

INTERROGATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EMERGING 'DRIVE-IN THEATRE' PRACTICE IN PANDEMIC ERA: AN NCAC EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The overwhelming trajectory of Covid-19 upsurge has wreaked havoc on the existence of man. Several public and private institutions were practically shut down, as normal day to day activities were extremely threatened by the spread of the disease. This panic attracted both scientific and unscientific attention; on how to change this narrative. While so many individuals and institutions were struggling with the realities of adopting and adapting to the new normal way of survival, some theatre practitioners succeeded in carving a niche for the continuation and sustenance of theatrical performance by the introduction of Drive-in Theatre. This paper interrogates the responses and significance of this emerging theatre culture to Nigerians and seeks possible means of retaining this practice in the event of possible re-occurrence of the pandemic or its adoption as a new dimension in theatre practice. Findings have shown that before the advent of the disease, Drive-in Theatre's were relatively rare, with limited performance spaces globally, thereby depriving many theatre patrons the opportunity of being part of this innovative art; which is both educative and therapeutic. It is based on this fact and many more that this study advocates for the government's intervention in creating more open stage performance spaces. And also ensure that strategies are available for its continuation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Drive-in Theatre, Covid-19, Performance, Innovative art, Entertainment.

Introduction

The wild spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has taken a toll across nations, races, religions, and various institutions. The sectors of economy and entertainment could be said to have suffered the greatest strike of the pandemic. The reality of this disease tested knowledge, predictions and medicines to their boundaries and equally rip apart economic, socio-cultural and political propensities. In other words, one can explicitly state that the pandemic altered the world and rendered humankind hopeless and helpless with its associated global lockdown situation. The severity of the spread of this disease and its subsequent threat to humans attracted thoughtful

investigations (scientific and unscientific); that could help to understand the existence of the virus, and perhaps seek avenues to eliminate it and return the world to its formal glory.

Live theatre performance is one of the entertainment sectors that suffered the greatest knockout of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because performance is a collective effort of people drawn together to achieve theatrical experience. Their quest for entertainment, communication, education, and the need to provide worthwhile information, demands that these people must come together to interact physically. Moreover, production processes require consistent rehearsals and consultations to meet up with the expectations of the audience. As a collaborative art, it calls for teamwork with adequate maximization of time and energy for a positive turnout. This interaction and interface contradict the strict adherence of Covid-19 protocols on social distancing, among other health stipulated rules. The rules of Covid-19 perceives this social intermingling of artists as jeopardy Considering the number of persons involved in both pre and post-production processes. This impression surreptitiously halted live theatre performance, thereby rendering most artists lethargic in the circumstance of the spread of the disease.

It is worthy of note that in the face of all threats to the lives and existence of humans, the pandemic opened up new vistas; as some theatre practitioners maximized this opportunity to carve a niche for the continuation and sustenance of theatrical performances, through the initiation of drive-in Theatre. This is perceived as a creative and innovative technique to weather the storm of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, creativity could be seen as the effective tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that are useful in problem solving. This persistent need to socialise, communicate and entertain the audience has directly or indirectly led to various creative dimensions.

In other words, for one to be said to be creative, it requires the capacity to view things in new ways or from a different standpoint. This among other concerns will help in the generation of new possibilities or alternatives. Hence, the real assessment of creative parameters may not only depict the number of alternatives that people could generate, but the uniqueness of those alternatives. Therefore, the ability to generate alternatives or see things uniquely does not occur by chance; but rather linked to the situation on the ground. Suffice it to say that the most fundamental qualities of thinking results to novel situations and the gratification of the circumstances presented. Ogande & Osori opine that "Creativity is the capacity of a person or persons to produce compositions, products or ideas of any sort, which are essentially new and novel, and previously unknown to the producer. It is also the ability

to think about something in a novel way and to come up with unique solutions to a problem" (38).

The valuable idea of drive-in theatre in Nigeria was nurtured and propelled by National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) in Abuja. The notion behind this initiative was to use the medium to revive and relieve theatrical experience which was stalled by the ravaging disease. It is sad to note that this novel idea instigated contempt by many Nigerians. This is because; many people had the impression that the drive-in theatre is highly sophisticated and selective as many theatre patrons were not carried along in the whole process, or allowed to witness and enjoy the drive-in experience. This paper therefore, interrogates the authenticity of this information and seeks possible means of improving and perhaps, retaining this novel theatre culture in the event of possible re-occurrence of the pandemic or any other life threatening disease that requires social distancing.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of this paper found its bearing on Jean Duvignaud's theory, which states that "society is in theatre and theatre in the society." This means that as the theatre is impacting the society, society in turn strives to make a considerable imprint on the theatre. Duvignaud is of the view that, as the theatre seeks to reflect societal problems, the society also forces the theatre to change in terms of content and operational styles. This theory portrays theatre as a people-oriented and people-centred kind of creativity, which its superfluities find expressions through the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding of critical issues. Live theatre helps to promote social discourse, dialogue and potential social change. Hence, theatre as a concept is a cultural phenomenon that stresses that society should examine itself through its mirror. Societal problems can be discovered and equally attempt to find solutions to them with theatrical interpretations. In effect, the role of theatre is no doubt expansive and can be likened to any other visual media of entertainment that tries to proffer solutions to societal difficulties. Duvignaud's theory presents the theatre as an excellent and a much more direct form of questioning what is off beam within the society. Its ability in influencing the thought pattern of the general public automatically leads to a new way of behaviour. Hence, theatrical medium of expression and communication could be said to be highly effective and impactful. One can unequivocally state that the theatre is an ally of society. This is because the latter naturally finds its focus in consonance with the former, rather than in opposition to its existence. Invariably, these two concepts influence one another.

A Critical View of Drive-in Theatre

Before the spate of the Covid-19 pandemic, drive-in system of entertainment has been relatively rare across the world. The quest to socialize, interact and communicate with each other during this critical period gave rise to lots of artistic innovations such as Drive-in-Cinema, Drive-in-Concert, Drive-in-Theatre among other creative and innovative scopes. It is noted that so many countries queued into the relevance of creativity to resuscitate both human beings and the entertainment sector. Countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Spain and France have witnessed the boom in attendance of these theatrical entertainment trends before the existence of the ravaging disease. The originators of these concepts used the effects of lockdown to close up distance and fill the void created by the closure of entertainment proceedings with these performances and displays. There is no doubt the fact that the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of many individuals was terrific and alarming. As such, it demands urgent measures to alleviate its effect on the masses. This is the reason why Ewrierhoma argues that:

Seasons come and go and are therefore like life transient. How can these times be full of prospects when news headlines daily scream tragedy, mayhem, commotion and diseases threatening our communal living and our collective ethos as theatre artists? Today, the theatre exists in a season of plaque, insecurity, political, as well as cultural upheaval. (7)

All these reflect the ugly situation Covid-19 pandemic has exposed people to, which theatre praxis is seen as an escape route for continuous interaction, communication and existence of man. There are evidence that this novel art of the theatre could lead to other theatrical ideas that can change communities, countries and continents. Needless to say that the exquisiteness of the drive-ins are that people can have a whimsical experience within the space or venue of the performance, by ensuring an appreciable percentage of safety in their personal vehicles. This is in response to the new normal way of social distancing that people are forced to accept. Drive-in culture could rightly said to be an excellent stop-gap and an addition in showcasing and guaranteeing good business in the midst of fear and trepidation.

Another endearing factor of drive ins is the colouration and aesthetic blend of live theatre performance and media arts; as media teams instantly streams the event on television and other media outlets to ensure visibility. In effect, people that could not attend physically were able to watch the event in the comfort of their homes. In essence, positive responses, accolades and assessments were received from audience members who were shielding and

feeling safe enough at either the events or their various homes. It was indeed, a worthy moment for people to have fun for the first time in months since the inception of the upsurge of the virus.

The researcher believes that the reasons for the organization of drive-in theatres at the peak of the spread of Covid-19 cannot be far-fetched; it aims at reaching out to as many people as possible, giving them a veritable opportunity to unwind and reset their psychological state of mind. This idea is immeasurably a soothing balm to all sorrows inflicted by this terrible disease. While outdoor cinemas are weather-sensitive, drive-in theatres are less so, and could be a new business model that is here to stay in the world of entertainment and exhibition; with the realities of the existence of Covid-19 and other related diseases still springing up. This may be possible if adequate attention could be given, and infrastructures put in place for its continuous existence and sustainability. There are numerous advantages of drive-in theatres that the weather is not as much of a consideration for its survival.

The drive-in theatres, Cinemas and films as large screen situated outdoor type of entertainment is quite simple in its set up. The basic requirements are the spaces, manpower, stage, screen, projector (for showing films) or lighting for stage plays and speakers as the case may be. Most drive-in theatres aside the actors using microphones and speakers to boost communication, go as far as distributing headphones to their audience as they make their entrance to the performance venue. However, the most important requirement is a huge area or space for the parking of cars at least two meters apart from each other. A drive-in theatre allows the audience to watch plays or films from the comfort and privacy of their cars. You drive into a parking space, switch on your headphone and watch the film or theatrical display. Some drive-in theatres even provide other forms of entertainment such as tables; chairs, for those who want to use the facility instead of sitting in their cars. There are also stores for different brands of drinks and snacks to help set the mood of the audience members while the performance is going on. Drive-in organisers have their linkages via various social media platforms where tickets are advertised to be purchased either online or sometimes at the entrance of the venue. The online purchase gives them a better opportunity to know the number of persons to make provisions for.

The following are the pictorial examples of drive-in theatres in different countries;

Plate 1



Drive-in Theatre in Florida, USA

The first-ever drive-in movie theatre was located at Crescent Boulevard in Camden in New Jersey in 1933. It was previously known as Park-in Theatre. Drive-in was a later term that originated by Richard Hollingshead, a movie fan and a sales manager at his father's company, (Whiz Auto Products) in Camden. He was inspired by his mother's struggle to sit comfortably in traditional movie theatre seats. As such, Hollingshead came up with the idea of an open-air theatre, where patrons could watch movies in the comfort of their vehicles. He experimented with various ways to guard against rain and other inclement weather, and devised the ideal spacing arrangement for cars so that people could have a wonderful experience with a full view of the screen on display.

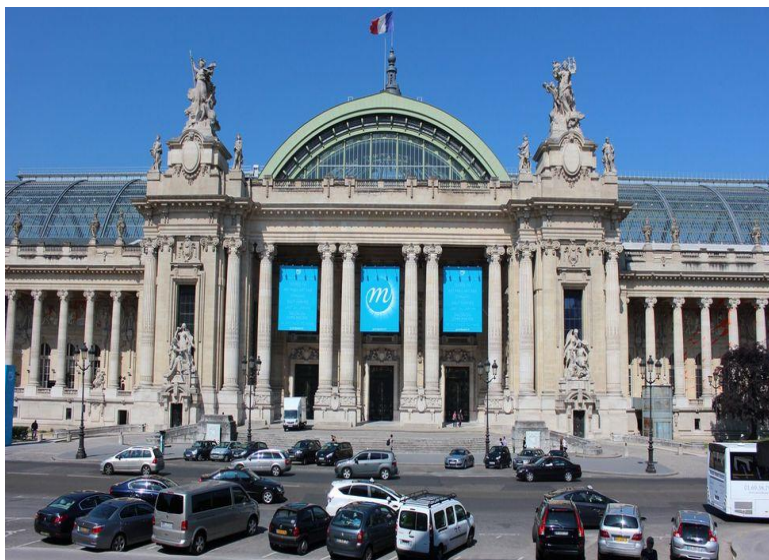
Plate 2



Drive-in Theatre Twyford Avenue Sports ground, United Kingdom.

Drive-in cinemas in England never took off in the same way they did in the United States of America. This is because drive-ins and drive-throughs are considered unnecessary and therefore rare in England. Hence, the number of drive-in cinemas across the country exploded as a result of the Covid-19 upsurge. Before the spread of the virus, the country had just three drive-in cinemas. The months of July to September 2020 witnessed at least 40 additional sites offering socially distanced cinema and theatrical experiences to audiences in their vehicles, with several venues even featuring rollerblading, masked service staff delivering, ordered and pre-ordered snacks and assorted drinks.

Plate 3



Paradiso Drive-in Theatre in France

Drive-in theatre came into existence in the 1960s in France but was abandoned by the managers due to the downturn in the business. Drive-in cinemas made a comeback in France as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. When the pandemic hit the country, group gatherings were the first thing to be banned, then came the closure of schools and finally extended to complete shutdowns. Presently, the drive-in theatre has regained popularity as an alternative means of entertainment in France at the moment. Hence, Paradiso drive-in theatre is the biggest drive-in theatre in the country.

Plate 4



Drive-in Theatre in Italy

Drive in theatre was first known in Italy as a metro drive-in theatre. This theatre has been in existence since 1950. It functioned till 1980 and was carelessly abandoned as a result of its aged technical equipment and materials which could no longer stand the taste of time. This theatre was revitalized as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is common knowledge that Italy is one of the countries that the disease ruthlessly dealt with. Hence, an alternative way of escape from the trauma becomes necessary among the citizens. The theatre as a matter of urgency commenced its operations by offering various types of entertainment during the lockdown, in other to keep life going.

The Birth of Drive-in Theatre in the Nigerian Space

As the scourge of coronavirus pandemic continues to rummage and hit harder on human beings and businesses, a Nigerian filmmaker named Charles Okpaleke, came up with the idea of drive-in cinemas, which was staged in Abuja and Lagos in early 2020. It also encapsulated a live performance from popular musicians such as; Style plus and the best DJs in Nigeria. The performance also had streaming of *Living in Bondage'* One of the first Nollywood movies in Nigeria. Mr Okpaleke who bought the rights to *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*, *Glamour Girls* and *Rattle Snake* later on, acquired the rights to *Living in Bondage* Mr Okpaleke believes that the medium of drive-in cinemas should be used as an effective approach to sustain the appetite of habitual cinema and theatre patrons; by entertaining them and as well, observing the guidelines of Covid-19 on social distancing. This was an imitation of what is in existence and obtainable in other countries as discussed earlier in this paper.

On the other hand, the Director-General of the National Council for Arts and Culture in Abuja, Mr Olusegun Runsewe, viewed that the Covid-19 strain has not only caused an entertainment deficit, but also a cultural void for many cultural arts enthusiasts. Consequently, he used the medium of drive-in theatre to reveal the programme of events prepared for the Annual National Festival of Arts (NAFEST), which was slated to be hosted by Plateau State in October 2020. He justified his efforts and intentions by engaging stakeholders and the creative sector in the experience in the light of the public health emergency. This idea was not personal, but rather with proper negotiations and deliberation with stakeholders, ranging from experts in various fields, members of the diplomatic community and journalists. This fruitful meeting and agreement were done on a virtual platform. Runsewe asserts that drive-in theatre and cultural tour were created as part of efforts to transmute the sector, and to alleviate the effects of Covid-19, rather than keeping the sector redundant. It could then be consciously said that the pandemic is coated with both misfortunes and opportunities in its entirety. It is the opinion of Uzundu that:

The relevance of theatrical performance could be seen in the ability to create and recreate without vagueness, the events and issues that led to certain agitations and remarkable challenges of the people within the environment. Creative works are naturally inclined to those physical and emotional problems that touch the social fabrics of the masses. Therefore, the values of creativity are traceable to the contexts within their immediate environment.... (84)

However, the upsurge of the virus presented occasions for creative artists to think outside the box and come up with innovations such as the virtual cultural tour and the drive-in theatre which serve as therapy and rain jacket to cushion the effects of the pandemic. Mgbemere argues that, "The shape, outlook and presentation of theatre, reflect the yearnings of the people. It is these attributes that bestow on the theatre the role of a vanguard, a watchdog, the barometer of the society and a major factor in nation-building" (425). With these well thought plans, one can conveniently allude that the spread of Covid-19, overtly or covertly opened windows for novelties, irrespective of all the maligning effects on humans and businesses.

Plate 5



Drive-in Theatre in Abuja

Drive in Theatre Performance by National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) Abuja

Drive-in theatre was organized by National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) Abuja. The event featured live performances of cultural songs across the three most populated tribes in Nigeria; Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, using the Nigerian Cultural Troupes that entertained the audience with various cultural tips. The audience was amazed at the expertise of Sheraton Hotel chefs who curated a top-notch menu of snacks and desserts, served through a contactless delivery method, to assuage hunger from the audience members. Afterwards, a staged performance of “Grip Am,” a Pidgin-language play written by one of Nigeria’s foremost playwrights, Ola Rotimi held the audience spell bound with an alluring performance. Grip Am is a hilarious comedy that fits into both past and present times. The choice of this play is obviously to entertain the audience and make them laugh off the sorrows brought by the disease. The play choice is both timely and effective as the audience kept laughing from the beginning to the end. It was a life-changing occasion that healed lots of people from the damage caused by the disease in their lives. The performance of Grip Am featured popular Nollywood actor, Francis Duru, who played the character, Işẹ.

Issues and Challenges of Drive-in Theatre in Nigeria

A drive-in theatre can be described as a construction of a large raised platform (stage) in a very wide parking lot, where the audience can conveniently enjoy the communal leisure experience from their vehicles. This

initiative came as a result of strict compliance with Covid-19 protocols on social distancing; an attempt to ensure a risk-free environment while enjoying the live theatre performance. This initiative was greeted with so much endorsement and appreciable rating, because of the ease and relaxation it presented to its audience at a devastating moment of Covid-19 spread in Nigeria. Ugala claims that, "in all ages, the theatre has mediated every life-giving and life-threatening situation. Nigerian theatre has not shirked its burden duty of watchdogging the society...Its immediate contact and response depict a sense of oneness with the action" (34).

This novel theatre practice in Nigeria was witnessed by a selected few audiences, with not more than 20 vehicles spaced two metres apart. This left many theatre patrons with the notion that the idea of this theatrical enterprise was specifically muted and designed for the benefit of the elite and affluents in Nigeria. The audience members were major stakeholders of the creative sector, some members of the diplomatic community, the National Association of Nigeria Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), the head of tourism association, arts reporters and some representatives of some embassies, among other few members of the audience. Perceptibly, this is not an all-inclusive practice that theatrical performances are known for right from their inceptions, especially in critical circumstances such as Covid-19 threat, where people have limited interaction with one another. Hence, the beauty of theatrical performance could be said to be determined by the number of audience in attendance. Suffice it to say that the information and the whole processes of theatrical experience should be for audience consumption and logical assessment. As such, the significance of audience members in performances cannot be over flogged. Indeed, they are the only reason why theatrical performances happen and flourish. The potency of this creative dimension could be seen as not impactful, with regards to audience participation. This is therefore a fundamental flaw from the organisers of the performance. The event should have been open to as many people that meet up the requirement for attendance.

Upon a critical investigation on this seemingly selective theatre practice, it was discovered that the space for the performance was limited and could contain only the aforementioned stakeholders and few audience members. This is so because drive-in theatre practice has not been a common practice in Nigeria, neither has the consciousness of unforeseen circumstances such as the spread of the virus come to many creative artists. Going by the brief analysis and origin of drive-ins in various countries, the consciousness has been established in many countries such as the United States of America, France, Italy, among other countries. These countries timely perceived the need for open space performances even before the outbreak of the disease;

thus, they provided this alternative means for continuity and sustenance of entertainment. This made it possible for them to easily revive the culture of drive-ins within a limited time and space.

It is, therefore, the standpoint of this paper that considering the number of unused or empty spaces in various states in the country, some should be reserved or converted to a drive-in theatre for either in the event of any disease outbreak or as a new dimension of theatre practice in Nigeria. This is considered necessary as a result of its instant response to psychological and physiological human needs. Consequently, the researcher observed that some of the empty spaces transformed to be used as parks or wedding reception arenas and other functions were non-functional with the spread of the disease. Other issues such as adequate publicity and budget, funding and provision of infrastructures from government and other relevant agencies are also some of the issues that demand urgent attention. Giving further critical thought to the social impact of audience going to drive-in performance, we could advance that social or business discussions may also take place freely in the cars as opposed to conventional theatre spaces, if the do-not-disturb culture is not adhered to. Also, it should be contemplated that some attendees may not have interest in the performance, but just to relax.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted a critical discourse on the establishment of drive-in theatres in various countries. It notes that so many countries have already started the drive-in culture before the outbreak of Covid-19 in the world. This made it possible for them to easily take off the drive-in culture without much struggle. With the realities of the spread of the disease, some countries that abandoned or neglected their drive-ins due to outdated equipment and materials, as well as poor management of the theatre swiftly rectified them in order to salvage the ugly situation presented by the pandemic. The story was not the same in Nigeria; as drive-in theatre never existed in the country. In effect, following the eruption of the disease and lockdown that prohibited the movement of persons from one place to another, theatre practitioners came up with the idea of drive-in theatre. This is because, it is considered convenient and safe; as people could sit in the comfort of their cars to watch the theatrical performance while maintaining social distancing. The paper observes that while this novel practice is all-inclusive practice in most countries, Nigeria's situation was witnessed by few individuals. Therefore, it interrogates this seemingly selective theatre practice and insists that this lofty idea should be to the benefit of all and sundry. This is pertinent because; the art and its giant stride is an effective agent of socialization and reformation. The threats of Covid-19 should not erase the functions of theatre practice as an

inclusive venture. Hence, there is a need for continuity and sustenance of theatre practice in Nigeria against all odds presented to the people and environment; as novel ideas will continue to flourish.

Recommendations

Based on the enormous relevance of drive-in theatre this paper recommends that there is a need for the sustenance of drive-in theatre practice in Nigeria. This can be made possible if government and stakeholders could be proactive and committed to the provision of spaces and facilities that will help in the realisation and effectiveness of drive-in theatre in Nigeria. Hence, some empty spaces in the country and states should be set aside for a drive-in experience in the event of reoccurrence of the disease or as a new normal theatre practice. Again, drive-in theatre is a worthwhile experience and therefore should be adopted not only as a novel theatre practice but a new dimension of theatre experience.

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