CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF MULTIMEDIA STAGING IN THE EDUCATIONAL THEATRE: THE UNIZIK EXAMPLE

Tochukwu J. OKEKE

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria, tj.okeke@unizik.edu.ng

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Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.
tj.okeke@unizik.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the century, theatre practice embraced digital technology as an aid towards the achievement of multifarious effects in the theatre. The problem of this study therefore is to examine the effectiveness of multimedia staging technique in an Educational theatre in Nigeria using the performance of Esiaba Irobi's *Colour of Rusting Gold* at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Theatre as a case study. Through the participant observation approach of the qualitative research method, the study interrogates the challenges and problems of the new media employed in multimedia staging in a Nigerian Educational Theatre. The study finds that due to the dearth of state-of-the-art digital staging equipment that the desired effects of multimedia staging is lost on the audience. It thus recommends the re-equipment of Educational Theatres for optimum positive effects of multimedia staging and concludes that the Nigerian Educational Theatre has the potentials of meeting global best practices in theatre design and technology if adequate equipment are provided for the training of theatre professionals.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, prospects, multimedia, educational theatre, digital technology

INTRODUCTION

Staging techniques have undergone tremendous transformations with the advent of new media into theatre practice and performance. In fact, in recent times, modern theatre practice has become a medley of science/technology and art with the introduction of digital technology into theatrical performances. This amalgam of different media in the practice of theatre is what is generically referred to as 'multimedia staging'. It is, literally speaking, the method of appropriating digital technology into theatre practice. Rosemary Klich (2007:9) posits that multimedia theatre is that practice of the theatre that "includes both performance where media technologies are brought into theatrical frame as a feature of mise en scene, and the area of new media performance, where a live performer may not be present but a high degree of performativity and liveness are achieved". It is therefore the application of new media technologies, live video projections of pre-recorded

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images (scenes) in the course of a live theatre performance that has made that unique difference between the conventional method of staging and the digitized technique. Correspondingly, assenting to the assertion that avant garde artists blazed the trail for the revolutions in theatre design, Irina Duksina (2014: 31), notes that "early-twentieth-century theatre witnessed radical reforms, bringing far-reaching innovations which left a deep imprint upon the very nature of the actor – his psyche, physical presence and technique… But the reforms affecting scenic construction, auditorium, and ultimately the building itself were no less revolutionary". Thus began the experiments and innovations in theatre practice which have culminated in the inclusion of media technologies into theatre design and staging.

Theatre is characterized by its propinquity; a situation whereby the performer performs before a live audience. The audience of a live theatre performance is separated from the live performer(s) aesthetically through the 'willing suspension of disbelief' wherein the audience believes in the existence of the situations and events presented before it and the performer on a live stage can directly or indirectly be affected (positively or negatively) by the reaction/response of the audience to his acts/actions or inactions. However, the idea of multi-staging has to a large extent challenged the immediacy of the live theatre because its (multimedia) practice requires the projection of recorded scenarios which are brought into the live theatre performance. Multimedia therefore is that practice of theatre that allows the theatre practitioner to experiment with new forms; to go beyond the boundaries of traditional theatre performance/staging. Matthew Causey (2002:182) describes this kind of theatre as that which;

> would violate the norms of live theatrical performance of the 'here and now' with dislocation and fluidity of narrative, character and theme, both 'here and now' and 'not here and now'. This theatre of monsters is possible through the incorporation of the technologies of digital media in such forms as video, hypertext, interactivity, and virtual presence within live performance. The theatre of monsters is a theatre that is not theatre, but also that is not, not theatre.

This presupposes that the practice of multimedia staging goes against traditional theatre conventions as it involves the use of other media such as projectors and large screens in the process of making the theatrical performance. Klich (2007:48) further explains that it "extends focus outside the boundary of mediated production to also include within its sphere of reference performance that occurs in real space, utilizing digital technologies alongside the live performer".

It can therefore be said that the idea of multi-media staging is the culmination of earlier theatrical experiments that challenged the sanctity of the 'traditional methods of staging. Such revolts include Bertold Brecht's Alienation Effect and the Manifestoes of Antonin Artuad and other exponents of the avant-garde theatre such as Martin Esslin. These are staging nay performance techniques that strive at eliminating the idea of the fourth wall making the audience constantly aware of the fact that they are watching a pre-arranged event. The aim of these theatrical experiments is to make the audience understand that they are not watching realistic situations. Brecht (1948:193) says of this type of staging that "in order to produce the A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays". The argument therefore is that the Brechtian style is 'against' the traditional method of staging and this among further experiments of the avant-garde proponents gave rise to what is now multimedia staging.

This is explicated by Marin Esslin, who in his treatise of the *Theatre of the Absurd* (1980:16) gave an insight into what the theatre of revolt was to bring into the theatre. He posits that "the theatre, an art more broadly based than poetry or abstract painting, without being like the

mass media, the collective product of corporations, is the point of intersection where the deeper trends of changing thoughts first reach a larger public". This underscores the fact that the apostles of the theatre of the absurd foresaw a theatre that will not only challenge the Aristotellian canon of realistic staging but will alter the traditions in theatrical performances. They proposed a theatre where "… the stage must use the techniques of recording, electrical posters and megaphones" (Esslin 372). It can therefore be averred that such was/were the precursor(s) to the idea of multimedia staging and as Antonin Artuad (1958: 93) in his manifesto on the nature of this type of theatre wanted a theatre that will furnish "… the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams..". This idea of staging thus was later to become practicable through multimedia staging because the director through the use of digital technologies is able to bring those "dream states" onto the stage through projections.

This paper thus interrogates the challenges posed by the dearth of modern staging equipment in an educational theatre in Nigeria where future theatre professionals are undergoing training for the sustenance of the theatre profession. It examines the experiments made by students at meeting current trends in theatrical practice irrespective of the limited scenographic materials available. It further analyzes the multimedia performance of Esiaba Irobi's *The Colour of Rusting Gold* as staged by the Master of Arts (MA) students of the 2019/2020 academic session of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, as part of their practical Examination for the course, Advanced Directing.

The Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, (UNIZIK), Awka runs a Theatre and Film Studies curriculum at the undergraduate, (Bachelor of Arts) and the Post Graduate (PGD, MA and PhD) levels. The department allows the students the liberty of experimenting with new forms in an attempt at producing "graduates that are technically adaptable to the demands of various scenographic genres and performance spaces" (Sibanda, 2013: 35). The production of *The Colour of Rusting Gold* in the multimedia technique is a bold attempt at bracing the odds militating against meeting modern staging techniques due to poor technical facilities. This paper therefore proffers some feasible solutions got through interviews and interactions with some members of the cast and crew of the said production.

The UNIZIK Theatre

The Nnamdi Azikiwe University, (UNIZIK), Awka theatre is a proscenium stage whose opening is 30feet with a height of 18feet. The depth of the stage from the proscenium arch is 6feet. The acting area is extended by an apron making the entire acting area to be 14feet from the foot of the stage to the proscenium opening. The stage is raised 2feet from the floor. The orchestra pit is almost non-existent as there is very little space between the foot of the stage and the first row of seats in the auditorium. There is very little backstage space because of the limited space between the proscenium arch and the cyclorama. The theatre has no scene dock thereby making it difficult for the department to store scenic units. The auditorium has a sitting capacity of 280 persons. There is a gallery which has very poor sightlines and any member of the audience that intends to watch a performance from it will have to stand in order to have a clear view of the actions on stage. The auditorium is raked and entrance into the theatre is from the back row of the auditorium. The audience thus descends as they enter the theatre. Actors also, make their entrances unto the stage through the aisles in the auditorium because there are no crash/exit doors on stage.

In the production of *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, a simultaneous set was designed to depict the two dominant locales for the play: the shrine of *Otagburuagu* (the herbalist) and his waiting room. *Otagburuagu's* shrine was located stage right while the waiting room was situated stage left. A rectangular strip of wood was used to separate the two locales. Bold inscriptions on the two

locations clearly identify the setting. A projector was placed in front of the first row of seats on the left side of the auditorium. There was no screen upon which the images will be projected; the projector was therefore focused on the wall; on a space beside the proscenium arch up stage right.

About the Play

The Colour of Rusting Gold is a play that satirizes the Blackman's insatiable quest for power. It shows the extreme greed of the average African nay Nigerian politician whose interest is not in the development and growth of the people who voted him into power but in the perpetual enrichment of his private pocket(s). The play also satirizes the people's dependence on magic and ritual and how those in religious authorities manipulate their fellow men out of the latter's ignorance. The playwright consciously pricks the minds of those in power and shows his disdain for the masses who are constantly exploited because of their complacency. The play also reminds every mortal of the saying that whatsoever a man sowed, he must reap.

The play tells the story of *Otagburuagu*, a herbalist who prides himself as being half human and half spirit, he says that he has four eyes "… one for the past, one for the present, one for the future" (Irobi, 2014:9) and one for the house boy/apprentice; *Ogidi*. The inscription on his shrine reads (Irobi 2014:5):

<div align="center">

HERBALIST OTAGBURUAGU
Specialist in Madness,
Rain Maker and Barrenness.
A trial will convince you.

</div>

Otagburuagu preys on his client's greed and ignorance claiming to be the mediator between the living and the spirits. The Politician, *Nanimgaebi*, is so taken in by the herbalist's antics that he spends money meant for community development on the traditional doctor. His name, *Nanimgaebi*, is in itself significant for it means, "I, and I, alone will live". It summarizes the nature of the average Politician whose preoccupation is to impoverish the people while he alone lives in opulence. *Otagburuagu* says of the politician:

> **OTAGBURUAGU**: Yes, it is possible. Such a miscreant, desperate to retain his high position … Yes, I was supposed to be his conscience … yes, I am the conscience of the people. I should not have let him swear … (*Anger*) But, then he took undue advantages. He did. He wanted to use my gesture of kindness to his lover as a bludgeon to cajole me into things I did not want to do. He kept ordering me around … Make rain for my enemy … Kill my opponent … such arrogant disrespect! … (Irobi, 64).

But, in a twist of events, a mad patient, *Oriakanjonuchichi* (One who eats the fruit of sin at night) elicits some hitherto hidden secrets from the supposed 'good' men: *Otagburuagu* and *Nanimgaebi*. In his supposed insanity, he took the audience through reminiscences of the 'gory' past of politicians and spiritual leaders and subsequently revealed the decay in the collective past of leaders.

> **ORIAKANJONUCHICHI**: Okay, this voting season you will use the bullet and not the ballot (*Raves*) I think you un'stand! (*He walks back to his imaginary blackboard*) Now let us go over to this historical monstrosity, this anthropological specimen, this political groundnut, sorry juggernaut called Nanimgaebi.

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> Honourable Nanimgaebi (*NANIMGAEBI walks in sodden from crown to toe, dripping with water*) Talk of the devil! (*Holds his gun at the ready. NANIMGAEBI looks at no one. He walks straight into Stage A. OGIDI sees him and runs backstage through the door in Stage A*) (Esiaba 2014).

The play employs a lot of flashback situations so that the past could be related to the present and a foreseeable future imagined. An example is in the situation cited above where *Nanimgaebi* was drenched by rain. Such situations could not be realistically captured 'live' on stage so the multimedia technique has to be used. It is in an attempt to realistically realize these flashback scenes as well as the thoughts of the characters and yet arrest the audience's attention that the multimedia staging technique was employed.

Challenges of Multimedia Staging in Unizik Theatre

The 2019 production of Esiaba Irobi's *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, as earlier stated, was the Master of Arts (MA) students' practical examination for TFS 803: Advanced Directing. The play production concept was designed and executed by the students with supervision and guidance from the lecturers-in-charge of the course. The Artistic Director was Solomon Egbe and he was assisted by his classmates. The members of cast were drawn from the undergraduate classes.

The paucity of technical facilities at the UNIZIK theatre makes it difficult for students to engage in very technically demanding play productions. The production under study is no exemption. For instance, the students had to hire the projector that was used for the projection of the recorded scenes as well as the camera and other cinematic accessories used in the production. It is worthy of note that hiring equipment for productions is a recurrent decimal in most educational theatres in Nigeria because only very few can boast of owning state of the art scenographic equipment. Consequent upon hiring the equipment therefore, the students realized that they had very limited time to make use of the equipment; some of these recorded scenes thus had poor picture and sound qualities.

Prior to the exploration of the multimedia staging technique, theatrical presentations at the UNIZIK Arts Theatre stage were majorly of the conventional style: design and technical theatre practice was simply the practice of putting rostra and flats on stage and illuminating the actors with minimal stage lighting; profile spots and Par Can flood lights. There were little or no special effects in terms of stage lighting, set design and sound effects. In fact, plays were mainly staged in the afternoon due to the poor lighting equipment. Actors were visible to the audience through the natural light of day. The little stage space does not allow for elaborate set to be constructed so designers merely symbolized the environment of the play.

This experimentation of the Multimedia staging techniques by the Masters students thus opened a new era in the production history of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. This is evident in the increase in patronage by the University community. Solomon Egbe, (the director) in an interview, presents this aspect as one of his greatest challenges the class encountered in the course of the production. He says;

> regarding this multimedia concept, I faced the major challenge of **synchronizing the media** used in the production to avoid disunity of the production elements (like maintenance of same costume, make-up, manner of interpretation, props and so on) which of course allowed the story to travel from stage to screen in a seamless way without discontinuity of the production elements. (emphasis mine) (Interview with Solomon 24/06/2021)

Stanley Obizoba, the undergraduate student that acted Nanimgaebi collaborated Solomon's position as technical inefficiency being the most challenge encountered by stating in an interview that "The problem, I would say, is professionalism, because during the production, the screenplay; that is the recorded scenes, I would say, was not all that professional (because I would say that the sound was not all that good)".

The fact that the recorded scenes were of poor quality underscores the fact that the students were lacking in that area of their training due mainly to the fact that they may not have had practical knowledge of some of the hired equipments. There is therefore no gainsaying the fact that there is a major gap in the training of students in the Media area of the theatre as far as the practical aspect is concerned. This simply means that the students were bold enough to venture into multimedia staging based on the theories they were given but the inability of the School, nay Department to foreground the students in the practice of theatre of the twenty-first century made it difficult for them to meet the challenges of their preferred medium. David Chinecherem, who played *Ogidi* sums it up by saying that "In my opinion, the editing and sound quality wasn't really good enough".

Fig 1: A Flash Back Scene
photo: tiata images

Fig 2: Still image projected
photo: tiata images

Beyond the problem of synchronizing the screen images, there was also the issue of the projected images causing some distractions to the audience. For instance, the image projected in fig. 2 above is that of the poster announcing the performance, that image stayed with the live action on stage when in actual fact it was supposed to be taken out once the play opened. It was a problem of inefficient management of digital scenic equipment when the students in actual fact, are not vast in its usage. The director owned up to this fact when asked what he would do differently if given a second opportunity to present a play in the multimedia technique. He says;

> I'll look for a way to blackout the screen projections while any action is going on stage because it was noticed that the audience had divided attention because of the steady/paused motionless pictures on the screen while actions were happening on stage.

It is therefore evident that due to the fact that the department is ill-equipped in terms of technical facilities, the students were unable to manage the hired equipment adequately in order to achieve the required effect(s).

Another factor that marred the effectiveness of the multimedia staging on the UNIZIK theatre was the size of the stage space. Owing to the fact that the stage has limited acting space after some pieces of furniture and stage properties were put in place, the effect of the simultaneous setting was destroyed. The actors unconsciously cheated into the spaces meant for a different scene

so that the space could accommodate every performer. In Fig. 3 below, the character Down Stage Right (*Ogidi*) is appears to have entered into the inner chamber of the herbalist (*Otagburuagu*) when the main action is in the waiting room. Similarly, in Fig. 4; *Ogidi* is lying across the wall represented by the slim piece of wood thereby bestriding two different locations.

Fig. 3: A crowded Scene
photo: tiata images

Fig. 4: *Otagburuagu* and a messenger
photo: tiata images

The lighting was also very poor. The production was lit with just two PAR CAN lanterns and a 500 Watts follow spot. This created a lot of shadows making the actors appear double. This lighting arrangement falls short of the basic stage lighting theory as proposed by Dean A. Sternke (2000:3). It states that;

> to duplicate the sun's highlights and associated bounce light indoors, we must provide **three lighting instruments as a minimum**: one fixture to create the highlight (the key light) and two to create the associated fill light. The three fixtures can adequately illuminate a three-dimensional object on all sides. (*emphasis mine*)

Sternke further states that the lighting fixtures must hang at an angle of 45 degrees in order to give good lighting effect. The equipment used in the staging of *The Colour of Rusting Gold* did not meet any of the specified basic theories of stage lighting as neither were the lanterns hung at the stated angle nor were the basic lighting equipment at least three in number. This is because the follow spot used to complement the available equipment is not a basic lighting instrument but a special effect lighting machine so it cannot be counted among the specified basic instruments. The resultant effect of this inadequate placement of the lighting equipment is that the lighting lacked the naturalness it was supposed to provide.

Again, all the lights used were Front of House (FOH) lighting; there were no backlights so the poor lighting failed to give the actors a three-dimensional quality. Also, as the projected images were intermittently difficult to be taken the intensity of the projector light distorted the lighting effects created by the stage lights thereby making it a little hard for the audience to concentrate on the action on stage as those sitting in the first few rows of seats had the rays from the projected screen in their eyes.

Prospects of Multimedia Staging in an Educational Theatre

The theatre is one art that has constantly re-adapted itself to both artistic and technological changes in its bid to remain relevant to its global audience. Ofonime Inyang (2008;7) calls it a "flexible art". The flexibility of the art of the theatre is evident in the fact that the practice of theatre has survived in spite of the challenges posed by the television and the cinema. This is because the theatre has learnt to acculturate new inventions and conventions in both the art and sciences. An

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example can be found in the multimedia staging technique where theatre meets science. According to Inyang (2008:9), "the theatre certainly has the wherewithal to engage the "new society". Its capacity for a multi-utilitarian functionality is not in doubt".

The future of the theatre in Nigerian Universities is therefore very bright as the experiment at the UNIZIK theatre has proven. With very little technical equipment at their disposal, the students were able to achieve a multimedia staging that got the audience's approval irrespective of the obvious shortcomings posed by the dearth of modern staging equipment. The students' efforts are commendable for it is believed that if they could achieve the much they did with very little technical aid that greater success will be achieved when and if the school equips the Theatre and Film studies with the required equipment for Film and media arts as well as theatre technology

The Department went through an accreditation exercise a few months ago and some new equipment were acquired for the training of the students in the area of theatre design and technology. So, the future of having graduates who are vast and well-grounded in the technical area of theatre studies and practice is very bright. This becomes very necessary in the face of constant flux of new technologies and the stiff competition the theatre faces in today's world of digital technologies. Solomon (the play Director) is equally optimistic that the future and sustainability of the theatre could be seen in its ability to embrace new changes in art and science. He says,

> well, theatre practitioners and scholars should accelerate the pace o discussions and efforts to ensure that the 'barriers' of efficient adoption of   multimedia technique into live educational theatre is totally conquered… with the
> availability of the required technical facilities, the bright future is assured and its positive effect of bringing back audience to the theatre   would   definitely   be achieved.

In UNIZIK, at the heel of the staging of *The Colour of Rusting Gold* in the multimedia mode, the department has arranged workshops and seminars for her students on modern theatre staging techniques so that every graduating student at whatever level of academics will be properly equipped to face the challenges of professional theatre practice.

CONCLUSION

The multimedia theatre staging technique no doubt is one of the robust experiments that theatre practitioners have adopted to ensure the continued relevance of the theatre in a globalized world of digital technology. In today's Nigeria where there are little or no government jobs for graduates, the theatre offers a good opportunity for entrepreneurship and self-reliance and this can only be possible if theatre graduates are well equipped to compete favourably with their contemporaries in other disciplines. Adequate training of theatre students in the area of theatre design and technology with new staging facilities will give the students ample opportunity to excel as entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry upon graduation. Multimedia staging in the theatre therefore is a good attempt at reviving the dwindling live theatre culture in Nigeria because it gives the audience the same excitement offered by the television and the cinema and it has the added advantage of presenting live performers.

It is therefore believed that when school theatres like the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka is well equipped that the students will be favourably disposed to experiment with new forms and become masters of the art which will help their sustainability as individuals as well as encourage them to venture into theatre practice as a profession which will eventually keep the live theatre flourishing.

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