of set design and construction.

The University of Ibadan Arts Theatre

The University of Ibadan arts theatre is a two storey structure that was opened in 1955 under the management of the English Department. Not until 1970 when the then school of drama turned in to an autonomous department of Theatre arts. Behind the stage house is the scene dock, fairly big in size which houses used flats and scenic pieces. There is a trap door on the floor of the scene

dock that leads to the workshop, were all scenic pieces are constructed and then hauled up manually into the scene dock, from where they are mounted on stage for productions. The University of Ibadan Arts theatre structure, made provision for the necessary spaces needed for the construction, mounting and storage of set pieces. The scene shop which is directly behind the scene dock at the bottom of the two storey building structure is fairly large enough for construction and painting jobs, at least for an educational theatre. The workshop was at inception equipped with five power machines used basically for wood works, which is at the moment not functioning. Dr. Orisaremi Alphonsus, the lecturer in charge of theatre design and technology in an interview with ObuksóEdenya (2004) asserts that: "These are heavy-duty machines, but the truth is that they are no longer functioning, but functioned for a very long time. I had the privilege of training with those machines then, but it goes with the general decadence in the country". The Technical Theatre manager [set construction] Adebo Saheed Adeyemi confirms this assertion as he escorted the author on a tour of the facilities. The dilapidated machines included a stationary Ban saw (floor design) which is used to cut irregular shapes; Lathe machine for turning operations; surface Planner, used to plain woods to have a smooth surface; and a Crosscut machine, used to cut woods across the surface. For now they are relics serving no purpose other than occupying space at the workshop. However, the workshop is still very functional. It is equipped with a sizable work bench and the tools used there are basically Hand tools which are most times, not adequately available for students use.

Although, the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre has a functional scene shop, the ventilation and lighting system is poor, the trap doors that leads from the scene dock to the workshop is in a very bad state and it is seldom used due to some structural problems that have been left unattended to for years. This has led to the construction of sets on the stage or the scene dock due to the fact that it is cumbersome to transport constructed sets from the workshop to the stage since the path meant for that is not functional. However, for a pioneer Department of Theatre Arts in Nigeria that was at a point in time, the most equipped theatre

structure in Nigeria not to talk of a university theatre; it is with dissatisfaction, we submit that in the aspect of scene shop equipment/tools, the department has fallen short of its glory. The recent renovation and upgrade of facilities and equipment in the Arts Theatre, which took place with the 2010 TET Intervention fund, did not cater for equipment and tools for the scene shop. Instead, attention was focused on only lighting equipment as if that is the only area of technical theatre in need of overhaul in the Arts Theatre.

Having gone through the University of Ibadan technical theatre workshop, we discovered that the area of scenery needs to be improved upon tremendously. For instance the power machines installed in the workshop are due for renovation or outright replacement, construction tools and materials are inadequate compared to the number of student productions that occur weekly. This has put a lot of burden on technical theatre students interested in set design and construction as they are made to either provide or improvise tools needed to accomplish their task, thus, frustrating their interest and causing a decline in their output.

University of Port-Harcourt CRAB

The University of Port Harcourt arts theatre commonly known as CRAB (Creative Review of Articles and Books) was established in 1982 under the Headship of late Ola Rotimi. The theatre structure houses a thrust stage which can be concluded to be due to the influence of Ola Rotimi in a bid adopt a performance space that will accommodate typical African play performances in which the audiences is always a participating spectator. However, there was no scene shop constructed as part of the theatre structure when it was constructed. Practical aspects of scenery making were carried out either at the back foyer or inside the Arts Theatre (on the stage), depending on the weather condition of any given day and the availability of space inside the theatre itself. According to Njokwu (2006),

When the combined factors of adverse weather conditions and ever increasing students' population brought tremendous pressure to bear on the use of the little available spaces in the

CRAB Theatre, the department under the leadership of the pioneer head of department, Ola Rotimi saw a need to erect a shade behind the Arts theatre to serve both as workshop for set construction and space to sustain class activities.

From findings, the improvised workshop was initially constructed on woods, riverine native mats and sheets of cellophane. Under successive heads of department, the workshop has undergone several renovations to what it is today. The workshop presently is a zinc canopy standing over a half raised wall, which also serves as a lecture theatre. It could be concluded that, structurally, the University of Port-Harcourt CRAB did not cater for set design and construction in the provision of the needed spaces like scene shop, scene dock etc. The reason might not be far from the fact that it was intended to be a temporary studio. According to Juliana Okoh (2005:406), she asserts that: "The CRAB, which was built in the early 1980s as a temporary studio for experimental programmes, has now become a permanent theatre space, even though all the equipment are dilapidated and the building itself is in need of renovation". The University of Port-Harcourt CRAB has no functional scene shop. What is available is a make shift called a workshop with a part of it acting as the scene dock and lecture room. The said workshop is porous and prone to theft as well as adverse weather condition because it is a mere zinc canopy open on all sides. Its small size and its multipurpose nature act as a limitation to the type of set pieces that can be constructed in it. It is not cheering that, the department that is about 30 years old, cannot boast of a permanent Theatre structure that encompasses all the needed backstage space, coupled with the crop of theatre scholars and student population. The lack of a Scene shop permits the lying about of set pieces which the students have provided with their hard earn money. This is not a welcomed development as, the area of Set design and construction is treated with no importance thus, theatre productions are usually done with sparse set pieces.

Consequently, the current situation on ground is not encouraging when it comes to Technical Theatre practice in Set

Design and Construction. In this era where theatre technology has gone beyond the usual, the CRAB Theatre is still caught up struggling with obsolete equipment and dilapidated structural facility.

Delta State University Theatre Arts Studio (TAS)

Delta State University was founded in 1992 from the then Bendel State University Abraka campus, after Edo and Delta states were created in August 27th 1991. Theatre Arts was founded as a unit under the Department of Performing Arts, the other being Music. This was in the 1992/93 academic session. Professor Sam Ukala who came from Edo state University Ekpoma now known as Ambrose Ali University Ekpoma on sabbatical was the pioneer Head of Theatre Arts unit. In 2005, after the full accreditation of the Theatre Arts Unit, it was separated from the Department of Performing Arts; to the full autonomous status of the Department of Theatre Arts. The Delta State University Theatre Arts studio is not a purpose built theatre plant. What they have was formerly a multi-purpose hall now improvised as a theatre structure that make available a platform now used as stage and an auditorium which Dr. Martins Tugbukorowie the lecturer in charge of technical theatre courses in an interview says "they have been managing right from the inception of the department". However, backstage spaces, which include the scene shop, scene dock and others, are not available. The only space available is a back room toilet that was converted to a store and a room carved out of the auditorium for the storage of props and set pieces.

Practical aspects of set design and construction are carried out either on the stage, the auditorium or outside the theatre building, depending on the weather condition of any given day and the availability of space inside the theatre. The unavailability of a workshop and scene dock has created a technically challenging environment. Hence, the department cannot boast of adequate construction tools, not even the basic hand tools needed by technical students for the construction of set pieces. In a rather painful note, Dr. Tugbukorowie submits that: "It has not been very easy because things we need to properly execute technical phases in a production are not there in terms of space and facilities for set

construction, and storage of set pieces. From on the spot investigation and observations at the Delta State University Theatre Arts studio, its shortage of backstage spaces for technical theatre practices has dealt a blow on the training of technical theatre students. Flats and set pieces lay about the theatre because of lack of storage facilities which makes them vulnerable to destruction, as they are not well handled by students through the process of moving them from one place to another. According to Dr. Tugbokorwei, "This has caused the over stretching of budget for production because they have no stock of flat to fall back on. So, for every production they construct new flats and set pieces. Students that are interested in set design and construction are discouraged because the facilities are not there to practice with. The ones who make the effort to involve in practical theatre participation are commissioned to pay artisan carpenter outside to help construct set pieces for a production, which places strain on the student's budget and distorts the learning process. Those who want to delve into the endeavour of building their sets, go to the extent of getting tools for the work, which later get stolen because of lack of safe storage facility.

Conclusion

It will not be out of place to say that, students of technical theatre are short changed in terms of practical training in most Nigerian university theatres. Theatre arts is a discipline that is more of a practical dimension and demands a lot of technical input, hence, it should be provided with all the necessary facilities that will at least aid the teaching and practical execution of scene design which, on the other hand, will guarantee learning and skill development. However, reasonable effort need to be put by management of the Nigerian Universities to make available adequate structural and technical facilities because the situation on ground as regards to technical theatre practice is detrimental to the development of contemporary Nigerian theatre. Hence, something drastic needs to be done to salvage the future of academic theatres.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we therefore want to recommend the following:

1. The management of Nigerian universities should provide the required space and technical theatre facilities that will engender the smooth running of university theatres, as this will maximize their output and enable them contribute meaningfully to national development.
2. A sizable scene shop with basic hand and power tools for the fabrication of wood and metal works should be provided in adequate number, as this would enable technical theatre students have the variety of tools to translate their creative ingenuity to meet the demands of productions, and thus, be a master of the craft while improving theatrical aesthetics.
3. University management as the principal source of finance being an educational theatre, should improve funding of theatre arts departments to enable frequent upgrade of facilities, tools/equipment to modern standards, and also for the support of students practical productions.

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