



THE IMPACT OF GENERATIVE AI ON THEATRE AND FILM LABOUR: UNION PRECEDENT, PRECARIOUS WORK AND POLICY RESPONSES ACROSS HOLLYWOOD, THE UK AND NOLLYWOOD

ARNOLD B. UDOKA

Email: arnoldudoka2000@gmail.com; arnoldudoka@unical.edu.ng

ORCID: 0000-0001-8045-5352

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence is reshaping creative labour across global entertainment sectors, with distinct consequences for theatre and film professions. This article examines how AI impacts actors, playwrights, designers and technical workers in Hollywood, UK theatre and Nollywood, focusing on low-paid, gig-based and non-union workers who are most vulnerable to displacement and devaluation. Drawing on the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, UK Equity's AI guidelines, and the absence of policy in Nollywood, it argues that collective bargaining outcomes are becoming the de facto precedent for negotiations, despite uneven institutional coverage. Using document analysis of union contracts, policy statements and case studies from 2023-2026, including the Royal Shakespeare Company and emerging Nollywood AI practices, the study analyses four areas of impact: performance roles, writing, design and technical roles, and the structural divide between union and non-union workers. Without explicit consent and compensation rules, transparency requirements and funding-linked staffing standards, AI will concentrate benefits and externalise costs onto the most precarious workers. Policy recommendations are tailored to the institutional capacities of each context.

KEYWORDS: Generative AI, theatre labour, film labour, precarious work, SAG-AFTRA, UK Equity, Nollywood, automation

INTRODUCTION

Theatre and film have absorbed new technology for centuries. The current wave of generative AI enters sectors already characterised by short-term contracts, low wages and limited bargaining power for most workers. Unlike live theatre, film can substitute synthetic performers and automated processes more easily, but both face pressure on budgets and employment norms.

The 2023 strikes by the Writers Guild of America and SAG-AFTRA made artificial intelligence a central bargaining issue for the first time in US entertainment labour negotiations. In the UK, Equity published AI guidelines in 2023 and 2024. In Nigeria, Nollywood operates without any industry-wide AI policy, despite being the world's second-largest film industry by volume. In fact, it is impossible to scale AI in Nollywood until four critical areas are given urgent attention.

Arnold B. Udoka: Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

First, power problem must be solved; second, dataset (dataset is central to machine learning. Machines train on large amounts of data to learn patterns and relationships, then use that knowledge to make predictions); third, the training of personnel in generative AI, motion capture and AI script tools; fourth, a policy to regulate AI deployment in the performing arts. These critical aspects are responsible for Nollywood's backwardness in generative AI. Their absence impede the development and protection of local personnel and datasets for example in Anaañ, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Efik, Pidgin, that capture Nigeria's accents that can deliver Nigerian stories and identity. This contrast reveals how institutional capacity shapes labour outcomes.

This article asks: how does generative AI impact different creative professions across Hollywood, UK theatre and Nollywood, and what policy mechanisms can mitigate harm to vulnerable workers? It maps uneven impacts across roles, compares US, UK and Nigerian responses, and evaluates the transferability of Hollywood's union precedent to contexts with weaker union coverage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on AI and creative labour has focused primarily on film, television and music in the Global North. Studies document the displacement of routine work by automation and AI, and note that generative AI is being applied to writing, visual effects, voice acting and performance capture (Cazzaniga et al., 2024). The IMF estimates that 40% of global employment is exposed to AI, with advanced economies facing greater disruption due to higher shares of cognitive jobs (Cazzaniga et al., 2024). However, this literature rarely addresses contexts with weak unions and platform-dependent production like Nollywood.

AI and Creative Labour in the Global South

In the Global South, creative industries are characterised by informality, project-based work and limited social protection (ILO, 2024). The ILO reports that generative AI is more likely to augment than destroy jobs overall, but augmentation depends on access to training and regulatory frameworks (ILO, 2024). For workers in low-margin industries, augmentation without training becomes de facto displacement. In Nigeria, creative work is a major source of youth employment, yet 85% of Nollywood workers operate outside formal contracts (UNESCO,

2023). This means AI tools that reduce production time and cost are adopted rapidly, but without workforce transition plans. Scholars of platform labour note that streaming platforms like Netflix and Prime Video intensify this pressure by demanding more content at lower licence fees, creating incentives for producers to substitute labour with AI (Srnicek, 2017). The result is a two-tier system: platform-facing productions use AI for dubbing and VFX, while local theatrical releases do not, deepening inequality within the industry.

Theatre Automation and Deskilling

Within theatre, scholarship has addressed digital scenography and automation since the 2010s. Early systems generated 3D stage layouts from scripts (Del Favero, 2018). More recent machine learning models produce lighting cues from music and generate set designs from text prompts (Gan et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2026). These tools improve efficiency but reduce demand for junior drafters, assistant lighting designers and stagehands. Labour Process Theory predicts this outcome: when technology mediates the work process, control shifts to those who own and operate the tools (Braverman, 1974). In the RSC *_Tempest_* case, AI did not eliminate the design role, but it redefined it from drawing to prompting and curating AI outputs. The critical gap is training. UK drama schools are only now adding AI and Unreal Engine modules, leaving mid-career technicians vulnerable to deskilling. No equivalent training infrastructure exists in Nigeria as of 2026.

Platformisation and Dubbing in Nollywood

Nollywood produces over 2,500 films annually, making it the second-largest film industry by volume (UNESCO, 2023). Since 2018, platforms have become the dominant buyers. This "platformisation" pushes standardisation: films must be delivered with subtitles and dubs in multiple languages within 8-12 weeks (Slator, 2026). Traditional dubbing requires hiring 4 separate voice actors and studio time. AI voice cloning collapses this to 1 session + software, cutting costs by 60-70% (Slator, 2026). At the same time, Nigerian copyright law and guild structures have not kept pace. The Nigerian Copyright Act 2022 protects against piracy but is silent on AI training data and synthetic performance rights. This legal gap, combined with "all media" contract clauses, means actors' voices can be cloned and reused without new consent or payment.

Studies of precarious creative labour argue this is typical: technological change is absorbed first by workers with the least bargaining power (Standing, 2011; Banks, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article applies *Precarious Labour Theory* and *Labour Process Theory*.

Precarious Labour Theory argues that workers without stable contracts, benefits and collective representation absorb the first costs of technological change (Standing, 2011). Hollywood and UK theatre have partial coverage through SAG-AFTRA and Equity. Nollywood has limited coverage through the Actors Guild of Nigeria [AGN], leaving most workers outside collective protections.

Labour Process Theory examines how technology reshapes control over work (Braverman, 1974). AI tools shift the labour process from manual drafting, cue plotting and script development to the management and curation of AI outputs. Control moves to those who own the tools and data, while workers face deskilling or displacement.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative document analysis of publicly available materials from 2023-2026. Sources include union contracts and statements, case studies of productions using AI, technical papers on AI-generated scenography, and policy reports from the ILO, IMF and WEF. Documents were coded for themes: displacement, augmentation, consent, compensation and union response. The analysis distinguishes between union and non-union work and between US, UK and Nigerian contexts.

Limitations: Document analysis relies on publicly available union contracts, policy statements and reported case studies. It cannot capture informal or undisclosed AI use on Nollywood sets, where NDAs and per-project contracts limit transparency. The absence of an industry-wide bargaining structure in Nigeria also means there is no central repository of contracts to audit. Future research should use ethnographic interviews and workplace observation to assess actual AI adoption rates and employment outcomes for junior crew and non-union performers.

Results and Analysis

Performance Roles

Hollywood and UK theatre: Live performance remains difficult to automate due to audience expectations of human presence. However, digital replicas pose a direct threat to voice and motion capture work. SAG-AFTRA's 2023 and 2025 contracts require informed consent and payment for digital replicas, and mandate bargaining if a synthetic performer replaces a role a union performer could fill (SAG-AFTRA, 2025). UK Equity's 2024 guidelines advise members not to agree to contracts that allow unrestricted use of their performance data for AI training, but there is no national agreement mandating consent and payment (Equity, 2024).

Nollywood: Most Nollywood talent work on per-project contracts with little legal review. Standard contracts include blanket "all media now known or hereafter devised" clauses. Producers use AI to clone voices for multilingual dubbing into Hausa, Igbo, French, and Portuguese, allowing one recording session to be reused across markets (Channels Television, 2024; ElevenLabs, 2026). The barrier to entry has collapsed: Nigerian creators now advertise "100% FREE" voice cloning and TTS tools on Nairaland and YouTube with no subscription required, making it possible to clone any voice and generate AI dubbing without studio approval (Nairaland, 2026). AGN has not issued AI guidelines as of May 2026. The practice has raised concerns: Nigerian actors including Bisola Aiyeola have publicly raised alarms about their "image and voice are being cloned" without consent (Instagram, 2026), while media reports note AI voice cloning is being used to dub films and for fraud (BusinessDay, 2024; Constancewilliams360, 2026). Voice actors report losing dubbing work because their voice is cloned from one session and reused for streaming platforms.

Writing and Dramaturgy

Hollywood: The WGA secured protections in 2023 that require disclosure of AI use and prohibit AI-written material from being considered 'literary material' under the contract.

UK theatre: The Writers' Guild of Great Britain has not secured equivalent protections. UK Equity advises writers to retain copyright and negotiate AI clauses, but there is no collective agreement.

Nollywood: Writers use ChatGPT and Claude to produce first drafts for low-budget films. Commission fees are already low, so AI is being used to justify further reductions. There is no guild standard for credit or payment when AI is used.

Design and Technical Roles

Hollywood and UK theatre: AI is advancing fastest in design. Systems now generate stage layouts and lighting cues automatically. The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2023 production of *Tempest* used AI-generated projections and motion capture for Ariel (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2023). The RSC stated that AI was used to augment design, but the production required fewer junior drafters and more technical specialists familiar with motion capture and game engines (Fast Company, 2024).

Nollywood: Low-budget films use generative AI for crowd scenes, set extensions and de-aging. The industry produced its first AI-centred hybrid film, *Makemation*, which combines generative AI, scriptwriting tools and live-action filmmaking (Channels Television, 2024). This cuts out junior VFX artists and set designers. AI-assisted dubbing reduces demand for voice actors. Because production is cost-driven and fast, producers adopt AI quickly without workforce transition plans.

Union vs. Non-Union Divide

Hollywood and UK theatre: Actors' Equity Association represents over 51,000 actors and stage managers in the US (Actors' Equity Association, 2024); UK Equity represents over 47,000 creative practitioners (Equity, 2024). These workers gain protections through collective bargaining. Non-union workers lack consent rules, transition support and bargaining leverage.

Nollywood: AGN has an estimated 5,000+ registered members, but thousands of actors work outside the guild with no formal contract (Punch, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). There is no national bargaining unit covering all producers. The absence of a single negotiating table means no standard AI clause can be enforced across the industry, creating a two-tier labour market.

Case Studies of AI in Practice

Case 1: Hollywood - SAG-AFTRA and the Synthetic Performer Clause, 2023-2025

The 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes made AI the central bargaining issue in US entertainment for the first time. The outcome was the creation of binding contract language on "synthetic performers." Under the 2023 and 2025 SAG-AFTRA contracts, a synthetic performer is defined as a digital replica of a real performer's voice, likeness or movement created using AI (SAG-AFTRA, 2025). Three provisions matter: informed consent is required, compensation must be paid for initial use and reuse, and a notice-and-bargain requirement mandates union notification if synthetic performers replace union work. This framework did not ban AI. It made AI use expensive and transparent. The precedent is already shaping negotiations outside Hollywood.

Case 2: UK Theatre - The Royal Shakespeare Company and *Tempest*, 2023

The RSC's 2023 production of *The Tempest* was the first major UK stage production to publicly disclose the use of generative AI in design (RSC, 2023). AI tools were used to generate motion-capture data for Ariel and AI-assisted projections. The RSC described this as "augmentation": AI allowed a design team of 3 to achieve visual effects that previously required 10+ animators (Fast Company, 2024). However, the junior drafting team was reduced from 4 to 1. Two technicians were retrained on Unreal Engine. UK Equity's response was advisory rather than contractual, with no collective agreement mandating consent or compensation (Equity, 2024).

Case 3: Nollywood - *Makemation* and Voice Cloning for Multilingual Dubbing, 2024-2026

Nollywood produced its first AI-hybrid film, *Makemation*, in 2024 (Channels Television, 2024). The producers reported a 30% reduction in pre-production time and 20% reduction in VFX costs. In parallel, AI voice cloning has scaled for dubbing. Platforms require dubs in Hausa, Igbo, French and Portuguese. Producers now use ElevenLabs and free tools to clone one actor's voice for multiple languages (ElevenLabs, 2026; Nairaland, 2026).

Voice actors report losing work because one session is reused. In April 2026, Bisola Aiyeola posted that her "image and voice are being cloned" without consent (Instagram, 2026). As of May 2026, AGN has issued no AI guidelines.

Discussion: Comparative Responses and the Policy Vacuum

Three patterns emerge across contexts. First, Hollywood precedent is shaping global norms. SAG-AFTRA's definition of 'synthetic performer' and its notice-and-bargain requirement are being

referenced in regional theatre contracts in the US and in UK Equity negotiations. Second, institutional capacity determines outcomes. SAG-AFTRA negotiates with AMPTP, which covers most US production. UK Equity negotiates with ITC and UK Theatre, but coverage is patchier. Nollywood lacks a comparable structure, and the Nigerian Copyright Act 2022 does not explicitly address AI training data or synthetic performers. Third, the labour process is shifting from creation to curation. In Nollywood this shift is accelerated by free tools. With no training programmes or cost barrier, producers adopt free voice cloning for dubbing while junior voice actors are displaced without transition support.

Table 1: Comparative AI Policy Framework Across Hollywood, UK Theatre, and Nollywood, 2023-2026

Policy Area	Hollywood: SAG-AFTRA/WGA	UKTheatre: Equity/ WGGB	Nollywood: AGN/DGN/AMP
Consent for Digital Replicas	Mandatory informed consent and separate payment. 2023 & 2025 contracts.	Advisory guideline only. 2024 clause.Equity AI Guidelines.No binding.	None. Standard "all media" clauses allow use without new consent.
Compensate	Payment for training data use and reuse of synthetic performer.	No collective agreement on payment. Negotiated individually.	None. Voice cloning for dubbing done without new fees (Channels Television, 2024)
Transparency	Disclosure required if AI used in writing	Disclosure recommended in programmes. No mandate.	None. No funding body requires AI disclosure.
Enforcement Mechanism	Collective bargaining with AMPTP. Grievance process.	Patchy coverage via ITC/UK Theatre agreements	No national bargaining unit. Enforcement not possible across fragmented industry.

Source: SAG-AFTRA 2025; Equity 2024; Actors' Equity Association 2024; Punch 2023; Document analysis 2023-2026.

The Role of Platforms in Accelerating AI Adoption

The platform economy is the key accelerant of AI adoption in Nollywood. Since 2018, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and YouTube have commissioned or licensed over 40% of new Nollywood titles (UNESCO, 2023). Their business model creates pressure for volume and speed, and localisation at low cost. Without a guild to set floor rates, producers compete by cutting labour costs through AI. The platform thus externalises the cost of technological transition onto workers, while capturing the benefits of wider market access.

Copyright and Legal Gaps in Nigeria

The Nigerian Copyright Act 2022 strengthened protections but is silent on AI. Three gaps matter: training data authorisation, synthetic performers, and enforcement. Copyright claims require litigation which is costly. Without a guild to bring class actions, the law is effectively unenforceable for most workers. This legal vacuum makes model clauses urgent.

What Can and Cannot Transfer from Hollywood?

Three elements of the SAG-AFTRA model are transferable: definition of "synthetic performer", notice-and-bargain requirement, and payment for training data use. What cannot transfer is enforcement infrastructure. Without an AMPTP-equivalent producers' body, AGN cannot negotiate industry-wide. The alternative is regulatory: NFVCB certification tied to consent and disclosure.

Future Research Agenda

Three areas require study. First, employment impact measurement through longitudinal data on hiring rates for junior VFX artists and voice actors. Second, effectiveness of funding-linked standards. Third, worker adaptation and resistance through ethnographic work on how Nollywood crews are informally learning AI tools.

Policy and Practical Implications

Four interventions are recommended, adapted to each context.

1. Consent and Compensation Clauses

All contracts should require informed consent and payment for any use of a performer's data in AI. SAG-AFTRA's language provides a template. For Nollywood, a model clause should be drafted by AGN, DGN and AMP and endorsed by NFVCB as a condition for certification. Implementation cost: £20,000 for drafting and workshops.

2. Transparency Requirements

Funding bodies and venues should require disclosure of AI use in programmes and grant applications. Arts Council England, NEA, and NFVCB can make this a condition of funding and distribution. Implementation cost: Negligible.

3. Skills Transition Programmes

Unions, universities and arts councils should fund training to manage AI tools. The RSC-Epic Games partnership is a model. In Nollywood, NFVCB and NCC could partner with tech firms to run training for 200 crew annually. Estimated cost: £80,000 per year funded by 1% levy on platform licensing fees.

4. Public Funding and Certification Standards

Arts councils and film boards can require minimum human staffing levels for funded productions. In Nollywood, NFVCB certification could be withheld from films that use AI without consent and disclosure. Implementation cost: £25,000 a year for audits.

CONCLUSION

Generative AI is changing creative labour by automating routine tasks, enabling digital replicas and shifting the labour process towards curation. The impact is uneven. Where unions have bargaining power, workers gain protections through contract language. Where unions are weak or absent, as in Nollywood, AI accelerates cost-cutting at the expense of low-paid workers. The 2023 Hollywood strikes provide a precedent: consent, compensation and notice-and-bargain rules are feasible and enforceable. UK Equity's advisory approach needs to evolve into binding contract language. Nollywood needs to move from absence to policy before contracts harden around unregulated AI use.

Future research should assess the effectiveness of funding-linked staffing standards and track employment outcomes for technicians trained in AI tools. The goal is not to resist technology, but to ensure that theatre and film remain sites of human performance and human livelihood.

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