
The Theatre and Sustainable Human Development: *Fumes of Fuel and Boundless Love* as Paradigms

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Abstract

*The performing Arts encompass a wide range of disciplines which are invariably synonymous with creativity, thus, creativity is the hallmark of performance. For the sake of clarity, Performing Arts comprise Theatre Arts, Music, Dance and Choreography and the electronic media of Radio, Television and film commonly referred to as the audio-visual or media arts. Development is invariably measured by performance using certain indices. It is also part of the function of the performing arts to project development as well be evidence of development themselves. For instance, it is a sign of development to produce a play before an audience, particularly an audience composed of persons saddled with the responsibility of showing the direction for the development of a certain society. This paper will use the plays, *Fumes of Fuel and Boundless Love* to expound on the relevance of the Performing Arts in human and societal development.*

Keywords: Performing Arts, Creativity, Development and Humanity.

Introduction

There has always been a gross misunderstanding of the theatre, both as a professional enterprise and an academic discipline, and all it entails. This is in spite of the fact that the theatre is a home of creativity. It is generally more than what even professionals and

academics, critics and admirers say it is. Matthew Umukoro tries to offer an explanation of what theatre arts is when he says:

Thus, far from being a pure art or an exact science, Theatre Arts is a rich blend of both, maintaining a delicate balance between artistic liberalism on the one hand, and scientific precision and empiricism on the other. We may, for want of a better nomenclature, christen this branch of knowledge as a *humanistic Science*, (emphasis included), since humanity is the constant centerpiece of its scholarship and creativity, in contradistinction to the *physical* and *social Sciences*, which deal essentially with the numinous world of nature and the capricious world of man respectively (2).

The above submission by Umukoro rightly notes that theatre arts is preoccupied with humanity; how to make life better and achieve societal harmony devoid of rancor, thereby creating room for humanity's growth and development. This is because peaceful co-existence is surely a mark of development. Chukwuma Anyanwu in "Theatre Arts as the melting-pot of the arts: A study" observes that:

Theatre Arts as both a profession and as an academic discipline and theatre artists, in whatever aspect of the field they may be involved, are not only vital to the society in general but are also pivotal to humanity's total and complete existence-socially, economically, politically and spiritually (61).

Anyanwu goes further to state that, "Theatre arts as a profession and as an academic discipline, constitute the bulk of the literature of human existence – a literature which pulses with the rhythms

and heart beats of human existence...”(62). This shows that humanity, its well being, its fate in every sphere of existence, whether for good or for bad, development or retrogression is, the concern of theatre arts.

Theatre and Human Development

Tackling the linkage between theatre and human development would require a disambiguating of the key terms *theatre* and *development*. This would help us to properly articulate the connections that may be salutary to the society.

Theatre as a concept may not need much explaining as it is something that is quite visible and understood, at least at the surface level, as stated above. Theatre can manifest either as literature or as performance although the performance component of theatre usually dominates. In this context, we can take theatre to mean the performance of a piece of real or imagined experience by a group of collaborators before an audience within a defined space and time. In this performance, a number of elements are used, the combination of which, in varying degrees lead to a composite whole that passes across immediate experience(s)/message(s) to the audience.

A unique feature of theatre as performance is that it relies on sight and sound in order to be enacted and to pass across its message. For this reason, it is “readable” by both the literate and the illiterate. A. B. C. Duruaku puts the point eloquently when he asserts that as a practical art, the “story” of theatre is told in action and words which are combined to stimulate the senses of sight and hearing. Thus if perchance a member of the audience does not understand the words used, he would understand the actions that

accompany the words. In his words: “An illiterate or one who has language limitation can still watch and understand a play” (12). The assertions by Duruaku build upon the views of Paulo Freire who in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sees the language of theatre as one that can be spoken by both literate and illiterate persons. In using the language of theatre, Freire says images become very important as they are an effective way to communicate which is not tied to someone’s level of literacy or lack of it. What is important, according to Freire, is that such images so used are properly coded and decoded within the framework of the particular cultural setting, and this elicits response from the audience. Exchange of communication as shown above can have wider implications beyond the performance itself.

Development is one concept that has been given a diversity of meanings depending on the leanings of the one giving the interpretation. On account of this, it is sometimes ambiguous when trying to tell precisely what is meant by development. The apparent confusion and lack of agreement that trails the use of the term development is captured vividly in the essay “Theatre and Development: Opportunities and challenges in a Developing World” by Olalekan Ganiyu Akashoro, Jimi Kayode and Shaibu Husseini. According to Akashoro et al., some persons look at development as something that is inert and stagnant while others view it as something that causes change. They posit that economists, politicians and other persons deploy the term in their discussions of a society’s growth but without any consensus as to what precisely it should mean. It is on the strength of this observation that they aver that “Indeed contradictions and ambiguity have characterized the many attempts to define the concept. The meaning a particular person attaches to the term

depends on his or her subjective view of the word” (108). Thus development may be looked at through the lenses provided by biology, humanity, psychology, politics, economics and so many others which are viewed against human development index, human development theory etc.

The 2015 edition of the UNDP Human Development Report argues that the world had been more interested in material acquisition and abundance of wealth, an ideology that has pushed so many persons to the fringes of life and existence. Taking a global look at the issue, the report admits that development has advanced in some respects but it also notes that this advancement has not been evenly spread and has been irregular. As a result of this, we have widely diffused levels of lack and hardship because a vast amount of human resources and abilities are not exploited.

As a way to remedy this skewed perception of development, the UNDP report advocates a change of the lens through which development needs are viewed. This is by taking what it calls “a people-centred approach”. This invariably leads to the realization that:

the true aim of development is not only to boost economies, but also to maximise human choices – by enhancing human rights, freedoms, capabilities and opportunities and by enabling people to lead long, healthy and creative lives. (1)

This presupposes that infrastructural development alone does not guarantee the development of the person and the society. Infrastructural development must lead to better developed persons just as properly developed humans would lead to a better and more beneficial deployment of infrastructural development. And as the

UNDP report puts it, human development is both a process and an outcome (2).

We can posit from the above that human development looks beyond the acquisition of material wealth or simply the deployment of modern infrastructure. It has to do with a holistic development of man as a human entity located within a well structured environment in which resources are fairly well distributed and choices are provided. This ensures that people develop as individuals that are part of a larger society.

Sustainability is when the human development that is achieved is enduring and as much as possible is all encompassing. Again, the United Nations Development Programme has shown the way by drafting and getting world leaders to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25th September, 2015. This agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which build on the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that ran from 2000 to 2015. A critical look at the SDGs reveal goals that are broadly meant to tackle poverty, inequality and injustice while also confronting the monster of climate change. The UNDP believes that if the implementation of these goals are well pursued at the sub-national, national, sub-regional and international levels, inclusive development can be had in a sustainable manner.

How is the theatre connected to all of these? In other words, what is there that theatre can do to conduce sustainable human development? And where do the two plays that constitute the focus of this study fit into the questions raised above? Historically, theatre has been a vehicle for social interaction, for the moulding

of public opinion and for the setting of agenda in any given society. Theatre is believed to have sprung from religious or quasi-religious activities, including sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic was engaged in for a variety of reasons which included trying to understand natural elements and trying to appease these natural phenomena. The bottom line is that early man sought to bend nature to do his bidding in order to ensure better yield in the gathering of fruits and the hunting of animals so that the continuous survival of the clan could be assured. That was the beginning of sustainable development using the theatre medium.

The history of theatre down the millennia has not shown anything different. The theatre has always been there, shining the light and showing the way. Chukwukelue Umenyilorah buttresses this point by asserting that:

The theatre is known to be alive to the social-political realities of its time; a kind of court where the economic, social, religious, and political issues of society are outlined, evaluated and judged. (34)

This situation outlined by Umenyilorah has of course played out in different societies across time. Dovetailing to Nigeria during the colonial era, we see how the theatre was used to set the agenda for development through the fight for independence and improved living conditions of Nigerians under colonial rule. The activities and travails of Hubert Ogunde and his troupe as documented by Eburn Clark are quite instructive in this regard. In the same vein, G. G. Darah presents a graphic picture of how Udje dance and its accompanying song performance is used to set people and the

community on the right track towards positive and sustainable development.

Numerous playwrights and theatre practitioners have trod this path and are still treading this path with a view to engendering a more positive and inclusive development of the individual and the society. A way of society developing is by exposing the ills inherent in the society and suggesting how to surmount those ills. O. S. Obuh stresses that theatre in Africa does not only mirror the society, record activities and interpret happenings, it also has a most crucial task of correcting the ills observed and creating an awareness of the need for change (142). Such awareness can be made manifest if practitioners strive to engage in theatre that truly speaks to the people and engages in the task of opening the eyes of the mind to see clearly.

When a people's mind is opened through encounter with the theatre, they begin to see themselves as instruments of change and begin to seek for ways to alter the course of their society positively. In the words of Paulo Freire, such persons behold in themselves "... a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social institution in which they find themselves" (9). Such a critical look should ordinarily spur a positive development of the society in a sustainable manner. It is in the light of this that the performances of *Fumes of Fuel* and *Boundless Love* become germane.

The Plays: Summary

The two plays under study are Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* and Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Boundless Love*. Both plays discuss issues that affect our common existence as human beings in an

environment that is not only hostile but also dehumanizing. *Fumes of Fuel* is a play about the destruction of the land and environment due to oil exploration in the Niger Delta, oil exploration that is supposed to bring wealth and increase the living standards of the people. There is denigration of the land. As a result, the land cannot grow crops and the rivers cannot harbour fishes anymore, thus impoverishing the people and making it very difficult for them to meet their basic needs.

Due to poverty in the land as caused by the activities of the oil companies, the people resort to oil bunkering. Okoro and his friends, Ewari and Efe, engage in the risky business in order to empower themselves financially. This seems to be the only visible means to extricate themselves from poverty ravaging the land. Apart from the issue of oil exploration and its after-effect, we also have leadership problem as exemplified by Ebi, the Local Government Chairman. He exploits this situation to his advantage providing for Timi and putting her in a sort of bondage against her will.

In their bid to empower themselves with ‘scooping of oil’ from the busted pipes, an accident occurs resulting in a ravaging fire which consume Okoro, his father , Efe and many others. But Ewari, the only surviving male friend of Okoro and Efe decide to take the protest further. The fight by Ewari is to stop corruption, oppression, injustice, and greed and insensitive leadership. Ewari represents the ‘People’s Force’ calling for change, the change that will bring about a just and egalitarian society that will discourage even oil bunkering itself. The play ends on a tragic note, but with some ray of hope for a better future.

Boundless Love discuss themes of love, quackery in the film/theatre business, sickle cell anaemia and HIV. The exploration of these themes is carefully rendered in a style that is experimental and peculiar. The time tested word 'love' is seen differently by Peter and Mark. for Mark, love is not the guiding principle for relationship, but to Peter love is worth dying for, that also makes him to be committed to the partner he is in love with, as he believes that to be faithful is the key to a lasting affair. Mark on the other hand feels that love can be expressed by having as many girl friends as possible.

The play also reveals a pervading menace in the theatre/film industry- quackery. We are told that fake directors abound in the industry, persons who are not knowledgeable or educated in the arts of the theatre and film making, who are only interested in speculation and the making of money.

In this play we see how love could not stand the test of time due to Hiv and sickle cell anaemia. Precious and Peter, in their plan to get married, go for the Hiv test only to discover that both of them have AS genotype. This discovery seriously shakes their resolve to be joined together.

The play discuss some social problems besetting the human society. The playwright relates his experience to create awareness of the Hiv/sickle cell anaemia scourge in the society, and also to say that love is a complex subject that no one fully understands. And for quackery in the theatre there is little the professionals can do due to lack of the financial power to break even.

The Plays: Analysis

Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* recounts the crisis and disaster that attends the activities of oil companies and oil bunkerers in the Niger Delta in general and Jesse in particular. The play opens with Okoro and Ewari, both youths, awaiting the arrival of their bosom friend, Efe who is coming from Abuja. In their exchanges in dialogue, we have a hint of the bad situation of things around them, caused by the activities of the multinational oil companies and their local collaborators.

Okoro: Like: London bridge's fallen, fallen
 London bridge's fallen
 To rise no more

Ewari: Which kine stupid song be dat? Is that a Christian hymn. Is Efe fallen because he is born again? Take your time-o. Anyway, talking about bridges that have fallen, why should you leave all the bridges that have fallen all over Nigeria, and have not risen, and be singing about London bridge? Take a good look at your father's house. Is it not a fallen bridge? Where is the link between it and the oil wealth of Delta State? Is our entire country not a fallen bridge? Is there any meaningful communication between those in power and those upon whose backs they galloped to power? Muroi, my local Government Headquarters, is an island. No bridge goes there. No cars, no Lorries... don't boil my temper, Okoro. The word "bridge" doesn't make sense to me. (81-82)

“Bridge” here symbolically refers to the decaying environment, human beings, leadership and infrastructure- roads, hospitals without drugs, fallen houses etc. in Nigeria generally and the Niger Delta in particular. The despoilers of the land are well known to the people, the culprits are the oil companies and their collaborators that help to under develop us. The fight, according to Ewari who is the mouth-piece of the “People’s Force”, is to reclaim all that belongs to them from the 'robbers'.

In the face of the inhuman and debilitating situation in which Ewari and co find themselves, they are still ambitious. An ambition to better their lot through bunkering. To Ewari, it is foraging for crumbs fallen from the 'masters' table. That would be a prelude to taking back what belongs to them. This fight for the people's emancipation, survival and existence, is greatly threatened by the fire that razes the community, burning people and property. Although the dreams of the people explode in that inferno, for example Timi’s marriage, Efe’s University education, Ewari and Okoro’s mansions, there is hope with Ewari surviving the holocaust. He represents the people’s force and the hope for the future. He is the voice of protest against our indicted leaders: politicians, religious leaders, intellectuals and neocolonialists represented by the multinational oil companies. Ewari contends thus,

Ewari: Why do they rob us with their pen instead of using their intellect to educate us on our rights and how to decently ask for them? Why is there no Nathan among our religious ladders to tell King David that he has sinned? ... Mr. Earthquake, why do you, our leaders, quake against your own people? Your

people live on water, but die of cholera because they lack good water to drink. They die of hunger because their land is devastated and poisoned. They produce the oil wealth of the nation, but die in fires of poverty, and their aspirations and their future die with them. Can't another Ken Saro-Wiwa rise from among our leaders to fearlessly and selflessly champion the cause of the commoners? Can't our leaders collectively shoot at injustice rather than shoot at their own already battered people? ... The people's force is a movement against corruption and insensitivity, from whoever they emanate-white or black, North or South or south-south...(108-109)

The people's force is a call for a new dawn, a call for change. The leaders must make a choice; it is either a redirection for change, i.e leadership correction or anarchy is let loose. The play concludes with Preye advocating for a true and people-oriented leadership.

Preye: It is possible to drop the evil baton, Chairman. There was Nbonu Ojike in this country, who was the first to reject English dressing; there was Obafemi Awolowo, who was the first to use Cocoa wealth of the people to provide free education for the people; there were Tai Solarin and Lateef Jakande, who rejected corruption, glamour and bad governance; there was Aminu Kano, who rejected money politics and lived and died in the service of the common people. Anthony Enahoro, Wole Soyinka and Olubunmi Okojie, even in their old

age, openly condemn tyranny and injustice; they tell our leaders when and where they have sinned. These people, on their own, dropped the baton of ostentation, corruption and inhumanity. What Ewari is saying is that we need to break the cycle of evil. I think we need a true leadership workshop in the Niger Delta. All the leaders need to come together and workshop on the kind of people-centered leadership that we need (110).

Boundless Love by Chukwuma Anyanwu makes a very serious and enduring statement on some social problems in our society. Unprofessionalism in the theatre business, love and misplaced love and their after-effects, the Hiv and sickle cell anaemia scourges. Unprofessionalism in the theatre and movie industry starts with those at the helm of affairs, the producer and the director who dance to the tune of the speculators or businessmen whose main aim is to make excessive profits from their investments. The money interest is discussed by Mark and Peter:

Mark: Now you are talking. It is time we faced the issue squarely. Who are those now bestride our movie and theatre world? Are they not those who have failed in their professions? Lawyers, doctors, economists, anthropologists, the list is inexhaustible. ...

Peter: And the money? These people are those who risk their money. The movie and theatre world is sustained by interest and professionals are weak on that score. (13)

The dialogue above clearly shows that those who have the knowledge to develop the movie and theatre industry are limited by lack of financial power. The panacea to this situation is to take action or at least speak out against the wrongs. For things to change we cannot just sit silently and watch. Change may come through speaking out and against something that is wrong. On the matter of love, Peter says it is dynamic just as man is prone to change. In his words,

.... But the moment she begins to reject the cow, search yourself, a stronger force has appeared on the scene. It must be a man with an elephant to offer! ... (19).

That is to say that materialism changes the face of love. On other levels, we also see love change: Peter's love for Precious could not bring about the expected marriage due to sickle cell anaemia scare. And for Mark, in the play-within-the-play, we have the problem of HIV because he tries to spread his 'love' by having many girlfriends. Precious decides to call off marriage plans with Peter because as a medical practitioner she has witnessed the grief and sorrow suffered by ignorant couples with AS genotype bearing children with sickle cell anaemia. Precious tells Peter,

No Peter there's no doubt of our love. We love each other, I don't think I can ever get another like you. Yet Peter, my rock, we must break; I have seen too much sorrows, too much grief in the hospital to fall a victim with wide opened eyes. No Peter it cannot be! ...

And for our children? It's not for our sakes that we must break up. It is our children, what will become of them? (36).

Context of Performance

Fumes of Fuel by Sam Ukala had two performances. The first was on Wednesday 24th February, 2010 as part of activities to mark the Delta State Culture Week 2010. The performance was given under the auspices of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter and was directed by Chuwuma Anyanwu , assisted by Martins Tugbokorwei.

The second performance of *Fumes of Fuel* was on Tuesday 30th August, 2011 to mark the 20th anniversary of the creation of Delta State. The performance of the play this time was given under the auspices of The People's Theatre with Prof. Sam Ukala as president. The play was directed by Martins Tugbokorwei with Chukwuma Anyanwu assisting. Both performances took place at the Unity Hall of the Delta State Government House, Asaba.

The performances were witnessed by high profile government officials which included the Deputy Governor, other top government personalities, persons from the private sector and members of the general public. The performances afforded opportunities to address the government on crucial national issues and things that were of immense relevance to the public. Issues like the effect of being power drunk, various kinds of corrupt practices, deprivation and poverty in the Niger Delta that leads people to engage in illegal oil bunkering. The fulcrum of the play was the Jesse fire incident that was eloquently captured in the play. This incident which occurred in 1998 saw thousands of people

roasted alive and property worth billions of naira destroyed. The multi-media approach adopted for the performances helped to drive the message home in clearer terms. The multi-media input came in the form of audio effects in addition to the use of projected video effect that captured the burning and roasting sequence in a very glaring manner.

Boundless Love by Chukwuma Anyanwu was presented on Thursday 29th November, 2012 to mark the occasion of a reception held in honour of one of Delta State's renowned writers, Ogaga Ifowodo. The ceremony was chaired by Odia Ofeimun with the Executive Governor of Delta State, Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan as special guest. In attendance were also the Deputy Governor, Prof. Amos Utuama SAN, civil commissioners and other top government functionaries. This ceremony was organised and hosted by the then Senior Special Adviser to the Delta State Governor on diaspora matters, Mr. Oma Djebah, and the Delta State Chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) was invited as facilitators/co-hosts.

Students from selected secondary schools were also invited to participate in the ceremony. There was an interactive session with the students in which the governor asked them questions bordering on their appreciation of literature after which the governor gave them prizes. One of the highlights of the ceremony was the performance of an excerpt from *Boundless Love* by members of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter. The excerpt deals with issues bordering on sickle cell anemia and breast cancer. The performance was well received by the students and dignitaries present at the ceremony. It opened the eyes of the young ladies particularly to the dangers of breast cancer even as it

was presented in a humorous manner. The issue of sickle cell anemia, how to avoid it and how to deal with it if or when it occurs was also tackled. The government, represented by its functionaries present, also got sensitized on these issues and was stimulated to begin to fashion out policies that would address them in a holistic and sustainable manner.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that theatre is synonymous with performance and both are fit for the edification of humanity. Such education, if properly delivered, would engender development in all its forms. Added to this is the fact that whatever education one receives invariably stays with the person for life. The two plays used in this study reveal as much, both in their textual context and performance. It is, therefore, concluded that theatre is vital to the attainment of sustainable human development.

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