

MEDIA IN THE SERVICE OF THEATRE: ENGENDURE OF THE ELECTRONIC STAGE

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Abstract

Broadcasting and Film are common to both Mass Communication and Theatre Arts. However, the latter does more on content creation, while the earlier consumes. In thrust and content, this work straddles both disciplines to varying degrees. The place of media in theatre arts needs to be defined and re-defined in line with changing times and emerging technologies. This paper brings to the fore the electronic stages upon which media have continued to transform and transport theatre art forms. With this development, content is greatly enhanced in terms of presentation and aesthetics. Using a qualitative methodology, as well as the descriptive technique, the paper attempts to highlight the role and value of the media specialist in the service of theatre as a whole. It positions media as the central focal point in the theatre; and through media, theatre art forms have been transported and transformed from the live stage, to the electronic stage.

This work, thus, succeeds in underscoring the associations and relationships between all theatre arts forms vis-à-vis media. In line with current audience psychology and changing lifestyles, media has provided another stage in addition to the still medium known as the live stage. Media, ultimately, has made theatre vibrant and relevant in a new world driven by electronic and digital technology.

Keywords: Live Stage, Electronic Stage, Media, Transformation, Theatre Art Forms, Indenture

Introduction

Theatre is a form of entertainment that presents live actors who perform on “stage” for a live audience. The word also refers to a space or building specially set aside for such live performances (Encarta, 2015).

As theatre progressed from the Ancient Egyptians, to the Hellenistic, and on to the Medieval, its elements became better defined. As it navigated through the Dark Ages, to the Renaissance, its various art forms took on finesse and sophistication. As it continued its journey to the Elizabethan, to the Restoration, to the Modern, the Contemporary and even the Postmodern, it dropped all the vestiges of crudeness and became an institution of excellence in its own right.

Today, we talk of world-class professionals and scholars in every theatrical art from Icons abound in Drama, Dance, Music, Children’s Theatre, and Story-telling theatre, to mention the major art forms. Historically, media is the last theatre arts special area to arrive. This is so because the very nature of media makes it technology-driven, rather than human-driven. For a long time, man could practice drama and theatre without calling on electronic science and technology. However, it was not until science and technology became a reality that media could come into the theatre configuration.

No sooner did media arrive as a special area of theatre than it became the focal point and quintessence of theatre. We should not wonder at this development because media rides on technology and it is, therefore, able to engender possibilities and options which are absolutely impossible on the live stage. Media can

document, shrink, stretch, compress, expand, enhance and explore. Little wonder then that about 95% of the world's theatre exists on the electronic stage – the media. Media thus, become the melting pot of all the theatrical art forms. It brings together all the forms and elements of theatre, then catapults same from the live stage on the electronic stage. One may aver then, that media connects theatre to both the electronic and digital worlds. Thus, media makes theatre useful and relevant in a world ruled by electronic and digital technology. Without media, therefore, theatre as we used to know it would probably have been left behind. So, theatre has media to thank for being alive and well today. This seems an appropriate juncture to quickly discuss some theoretical insights.

Theoretical Insights

Two theories readily come to mind here. The first is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. This is one of the earlier social science theories developed by E.M. Rogers in 1962. The theory attempts to explain how and why certain products or ideas when introduced, systematically gain acceptance, momentum and then spread through a population or social system in spreading, the innovation diffuses and becomes adopted as a part of the social system, often leading to behavioural change.

The diffusion of innovation theory dwells much on “adoption”. When people adopt an innovation, according to this theory, it means that they have agreed to put aside what they used to do, and have now embraced another. Adoption does not happen suddenly, this theory insists, but constitutes a process that sees some adopting early while others adopt much later on. Adopters belong, in the main, to five categories. The Innovators are usually the first to try the innovation. Such people are adventurous and find excitement in trying new ideas. Early adopters represent the opinion leaders, they assume the role of bringing in more people into the new era. These individuals are very comfortable with the adoption of new ideas and need no information to convince them to change. The early majority are not the first to adopt, neither are they opinion leaders or campaigners. They, however, adopt innovation before the average person.

Those who belong in the late majority, are people who are skeptical of change. These people will only adopt innovation after it has been adopted by the majority. Finally, we come to category of the “Laggards”. They are the most difficult group in a population to be convinced about change. They are very conservative, and are strongly bound by tradition. The laggards continue to reject change even when it is evident that such a stance is against their best interest.

In applying this theory, one is focusing on the innovations that delivered radio, film, television and lately the internet. Theatrical products used to be consumed live, as presented on the live stage. With the introduction of radio, film, television and the internet, and the adoption of these by populations around the world, theatrical products successfully transformed from the live stage to the electronic stage.

Due to the adoption of the said innovations it became possible to increasingly re-package and transport the arts of the theatre, as represented in dance, drama, music story-telling and children's theatre. The media specialist enhances and enables this transformation. In so doing, the horizons for these arts expanded greatly, with story-telling stretched as far as the documentary; even as children's theatre snowballs into breath-taking cartoons, for example.

Also, the future of the live stage lies in the hands of the Laggards. This category of people according to the diffusion of innovation theory will remain traditional and conservative. They are the ultimate guardians of the live stage. As their ranks swell or diminish, so will the real audience of the live stage.

The second theory considered relevant for this study is Aristotle's Dramatic Theory, which has come to us from ancient antiquity. Inexorably, Aristotle's theory on drama has found not only relevance but also essence through the ages. Whether on the live stage or on the electronic stage, drama tenaciously continues to hold on to the tenets articulated in "The Poetics". The elements of thought/theme, action/plot, character, language and spectacle are almost indispensable in every presentation of the dramatic genre, regardless of the medium or channel, (Heath, 1999). These elements cut through drama on the live stage, radio, television, film and even on the new media. Furthermore, the broad division into tragedy and comedy continues to hold sway. Other new forms are varying degrees of admixtures brought in, here and there.

What this simply means is that drama has always carried good old Aristotle with it wherever it went. Whenever and wherever the content, structure and meaning of drama become a matter for discourse, Aristotle immediately finds not just relevance, but essence.

The Electronic Stage

The media specialist depends on some old and new channels which serve as the electronic stage. The old or traditional channels of media are television, radio and film. However, the advance and explosion in digital activity has presented new or social channels like the Internet and mobile devices. Film, radio television and new media have been selected because they are the most common electronic platforms spanning the traditional to the contemporary. A brief discussion of these should help out in ultimate understanding and appreciation of this position.

Radio (Electronic Stage Number One)

Whereas television entails the distribution of video and audio signals over distances, radio consists in the sending audio signals only. The familiar radio set picks up the waves and decodes it into sound.

Lately, radio has become associated with the Theory of Mental Imagery. Those who support the theory of mental imagery insist that humans often go through experiences which are naturally supposed to be triggered off by specific stimuli, even in the absence of such stimuli. Using an imagery group and a control group Roure et al, (1998), upheld this theory.

Studies carried out by Suinn (1990), also affirm the theory of mental imagery. According to him, a combination of emotional, visual, tactile, kinesthetic and auditory cues could be used to demonstrate that mental imagery can give rise to physiological and psychological responses.

Despite the fact that radio has not earned the respect and glamour usually accorded television, its greatest strength lies in the fact that it has been able to evolve highly specialized programming which appeals to very narrow segments of population. This has, however, not erased the local image which this arm of the electronic stages is identified. The intrusiveness of radio, as well as its spread and access are other strengths.

Film (Electronic Stage Number Two)

The term film comprises individual films (motion picture), in addition to the concept, practice and industry. To make means to record people and other objects with a film camera. It may also mean creating the same content through animation techniques or special effects such as the synthespian. In film, the images are captured on celluloid; they comprise a series of individual images (frames), which when shown in rapid succession, creates the illusion of motion.

The human eye does not perceive the flickering between frames. This is attributed to phenomenon called “persistence of vision”. The theory of persistence of vision states that there is a phenomenon which predisposes the human eye to an ‘after image’. As result, the human eye experiences a persistence of image on the retina for a very brief period, after the image is no longer there. This explains why the human eye perceives a continuum of images and sequences in film, rather a disjointed series of frames which run at about 24 frames per second. The term persistence of vision, though doubted by science, stands supported by psychology. It is accepted as a phenomenon in film history, practice and theory. It is pertinent to add that in Nigeria, all “home videos” are generically classified as films.

The strengths of film as a platform for the media specialist include higher recall, and larger than-life appeal. However, the fact that film is not a mass medium has prevented it from being considered as powerful as television or radio.

Television (Electronic Stage Number Three)

When in 1926, John Logie Biard became the first man to transmit sound and picture from Alexander’s palace over distances; he did not know that he was unleashing a phenomenon that would take the entire world by storm. The ability of television to combine visual images, sound, motion and colour, according to Belch and Belch (2001), offers “the opportunity to develop the most creative and imaginative” presentations possible. Technically, television broadcasting is accomplished through the release of electro-magnetic waves which the domestic television set receives through the antenna, and decodes into sounds and pictures.

New Media (Electronic Stage Number Four)

Simply put, the Internet is a world-wide means of exchanging information and communication through a series of interconnected computers. The world-wide web, on the other hand refers to the content of the internet.

A number of studies exist on new and emerging media. For example, after conducting a study on new media, Andrew Shapiro in Croteau and Hoynes (2003), concluded that emergence of new, digital technologies, signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information experience and resources. Russell Numan also cited in Croteau and Hoynes (2003), add that what we now witness is the evolution of a universal and interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communications.

New media will alter the meaning of geographic distance. This simply means that the audience can be located anywhere in the world, East or West, North or South, and still share a theatrical experience. They do not have coverage at a place called the theatre or playhouse, neither do they have to be within any regional boundaries to be a part of a specific theatre experience.

It also means that there will be an aggregate explosion in the volume of theatrical communication, since virtually everyone can log in and share the experience. Thirdly, with the emergence of new media, there is a merging of what was previously known as individual and district media such as film, television, radio, and even print.

Additionally, the level of interaction between source and destination is likely to increase, since everyone would be carrying along his or her own electronic stage. The audience is also able to reach the source at will, for the exchange of opinions as well as ideas. Therefore, “feedback” as an aspect of classical communication theories is greatly encouraged, as real-time and on-line interaction is available via chatting. There are two major new media options here. Through the internet, theatrical experiences can be created shared, manipulated, edited and recycled. Many sites provide these services on the Internet, but the most active internet site for uploading and downloading sounds and images (video recordings), is www.youtube.com. The other option made possible by new media is the distribution and consumption of theatre on mobile devices. These include smart phones, iPad and 3G as well as 3G plus mobile phones. Let us move on, as we discuss media in the services of individual theatre art forms.

Media in the Service of Theatre

If the media specialist has the job of transforming and adapting theatre art forms for the electronic stage, it follows that he must have an understanding as well as a solid foundation in all the elements and forms of live theatre. It is with this background knowledge and skill that the media artist proceeds to transform, enhance, embellish, shrink, stretch, compress, expand, document and preserve theatre on the electronic

platform. We shall proceed to see how the media specialist brings together the various theatre art forms in his role of relocating and transforming them from the live stage to the electronic stage.

Drama

The dramatic genre of theatre, according to Aristotle, is a specific mode which presents fiction in performance. He considered it to be a branch of poetry, the other branches being the epic and the lyric. He also sub-divided drama into tragedy, comedy, and satyr.

Drama itself has proved to be collage of skills and specialisations. Consequently, playwriting, directing, acting, speech, mime and stage management, to mention a few, of necessity, come together to constitute drama. Additionally, drama requires elements like thought, theme, action, plot characters, language, and spectacle to make it effective; if we must accept Aristotle's immutable paradigms.

Lifting Drama on to the Electronic Stage

On the audio-visual media of film, television, internet and mobile devices, drama goes through four key processes. First, there is the pre-production stage where all inputs, budget and timing issues are discussed and agreed upon. The second stage of the process is the actual capturing of the content of the drama. Cameras, microphones and recorders are usually saddled with this responsibility; operated and controlled by relevant specialists in the area of media. One must add that for radio, the microphone will suffice in capturing the drama, in synergy with the recorder.

Post-production comes next. Here, the audio and video inputs are fine – tuned and overall quality boosted. For film, the images captured on camera go through the splicing technique of editing. In linear editing, the sequences are selected serially and recorded on another storage device. However in non – linear editing, using the computer, frames can be accessed and laid on without approaching the task serially. This technique is favoured by the internet and mobile devices otherwise known as the new media. Post production of drama on radio can also adopt the linear or non – linear technique, depending on the capacity of the recording studio. Then we come to the fourth stage of the process: distribution. Films are packaged, and distributed through accredited agents for exhibition. On television and radio, the transmitter converts audio and video signals into electromagnetic waves which are released into the atmosphere. These are, in turn, picked up by television or radio sets and decoded into sounds and images which are received by audiences.

Media has indeed taken drama beyond the traditional and the mundane. The media specialist has harnessed the constituent units of drama, and elevated the art form to a new realm. We have only to look to Hollywood, Bollywood and our own Nollywood to affirm this position.

Story Telling

There are enough grounds to believe that story-telling is the natural precursor to theatre. Stories, anecdotes and myths were first created by the ancients, and then told to children and family members. Subsequently, it may become ritualized, and then later on dramatized, as www.crickcrabclub.com will postulate.

As a distinct theatre form, according to this source, story-telling differs from drama in one crucial area. In drama, the action or plot unfolds on the stage, in the story telling it unfolds in the imagination. It is worthy to note that when transported into the electronic stage, the media assists the audience with their imagination through techniques such as “flash backs” and “flash forwards”. This may seem to whittle down the audience’s strength of imagination. However, if the global preference for the electronic stage is anything to go by, it would seem that the audience is not complaining. The internet adds that theatre needs spectators in order to be consummated, while story-telling needs an audience.

The story-teller, especially in the African setting is a skillful presenter/performer who relates tales and stories to an enthusiastic audience. His stories range from common tales to anecdotes, folktale, myths and legends. Usually this consists of fictitious narratives of incidents in the proper sequence.

A spectator looks on, taking in the spectacle of a particular action or activity. An audience on the other hand listens and pays attention to what is being said with a view to gaining understanding. Unlike the spectator, he is not so interested in the spectacle, but in the ideas and views being put forward. In its pristine state, the story-telling theatre was a one-man affair. The story-teller ended up being (a) the author, composer or adaptor; (b) the performer of the story; and (c) the director and manager, all rolled into one. Today, however, contemporary drama has integrated story-telling into the big picture. Under this dispensation the story-teller appears in a few sequences of a drama as the narrator. This does not imply that story-telling is not a distinct theatre form.

Media has again come in to elevate story-telling theatre to a higher pedestal, by providing facilities and possibilities which make this art form more exciting, more engaging and more effective. By using the same processes and procedures discussed under drama, story-telling as a theatrical art form can be captured, processed and distributed to relevant audiences (film, television, radio and new media). In Nigeria, Dr. Victoria Ezeokoli, former Executive Director of the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) demonstrated this with her internationally-acclaimed and global award-winning programme called “Tales by Moonlight”

Music

Suffice it to say that music is a connected series of sounds made by instruments or voices in a way that is received as pleasant or exciting. The key words in the above expression are “series”, “sounds”, “instrument”, “voice”, and “pleasant”. Of necessity, therefore, music has to be rhythmic and continuous,

and it appeals to the aural sense. Also, music can be instrumental or sung; and brings a sense of aesthetic appreciation.

McGowan and Mellnitz (1955), will inform that music was one of the earliest theatre art forms. Although this happens in drama, dance and other theatre art forms, the music audience is often called to play a role by signing along or responding to intermittent calls by the performers. This source informs that music began with caveman, and continued with the primitive man and the barbarians. Music as a form must have worked well to have survived till now. Today, music has broken out of the institution called “theatre” and has continued to soar as a purely entertainment mode in its own right. However, music has not left theatre altogether, as most dramatic pieces from opera, to tragedy, comedy, melodrama and tragic-comedy have music incorporated into their vital fabric. When it comes to the music form, media is almost indispensable. In order to come out rich, clear and effective, music-in-the theatre goes through media gadgets like the microphone, mixer, amplifier and loud speaker. Apart from this fundamental dependence on media gadgets, music can be recorded, stored, edited, manipulated, enhanced, bolstered and distributed only with the help of media, through special apparatuses. Here again, all the afore-mentioned dynamics of packaging and transformation are applicable. On film, television and aspects of new media, the content of music will necessarily include audio and video components. On radio, however, only audio input is required. This may also apply to the new media, depending on the preference of the audience.

Children’s Theatre

Children’s theatre is that art form which presents theatre to children in a mode and manner that they can understand and appreciate. This area of the theatre not only develops productions for children, but also uses mostly children as actors, dancers and musicians. Of course, it is implied here that although children play most of the roles in children’s drama, adults also feature. As a matter of fact, it is an adult concept for the benefit of children.

The overriding objective is to develop an attitude for creativity and art appreciation in children. Children’s theatre also aims at educating the young ones using the dramatic channel. This theatre form, additionally, helps to inculcate family and societal values into children, whilst acquainting the young minds with functional and critical aspects of their cultures and traditions.

The concept and practice of children’s theatre is predominant in United States of America, where groups like the Children’s Theatre Company, Sesame Street and The Moppets, have gained local and international relevance and acclaim. Worthy of note is the fact that current trends around the world favour the appellation “Theatre for Young Adults”, since children who consider they to be big boys and girls feel that only those aged 12 and below are children. This is in spite of the position of UNICEF that the child is a human being aged 0 – 19 years.

The most significant leverage for children's theatre is media. Depending on the electronic stage of choice, children's theatre can be rendered on film, television, radio and new media. Pre-production, production, post-production and distribution processes are as earlier articulated under drama. It was not until the media took children's theatre from the live stage to the electronic stage that the concept became more appreciable, and a whole lot more effective. The media single-handedly built Sesame Street into a global phenomenon. In Nigeria, the decision of USAID, FID and some other international agencies to sponsor the network television drama "I Need to Know", did succeed in bringing the reality and horror of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases to the homes of millions of children.

Dance

Dance is the very first art of the theatre. Archaeological findings and cave paintings date back fifty to one hundred thousand years. Island Indians, Plane Indians and the Aborigines of ancient Australia used dance to relax, to celebrate, to prepare for war, and to engage in ritualistic activities.

Dance is, therefore, the coordinated use of measured and calculated bodily movements to create rhythm. It may or may not be accompanied by music. The concept and content of dance has grown exponentially through time. Today, it makes more sense to view dance as a special and deliberate set of movements of any part of the body to create performance.

As a theatrical art form, dance may be performed alone or integrated into a dramatic piece. The total theatre concept with which Africans, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Arabs and South America are identified, gives dance an exalted place in plays and dramas. As a performing art, dance has been the most flexible, capable of being fabricated and dismantled with relative ease. Choreography has also taken dance to new frontiers, as we see the good old dance instructor mutating, as it were, into the choreographer.

Here again, media have proved invaluable. With the help of media, dance has been recorded, presented, enhanced, preserved and re-energized. As a theatrical art form dance, however, cannot be rendered on an "audio only" format. Therefore, radio cannot serve as an electronic stage for dance. As dance is best appreciated through the sense organ for sight-the eye, film, television and new media remain the ideal electronic stages. With this exception clearly pointed out, the packaging and distribution of dance as an art form in the theatre follows the same processes and procedures applicable to all visual and audio-visual media. The media specialist enables dance to be arrested, punctuated, re-arranged, manipulated, and elevated, on the electronic stage.

On the electronic stage, it becomes possible to introduce every manner of incredible special effects and creative perspectives. These bring improved quality to dance presentation, whilst also heightening overall appeal and aesthetic impact.

Conclusion

It is apparent that theatre has and will always be an integrative endeavour. Its various art forms and special disciplines must effectively continue to collaborate if the show must go on, as they say. Some have even considered wrestling an art of the theatre. However, it is not, as it belongs in the category of games and sport. So does boxing. However, these types of entertainment may be brought in as elements of theatrical content where the need arises.

One has tried to argue and to prove that the media specialist in theatre arts occupies a special position made possible by breath-taking technological advance. This places him at a station where he must serve all the theatre art forms. This is especially so if theatre must remain alive and well in this technologically-driven era. By making the electronic stages available to live theatre, this task is accomplished. In order to carry out this task effectively, the media specialist needs more than a basic knowledge and understanding of all the theatre forms and disciplines. Let us not forget media's ability and capability in improving, enhancing and expanding the horizons as well as frontiers of all theatre art forms; a feat which is not only impossible, but quite inconceivable on the realm of the live stage.

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