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POSTDIGITAL THEATRE: BEYOND DIGITAL ALIENATION OF LIVE THEATRE ON THE NIGERIAN PERFORMANCE SPACE

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Abstract

The challenges of studies in humanities in the wake of the ongoing digital revolution in science and technology sum up the crisis of the place of live theatre in response to skit making on social media apart from the traditional film medium like cinemas and home videos. There are perhaps arguments around the presumed effectiveness of digital theatre in terms of its ability to reach wider audiences across the globe at once through the deployment of technology. Nevertheless, it is clear from my experience of live theatre as recent as May 15 and June 19 2022 by the *House of Arimata Theatre Studio* in Osogbo, that digital theatre cannot take the place of a live theatre. The communal ritual essence of live theatre, its liminal phases, the necessary separation, the shattering of the performers in the limen, their re-assemblage/merging with the audience, and the communal re-emergence with a new consciousness, all in the transitions and the festivity of a live theatre, cannot be captured in/by a digital theatre. Thus, the lacuna is clear even in the rate at which humanity is commoditised with its knowledge and cultural productions monetised in most digital theatre productions. It is on the basis of the argument of postdigitalism that this paper uses direct observation and historical-analytic methods to argue that while live theatre retains the power to humanise through communal participation, digital theatre can only continue to commoditise/zombiefy humanity with its focus on traffic generation and advert placements essentially for materialism.

Keywords: Digital theatre, Live theatre, Postdigital theatre, Ritual essence, Liminal phases.

Introduction

The theatre, as a social art, is unique in its form because of its being, essentially, a collaborative art (Mini and Terver 135-7; Obot 387-94). However, for this same reason, of its being a shared form of art, there seems to exist a lot of apprehensions around its continuous relevance and survival since the time of the invention of the film and the home video mediums. Of course, it is not as if films or home videos are anything but also such collective art forms in their own right. These media, in their mode of transmission, are different from the live theatre and they also have the capacity to reach wider audiences in the comfort of their homes. Thus, the fears in the live theatre is first of its being live, in its bringing the artists before and with the audience in the same space in its form. The second fear is its continuous relevance in the face of digitalism. The third is its economic viability and survival. These fears seem to have

been heightened in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly towards the tail end of 2019 through the 2020 lockdown across the globe and a considerable part of 2021. For instance, such fears are attested to by some of the papers on the pandemic theatre experience that were presented at the SONTA 2021 International Conference in Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, which seem to be suggesting a progressive demise of the live theatre for what is seen as the emergence of what is christened drive-in theatre and the pure digital theatre (Udengwu and Godwin 179-87; Erojikwe, Ezegwu and Omeje 141-153; Msuega and Ugede 506-13). In fact, Imiti feels very strongly that digital theatre has come to send the live theatre into oblivion, to eclipse it, perhaps, forever (93-100). The fear around the possibility of a progressive irrelevance of the live theatre as being perceived on the Nigerian theatre stage precedes the crisis of the relevance and the survival of the theatre as heightened by the crisis of the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, as noted briefly above, there have been concerns around low patronage and sponsorship of the live theatre as most people now, arguably, prefer to sit in the comfort of their homes to watch films, home videos, online skits or digital/cable television theatres. There is, possibly, a sense in which the lethargy towards seeing a live theatre in Nigeria can be linked to other fundamental factors like insecurity (Udengu and Peter 120-129). There is also high rate of poverty level as many are struggling to feed themselves and their families according to Mansir in a World Bank report entitled *Deep Structural Reforms Guided by Evidence are urgently needed to lift Millions of Nigerians out of Poverty*. Poverty has made people to have little time to think about theatre for pleasure or relaxation. There are also the gradual erosion of the middle class, high level of illiteracy and, perhaps, that of the non-existence of sustainable theatre culture in the country. The reason for the lack of such theatre culture appears to be linked to the fact that the arts theatre seems elitist in nature. Unlike its community theatre counterpart, it is, arguably, not owned by the people. This is against the reality that the theatre, in its pristine ritual state, was and is still owned by the people. Going forward, the ownership of theatre by the people will help to sustain their interests for it to further enjoy their patronage.

The point of argument is that the challenges of the survival of the live theatre in Nigeria, arguably, has little to do with digitalization, on the one hand, if and when digitalization is properly understood within its historical development and purpose. On the other hand, if and when we properly reconceptualise and understand the purpose, the relevance and the place of live theatre within its historical development and functionality against digitalization as a tool of theatre making. Such other challenges of security, poverty, illiteracy and lack of sustainable theatre culture, as mentioned above, are social problems that can easily be addressed and improved upon to create such quality of life and living for the citizens such that the importance, the value and the place of live theatre can be understood for productive communal engagement and reengineering. When this is understood, it will arguably help to drive national socio-cultural cohesiveness, growth and development through live theatre performances.

Understanding Theatre Digitalism

There is a misconception around digitalism and the digitalization of the live theatre, possibly, as result of poor understanding of its historical development and purpose. But, in Ododo and Fanyam, there is an attempt to place the development and the employment of technological/digital tools to enhance the making of live theatre in clear historical perspective. For instance, the duo, quoting Gillete, note that: some Roman amphitheatres, such as the Colosseum, made extensive use of elevators, moving platforms, and trapdoors to raise animals, people and scenery from the basements underneath the amphitheatre's floor to the arena level (qtd in Ododo and Fanyam 445).

What is clear from this historical record is that technological or digital tools were historically deployed to enhance the making of the live theatre. Thus, they were not at any time in history set to displace the live theatre. In essence, historically, digital tools are not installed in the theatre against the live theatre as we seem to be arguing and positioning them today. And, if we would not be ahistorical, this simple way of seeing theatre digitalism, as the employment and the deployment of digital/technological tools to enhance the making of the live theatre, is also very visible in the experimental theatres of the likes of Brecht, Picastor and Artaud who deployed extensive use of digital tools like projectors, slides, digital music, digital sounds and e-posters in their theatres. Even when through the opportunities provided by such platforms offered by digital technological forms and mediums such as films, cinemas and online streaming emerge, they did not arguably emerge to destroy the nucleus. That is, the heart of the need, of the necessity for the emergence of the live theatre in its pristine state; as means of addressing existential concerns around its ritual essence in the consciousness of humanity in search of solutions to its existential crisis. We know that the quest for ritual performance to mediate the challenges of human existence was at the heart of the birth of the theatre.

Understanding the Heart of Live Theatre

Historically, the heart of the live theatre is traceable to its ritual roots in the festivals and the performances of different indigenous cultures in search of answers to the questions around the purpose of life; living and death. However, it must be clarified that when we speak of the indigenous man as being ritualistic it appears too simplistic if it is taken to mean that we are saying that the contemporary man is anything different from such a man when it comes to the apprehension of the need for rituals. In essence, from the Greek Dionysian festival, to the contemporary Christian rituals of harvests and other such rituals of circumcisions and sacrifices, to Islamic rituals of prayers and recitations. And back to the indigenous African rituals, incantations to/of different traditional gods to the ancestral Egungun/masquerade worship, including Ododo's Facekuerade type of the ancestral Ebira-Ekuechi (Omoera "The Significance of Facekuerade" 63-75; Ododo and Okoye 1-9), festival theatre performances in many cultures, particularly in Africa, going by their roots in different ritual essences, the reasons we posited gave birth to their existence in the first place (Soyinka 154). Live theatre cannot arguably be rendered redundant by digitalization/digitalism. Hence, particularly to an Africa man, the live theatre seen in the purposes of its numerous

communal rites, rituals, and performances, can only probably continue to progressively appropriate the opportunities offered by technology and its digital tools to keep reinventing itself for continuous relevance just as it has always done in history (Omoera “Reinventing Igbabonelimhin” 49).

The existence of the live theatre is essentially ritualistic, for it seems to answer to a need, a yearning for a transcendental communal experience of a communion in form of a sharing of, perhaps, a sacred meal in a marked space of existence, a similitude of a ritual experience in a liminal space as sanctioned by the ethnicities through that which can only be ensured and assured in a form of a rite of passage (Ojoniyi “A Masquerade Performs” 45-52). And, this rite is essentially endorsed by that communal spirit of shared living and shared experiences of common spirituality in the face of their search for existential answers to such paradoxical cosmic realities, mainly of such ironies of life and death, of fortune and ruins and of plenty and famine. Unfortunately, it appears that when we think of the theatre today, we are only concerned about and confined to what happens to our limited university educational arts theatre without necessarily being mindful of the ritual essence of the indigenous theatres, the indigenous reasons and purposes for the communal rites of passages and performances as demanded by the mutual myths and spiritualities of the people in their festival celebrations.

Every communal ritual theatre performance demands the coming together of the people. This open coming together of the people for the performance at a marked ritual arena only signals the final stage of the production process that has earlier began in the separation of the artists, the ritual *communitas* as identified by Turner (94-6). Even in the making of contemporary films, cinemas, the home videos and of the online skits, these artists, like the ritual *communitas*, must still be separated from the crowd for the rites of rehearsals toward a successful final performance. They must be isolated from the general public for a time, a season of/for the making of the theatre. In the rare cases of, arguably, such extreme digital experimental theatre during the Covid-19 lockdown as identified under the broad name of transmediality or transmedia theatre, using digital tools like the zoom technology, TikTok, IG or WhatsApp group video for rehearsal and performance as seen in Romanska, Magda’s *Transmedia Dramaturgy of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Theatre* and Svich (1-14), the theatre makers/performers must still be separated to a marked space for a similitude of the ritual liminal experience. Only that in this case, on such a digital space, the liminal transcendental space is a virtual space where both performers and audience do not experience physical body contact.

However, we must know and admit this form of digital theatre for what it is: it is an emergency theatre or a theatre in an emergency. In essence, such zoom digital experimental theatre, TikTok, IG and WhatsApp video theatre, in fact such aspect of what constitute the making of transmedia theatre, can only rightly be seen as part of what should possibly be considered as belonging to or representing pandemic emergency transitional experimental theatre. The remaining like music or action streaming and e-poster projection are essentially not new to experimental live theatre making. And, as it has already been noted above, such have always been part of what

Brecht uses to achieve his alienation techniques in his Epic theatre form. In sum, historically, technological and digital tools have always served the purpose of enhancing theatre making, especially in the area of the making of Avant-garde or experimental theatres.

Towards a Postdigital Live Theatre

In making the case for postdigital live performances, Wilson in his essay which explores the place of improvisation in music education in a postdigital education teachers-students interactions(1-27), reemphasis Green's report on teacher-designers' observation that there is a 'loss of spontaneous responses to perceived student needs' when teaching moved online especially during the Covid-19 pandemic(108). He further claims that Green's observation equally agrees with Fawns' position when he claims that teachers could "no longer use known resources and experience developed over years of teaching, which in the physical scenario enabled instant responses to student learning needs" (132-145). In essence, digitalism eclipses the teachers-learners' spontaneity and thus stiffens instant reflectivity on the part of the teachers and the students in a teaching-learning process to respond to the students' needs. This is also true of the artists/performers/audience relationship in a live performance.

There is no doubt that a level of natural spontaneity that exist between the performers and the audience in a live theatre is lost in a digital mediated theatre. And, further citing a recent study on the restrictive impact of Covid-19 pandemic on improvisation in music, Wilson contends that "improvisation practiced by musicians who are co-located in the same physical environment is not the same as that practiced by musicians collaborating online" (1-27). What Wilson's observation here, in relation to the place of improvisation in music digital education in the pandemic, suggests is simple: it is that digital theatre like digital music improvisation lacks the capacity to initiate or provoke immediate natural responses of the performers to the yearnings and the needs of its virtual audience. It is perhaps impossible for digital theatre performers to so respond to the needs of the audience as a result of such factors as time frame, delay in/of digital relay of events from one end to the other, as well as the overlaying or overlapping of actions and reactions as a result of such digital timeline delay of the relay of the actions being responded to from either sides/ends.

It is possibly in the realization of the factors above and the gradual erosion of our common humanity consequent on our growing addictions to digital tools such as smart cellphones to the detriment of our common physical bonding, direct human to human communication and socialization, such factors as being linked to our widening socio-distancing, mental pressure and degeneration as a result of lack of human agency of support for each other under stress and the excessive commodification of our socio-interactions as being promoted and sustained by unmediated digitalism that scholars like Wilson and the other he cited in his work (1-27) are now promoting the idea of postdigitalism. Postdigitalism is a socio-academic response to the challenges of digitalism. It is based on the reality and the realisation that digitalism is to be seen and accepted as human tools and instruments of socio-cultural interaction, and not as a replacement of such time tested socio-cultural values of communalism, face-to-face or one-on-one direct interaction and communication. Thus, if digitalism inevitably

promotes being hooked to/on machines or other technological devices as computers and smartphones, that humanity consequently has little or no time for physical socio-interaction and bonding among themselves, postdigitalism is calling for our return to retrieve the loss of such humanity as is expressed in Sartre's socio-cultural existential theory of 'being for-others' (McCulloch 40-1; Ojoniyi "Crisis of Consciousness" 13-16; "A Masquerade Performs" 24-27).

The calls for a return to real-time social bonding and interaction in postdigital reasoning are based on evidences from socio-cultural and educational research findings that have established that unmediated digitalism is progressively eroding our common humanity, increasing our social distancing and thus 'zombiefying' us rather humanising us (Wilson 1-27). Human beings do not just operate as 'being for-itself'; they are social beings that must interact as 'home-comrades' with 'being in-itself' and 'being for-others' (Ojoniyi "Crisis of Consciousness" 13-16; "A Masquerade Performs" 24-27). The lack of the sustenance of such historical social-cultural human to human interaction and bonding can be seen as possible reasons for deviant and asocial behaviours and mental degeneration among many people as have been posited above. What is perhaps evident in the Covid-19 pandemic rules of socio-distancing, partial lockdown and the total lockdown of our socio-bonding and direct interaction in some States is a world-wide sense of the loss of our common humanity; a loss we all seem to mourn and seek to overcome through the tools provided by digitalism. In essence, what is clear from the works of many postdigital scholars like Svich (1-14) and Wilson (1-27) is that digital theatre practice without human direct interactions and bonding as is required in a postdigital theatre is inadequate in solving the human problems it seeks to solve.

The Example of House of Arimatha Theatre Studio Live Productions in Support of Postdigital Arguments

The House of Arimatha Theatre Studio was established in Osogbo in 2017 by five theatre enthusiasts according to Abiodun Ajiboye in a WhatsApp interview of 27 November, 2022. However, the leader of the group and the founder, Dr Bello Adeza, a lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, claimed in a WhatsApp interview from him that the theatre outfit was established in 2007 when he was in the Gambia. It is reported to have served as a creative platform for some Nigerians that were gathered together for performances ranging from drama, rhetorical arts, musicals and dance theatre. On Adeza's return to Nigeria, he took up lecturing job with the Redeemer's University where he continued to promote the theatre outfit as a platform to sponsor ambitious students to showcase their talents through what he christened 'Feast of Dance' every session until the university moved from Mowe to Ede in Osun State. Adeza then moved to Osogbo and re-established the theatre outfit in Osogbo in 2014 to provide opportunities to train youths within the church, especially National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members. In 2017, Abiodun Ajiboye who would later become the director of the outfit and four others who have then just completed their NYSC programme joined the group. Through their burning zeal and passion, some of them being theatre graduates, to revive live theatre and performances tradition in Osogbo, the theatre outfit became more aggressive in its

mission by holding performances regularly and training other youths. That is the story of the birth of the Theatre Company that has now produced more than 15 plays between 2018 and now.

According to Ajiboye (in a What'sApp interview of 27 November, 2022, their first production in Osogbo, a music drama, was written and directed by Bello Adeza. It was performed inside the hall of Hotel de Heritage, Ogooluwa Area, Osogbo. Some of the plays the group has performed to date since then include: *Silhouette* by Adeza directed by Ayo Olatona and Abiodun Ajiboye, *Grip Am* by Ola Rotimi directed by Dominic Fayenuwo, *Ikoko (Pot)*, a dance drama by Abiodun Ajiboye choreographed by Tomiwa Oluwadamilare, *Caring Cordelia* (an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*) by Abiodun Ajiboye and directed by Dolapo Kolade, *Eniyan* by Wale Ogunyemi directed by Abiodun Ajiboye, *Back to Eden* by 'Bode Ojoniyi directed by Abiodun Ajiboye, *Touch of Love* (musical libretto) by Bello Adeza directed by Abiodun Ajiboye and Sunday Adebayo, *The Woman with a Past* by Segun Ogunrinde directed by Abiodun Ajiboye, *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi directed by Abiodun Ajiboye and other of such performances as dances and musicals. The theatre studio is currently located at 11, Ataoja Estate, behind NECO Office, Osogbo. It hosts students on industrial attachment. Its activities are mainly financed by the members and goodwill from friends of the theatre.

In the course of this research, the researcher was able to see their productions on two occasions with his family: the first was on May 15, 2022 and the second was on June 19, 2022. One of the reasons for his seeing the second production of June 19, 2022 was because his children became so fascinated with the theatre from the day of the first production that they always want to go back to see their performances. The theatre performed *Eniyan* an adaptation of an anonymous' *Everyman* on May 15, 2022 while on June 19, 2022, *Grip Am* by Ola Rotimi was performed. Below are some of the pictures taken by the researcher during the performances:



Picture 1: From the performance of *Eniyan* taken by the Researcher on May 15, 2022



Picture 2: From the performance of *Eniyan* taken by the Researcher on May 15, 2022



Picture 3: 'Death' from the performance of *Eniyan* taken by the Researcher on May 15, 2022



Picture 4: From the performance of *Eniyan* taken by the Researcher on May 15, 2022



Picture 5: A cross section of the audience during the performance of *Eniyan* taken by the Researcher on May 15, 2022



Picture 6: The researcher and some of the performers from the performance of *Eniyan*



Picture 7: The researcher and Dr Peter Bello Adeza, the founder of House of Arimata Theatre Studio, Osogbo.



Picture 8: The researcher's elated children and one of the performers who happened to be a household face in Nollywood Christian films.



Picture 9: From the performance of *Grip Am* taken by the Researcher on June 19, 2022

What is clear from the post-pandemic performances of House of Arimatha Theatre Studio in/from the interactions of the performers and the audience is that digital theatre cannot take the place of live theatre. This is just as it is also evident in the West in the works of theatre practitioners and educationists such as Svich (1-14), Gallagher (1-22), and Wilson (1-27). The point is thus clear that whatever represents what has been identified above as the pandemic emergency transitional experimental theatre and educational processes during the pandemic crisis period cannot perhaps take the place of the traditional theatre education and performance as espoused in postdigitalism. Perhaps, this is the reason the House of Arimatha Theatre Studio was quick to return to the making and the production of live theatre experience in Osogbo immediately the pandemic induced lockdown was lifted in Nigeria. And, what is interesting and essentially gratifying here, again as a testimony against the position of some scholars like Udengwu and Godwin (179-187), Erojikwe, Ezegwu and Omeje (141-153), Msuega and Ugede (506-513) and Imiti (93-100) on the claim of the gradual extinction of the live theatre as a result of digitalism, is that a lot of people actually trooped out to see these productions by the House of Arimata Studio live as can be seen in some of the pictures above. Of particular interest to this researcher is also the fact that most of the members of the audience are first timers to the live theatre experience.

Conclusion

The idea and understanding of theatrical activities in a pandemic digital world is not and cannot be the same thing as the theatre in a postpandemic or a postdigital world because the dissimilarities are clear: digital theatre and theatre in a postdigital world are historical developments in the making of theatre; whereas, theatres in Covid-19 pandemic era are merely historical emergency theatres. Theatres in the pandemic era are developed to respond to an emergency period in the life of humanity and it should be noted that nobody lives its entire life in a perpetual state of emergency. Even though digital theatre as practised in the pandemic period is equally within the period of the pandemic historical reality, it is rather to be appropriately seen as an emergency response theatre and not as model of theatre to serve as a viable replacement of the live theatre.

In conclusion, postdigital theatre is, perhaps, a form of theatre of restoration; a theatre that advocates a return to normal pre-pandemic human to human socio-cultural interactions where digital tools are again employed and deployed to serve the art of theatre making. And, this is exactly what the post-pandemic theatre productions of the House of Arimatha Theatre Studios embodies. The productions reignite the communal ritual essence of theatre performances as they bring everyone (crew, artists and audience) together again in an open theatre ritual arena/space. The crew members become the ritual agencies, the priests and ritual attendants. The artists are the ritual *communitas* who have been separated from the crowd to undergo the ritual process of the theatre making from the auditioning through the rehearsals. The audience are the members of the ritual community into which the artists, the performers are to be reintegrated at the performance. The performance serves the purpose of the process of

the reintegration of the *communitas* into the community in an atmosphere of festivity and joy: an atmosphere of music, dance and drama.

What is clear, therefore, from the live theatre post-pandemic productions of the House of Arimatha Theatre Studio productions is simple: it is that the postdigital theatre position of the need for human to human theatre experience will indeed bring back a similitude of the pristine communal ritual festivity essence of the theatre. And, in bringing it back, it would arguably help to reignite the communal spirit in humanity as a viable agency to/of dealing with loneliness and depression as were experienced during the lockdown isolation crisis. It will also restore the spontaneity of the natural human to human interaction for healthy socialisation as means of communal renewal, sense of fulfilment, joy, and togetherness as witnessed after each of the House of Arimatha Theatre Studio productions through/in the performances and postproduction interactions and festivity among the production crew, the performers and the audience who left the arena rejuvenated, restored and renewed.

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