

Exploring the Potentials of Community Theatre as a Tool for Social Change: the Participatory Communication Method.

By

***Adie Edward U., **Okoro, Lilian A. & *** Orim, Eugenia G.**

Department of Theatre, Film and Carnival Studies.

University of Calabar, Calabar- Nigeria

[*eddytorial@yahoo.com](mailto:eddytorial@yahoo.com), paciafrica@yahoo.com, [***g-bakery@yahoo.com](mailto:g-bakery@yahoo.com)**

Abstract

It is observed that most development modalities employed over the years for achieving community development in Africa have not leaved up to expectation in terms of involving the majority of people in the quest for national transformation and development; rather, these modalities tend to complicate the very problems they are set out to solve. The situation is mostly like this because the adopted development strategies have not taken adequate cognizance the essence of effective communication methods and the importance of people's perspectives and peculiarities in these processes. Mostly, the so-called outsiders and experts in development matters who are physically and socially separated from the people think for them and about their development. This situation is inimical to genuine and sustainable development. It is important therefore to note that development can only be meaningful and sustainable when it is people generated; involving people's real needs and their participation in the process of achieving them. It is at this point therefore that community theatre can come handy as it has the potentials to bring people together to discuss issues that disempowered them and participatorily proffer solutions to the negatives. Community theatre can be explored to work with rural and urban people; mostly the rural dwellers who are mostly disempowered. In view of this therefore, this paper posits that community theatre is a method of participatory communication towards achieving social change.

Key-words: Community Theatre, Social Change, Participatory Communication, Culture

Introduction

It is important to define participatory communication (PC) and its nuances before an attempt to establish its areas of convergence with Community Theatre. In this light therefore, Bessette (2005) posits that participatory communication is a process by which people become leading actors in their own development. It empowers people to move from being objects or recipients of development interventions to being the initiators of their own development. It is a communication method that puts the people in the driver's seat throughout the development process. This approach, according to Bessette, is gradually gaining more significance in the development world and is based on dialogue in which listening is as important as talking and one is not complete without the other. The importance of this two way communication model is to entrench trust, love and consensus in order to analyze one another's perceptions, ideas, opinions, available opportunities and potentials in solving observed problems and bringing about desired change.

According to Garland (2004)

Participatory communication is a planned activity, based on the one hand, on participatory processes, on media and interpersonal communication, which facilitates dialogue among different stakeholders, around common development problems or goals, with the objective of developing and implementing a set of activities to contribute to its solution or its realization and which supports and accompanies this initiative.

The stakeholders Garland talked about above are the community members, local authorities, NGOs, Community Based Organizations(CBOs) and other institutions working at the community level as well as policy-makers who are involved in a given development

initiative. This kind of communication means moving from a focus of informing and persuading people to facilitating interface and exchanges between stakeholders in order to address a common problem that could result in social and attitude change. Among others, participatory communication articulates the following characteristic features:

- i) Participation is the watchword
- ii) It anchored on dialogue
- iii) It adopts bottom-top communication system
- iv) It is cultural sensitive
- v) It is directed at attaining empowerment, capacity building and sustainable development of local people.

The enlisted features represent very few of the numerous tenets of participatory communication. It is interesting to point out that, by definition and intention of Community Theatre earlier discussed, Community Theatre subscribes to the tenets of Participatory Communication and clearly dovetails into its core assumptions. Its ability to practicalise participatory communication is attributable to a number of functions as articulated by Iyorwuese et al (2011).

- i) First, community theatre is a collective activity stressing creative communal participation instead of a few people (elites) who exercise their power by imposing their idiosyncrasies on the people.
- ii) Secondly, community theatre uses the language and the cultural forms of the people thus encouraging indigenous creative expressions that were killed progressively over the years by missionary, colonialism and elite negligence.
- iii) Thirdly, community theatre as a theatrical representation is useful in framing or modifying a piece of problem or reality. Through the medium of fiction with characters and situation, it holds up problems of local relevance for people to contemplate. In so doing,

it helps to take a fresh look at their situations with a view to changing it.

- iv) An important dimension of community theatre is discussion and evaluation, a process of dialogue which helps in further clarifying the problems dramatized before the final and most important step which is action for social change.

Methodology of Community Theatre

As a matter of fact, the methodological approach of community theatre is woven around carrying out investigative research within a given community, analyzing the information to gain a deeper understanding of the contradictions, building up a scenario within which to illustrate the issues, putting up a performance followed by a discussion and possible mobilization for action. This methodology seems to be the approach best suited for the kind of workshop and community theatre projects in Africa in recent years. We shall briefly review some of the basic elements of Ross Kidd and Byram standard methodology as captured by some theatre scholars especially Lawal (2010), Abah (1997), Okwori (1994) as follows:

- * Training the participants
- * Community research and data collection
- * Data analysis
- * Scenario building
- * Rehearsal/performance
- * Post performance analysis
- * Follow-through

It is important to note here that the methodology as put above is not given or constant. It could be adjusted as appropriate to match any Community Theatre field work peculiarity.

The Participants Training

The first step in this methodology comprises training the resource catalyst group who will be working with the target community. The essence is to teach the rudiments of organization for social mobilization and transformation. Lawal (2010) stresses the fact that training is also meant to enhance the pedagogical technique of instructing adults through a dialogue process of give and take.

Researching Community

This is a process of collecting information from the villagers themselves on what they regard as their problems. Various approaches on information gathering can be adopted but it is the situation on the ground that can determine which research approach is most appropriate some of the approaches include the Home Stead Method, the Migrant Method, the Interview Method, Flooding method, Hierarchical method and so on. Whichever approach is used, efforts must be made to draw out opinions on the problems from every available stratum of the community. In this regard, it will be necessary to obtain information on the community's problem from members of all social groups, all age-groups, and all economic and religious groupings. Such a wide spectrum of opinions will offer a wider perspective to the problem of the village or community.

Data Analysis

Once quality information is gathered, it is prioritized and analyzed by all participants. This according to Okwori (1994) is to ensure collective reflection on the problems of the community. It enables the participants to critically understand the problem and the strategies for solving them by overcoming fears and superstitions. This step is useful to get to the root cause of the problems, link them to micro and macro socio-economic and political determinants, prioritize issues, identify the ones that are subject to solute at the local level and through the drama process, discuss possibilities for channeling the ones that are beyond the community's capacity to

appropriate quarters. In doing this, representative opinions of youths, women, and men children are sought.

Scenario building

After the analysis of the problems, the group then decides which of the problems can make good drama and how these problems can be tied into one story. Sometimes, the villagers themselves may be asked to act out a principal problem as it occurs in the village so as to give a more graphic view situation. In developing a scenario, a lot of creative thinking must be involved in trying to tie the various problems together otherwise the drama may appear as a series of plays brought together without any logic.

Performance

Through the process described above, a finished play is arrived at. A day and time are fixed for the final performance and the villages are left to do the publicity themselves, using the indigenous systems of disseminating information. The whole village gathers at the appointed time and place and watches the finished drama. After performance comes evaluation. This is a critical evaluation of the drama and its significance to the life of the villagers.

Community Theatre and Social Change

It is very necessary to define social change before we go further to examine how the community theatre fosters it. Rogers (1989) sees social change as the process by which alternations occur in the structure and function of a social system. The social system in this definition may be a social group, a community, a city, a region or a nation. Any change that occurs either in ideas, norms, values, roles and social habits of a people or in the composition or organization of society can be referred to as social change.

In the same way, Nair and White (1993) define social change as the process of raising the quality of life for the poor through communication and information processes which alter attitudes and behaviors of rural society and this enables their participation in development. To Burkey (1993):

Social change is a process of transformation in which people increase their awareness of their knowledge to analyze their needs; decide on solutions, organize themselves for cooperative efforts; and mobilizing their own human, financial and natural resources to improve, establish and maintain their own social service and institutions within the context of their own cultural political system.

One basic feature in the life of all living things is change. When it takes place in the lives of interacting human beings, it is termed social change; when it is viewed within the communal setting, it is termed communal social change the fact is that changes take place in the rural sub-urban and urban areas. Change could be in all attributes of a societal unit. It could be introduced from internal or external sources to the society or both. Having said this, we may now interrogate the place of community theatre in social change. Several factors come to mind in the process of discussing community theatre as a tool of social change. We shall only consider a few of these factors and constitute them as our canons or anchor to explicate the place of community theatre in communal social change. Such factors include:

1. Participation in development process
2. Cultural projection
3. Education for employment

Participation for Social Change

As earlier indicated, participation is the stock-in-trade of community theatre. Community theatre is a participatory theatre which everyone that aspires for change must take part in. This is because, one cannot effect change without being involved in the larger process of change. The ease with which community theatre is accepted as a development tool in the developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, is due to its horizontal communicative ability and its participatory approach to issues.

Based on the above, Okwori in Abah (1997) posits that community theatre has come to be accepted as the people's theatre. This is because it deals with the issues and problems of the people. It uses their cultural forms, challenges them to become engaged in changing their realities and leaves the process of creativity and sharing in their own hands

Contributing to this discussion, Abah (1990) notes that:

Community theatre is not a professional affair and therefore, does not require professional attitudes to harness it. What it requires is the collective aspiration and decision of people wanting to use the theatre to develop their environment... community theatre entails the use of communal participation from problem identification and research to staging.

Reinforcing the above quotation, Abah (1990) further argues that the ethics of participatory community theatre is therefore participation and change. It is a process of learning which involves both the theatre and community. It is this aesthetics, which allows for an ever-deepening analysis based on active participation, that is anti-theatrical to the elites concept and approach. Obadiogwu (1994) adds that the community theatre is geared towards demystifying the popular idea held by elites that only professionals in the area of theatre can use theatre for the benefit of the society. This demythologization is contained in the ethics and aesthetics for integrated

human development, which could be summed up in the injunction of a Chinese community organizer:

“Go to the people

Live among the people

Learn from the people

Work with the people

Start with what they know

Build on what the people have

Learn by doing.

The above postulation has been the participatory strategy adopted by community theatre workers throughout the world. Most elite especially from the ivory tower are engaged in this arduous task of organizing rural urban people in the use of the art of the community theatre to drive change.

The community theatre as a participatory communication technique has undoubtedly been viable method for generating community involvement, in discussing communal issues and seeking joint method for action. According to Eyoh (1987), the implications of using community theatre as a participatory tool for social change are quite enormous. Undoubtedly, the participatory process provides a forum for collective interrogation towards a communal search for a better life; it creates a dialectical context within which the past can be used to inform the present and shape the future; it provides humanity with the possibilities to set its own agendas and set their realization, it gives a better understanding of their situations; it allows them a format/platform to hold discussions, it incites the people to mobilize themselves for action and creates an organizational structure for further action within the community it helps to catalyze the articulation of problems, the discussion of the basic contradictions within the community and helps strongly to create a reflection of their aspirations and total psyche. The final result of this communal participatory effort is to

create a people's theatre with the view to instigating the process of social change.

Community theatre generates participation and participation in turn, produces self expression in the development process. Self expression increases confidence and self-knowledge, self-expression increases opportunity for creativity and this creativity transforms the community stakeholders from passive observers to active engagement in change-oriented dramatic action. Through community theatre, the community stakeholders are encouraged to development critical ways of looking at problems and situations so that can learn to work out new strategies for social change. This is achieved through dramatization, role analysis, play criticism and evaluation. To this end, community theatre serves to bring people together for solidarity, for celebration of important victories, for building confidence in popular power, for deepening the community's discussion and understanding of the major issues, for posing fun, stirring emotion and producing concrete possibilities for driving social change through participatory approaches.

Social Change via Cultural Projection

The very dynamic relationship between culture of a people and their development cannot be overemphasized, Culture is what makes a people; community theatre as a process and practice of Development Communication is often associated with and realized through the deploying of community cultural values, ideas, aspirations and their nuances of expression. Community theatre deploys the cultural practices of the people with a view to stimulating social change. Culture as a term, has a very wide range of both usage and application. In the context of social change, however, the concept of cultural projection requires not only the promotion of community cultural values necessary for community as a given entity

including both its materials and non-material aspects. In view of the above, it is very imperative for the development catalysts using participatory community theatre to begin by studying the people's culture and its relevance to social change. To deny the relevance of the people's culture in their overall development process is to cripple change initiate fast. The native or communal people are quite inventive, creative and have imaginative range of expression. This mode of expression is part of their culture. Cabral (1977) notes that:

It is generally in culture that the seed of protest, leading to the emergence and development of the liberation movement is found: they need to retrieve their past culture and use it to develop their situation, instead of imposing alien culture that perpetuates dependency in them. This retrieved of culture is the need the development facilitator must start from. This may pose the problem of how to communicate with the people using their basic language and idiom.

In view of the above quotation, most community theatre practitioners who are strongly in pursuit of change goals have cultivated the consciousness of putting the community cultures on pedestals knowing fully well that culture can either enhance or inhibit development processes. They therefore, encourage the communal people to document, store and disseminate in their own language their ongoing experience for progressive advancement of their collective knowledge based on their collective efforts. They are also encouraged to use their cultural traditions of storytelling, drama, poetry to document and disseminate their knowledge, and to take their experience to other groups and villages. Community theatre, in pursuit of social change also provides alterative cultural mode of expression. It attempts to return the theatre to its communal traditional function as an

instrument of expression recognizing culture as the very life blood of truthful communication. It is only through cultural method that participatory community theatre becomes very effective means of advancing development efforts of the people. Any idea of community development that does not take into consideration elements within such environment would be inadequate.

The overall goal of the community theatre can be enhanced with a requisite dose of cultural elements with which the community does not only readily identify with, but which they can appropriate in the task of self representation as the ultimate goal of community theatre.

This is true of the community theatre if it is to remain a people's oriented medium for self-expression and development. The involvement of cultural framework in the process of the community theatre is to the extent that it facilitates far easier and amenable means of exploring, tapping and deploying the community's nuances, values, ideas and general communicative expression towards social change.

In view of the above, Forum Theatre (2001) believes that, using the cultural tool and framework, community theatre practice can help to stimulate social change in following ways:

1. By encouraging lucid learning which offers people possibility communicate easier, to see things in a new and liberate for stereotypes: to promote the equally among communal stakeholders and offer the possibility to create a vision.
2. By positively influencing the associative local capacities and the capacity to analyses local problem.
3. By creating a stimulant and flexible working environment, so that new behaviours, new kind of relationships can be exercised and learned in the community in order to consider the needs of the oppressed/powerless members of the community.

However, Buratai in Okwori (2004) believes that if community theatre must drive change from cultural perspective, the following rubric must be taken into cognizance:

- a) The need to study, understand and deploy the various cultural patterns and genera social nuances of the community in which the community theatre project is located.
- b) The need to delineate the elements of (a) above in terms of their cultural and communicate potentials in order to select those i.e. songs, music, dances, folktales etc which can be adapted to the strategy of the community theatre and the same time meets the needs of community cultural promotion and identity.
- c) The need to look out for community cultural, behavioural and attitudinal perceptions and disposition, within the wider context of socio-cultural and customary biases as are likely to be encountered and which may turn out to be inhibitive to the task of the community theatre in a development project.
- d) The need to identify and cultivate existing cultural groups in the community with the values and ideals of the community theatre in order to transform it from an alien and abstract concept into a tangible and visible feature of community life, to be appropriated and deployed by the community.
- e) The need to be as vigilant and alert towards possible areas of cultural differences that may result in friction and therefore obliterate the goals of the community theatre.

Education for Social Change

In recent years, African art especially the community theatre is reaffirming its functionality. The role of community theatre in social education has been acknowledged worldwide. Mbachaga (2011) observes

that Social education programmes particularly those geared towards development generally, have sprung up in many parts of the 3rd world: Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Nigeria etc. Organisers of these programmes attest to the validation of the performing culture of the people. It has been observed that popular performing culture should not be seen as mere performances of folksongs and dances but event that have far reach implications in the daily life of the people.”

The above quotation implies that the process of using theatre to mobilize and motivate participation as well as educate rural community is a task that entails using community theatre to enhance social change. He further argues that the cognitive value of community theatre as an art rests on its capacity to stir up a thought that propels the target audience to development an approach that confirms to the situation to address issues raised in the theatre. In this sense, the theatre activist automatically becomes a popular educator. Contributing to this issue, Eyo (1986) pontificates that “theatre (community theatre) in particular is being used in community education to conscientize and mobilize marginalized group of society who have been deprived access to the more conventional forms of media”.

With the influence of Freire (1972) and Boal (1974), many theatre practitioners and adult educators have sought to rediscover community theatre’s potential as a tool for mobilization. Community theatre as used in Africa, has the potential to stimulate community thinking, develop self-confidence, interactive expression, awareness and organization strengths of popular groups, communities and organizations (Ross Kidd, 1982). In the same vein, Bryan et al (1981) add that community theatre educates the populace in its pursuit of social change by building on the skills the people have. As an educational strategy, it combines the entertainment values of the performing arts with the capacity to highlight issues in relation to social change. Through dramatization, people’s attention can be focused on

problems in a way that challenges their perception of their situation. They are encouraged to take a fresh look at the situation and work out new solution. They are respect, community theatre is used as a two way communication process for education; it serves as a catalyst for involving people in discussion and action on their problems rather than merely accepting their lot or waiting for extern solutions.

Furthermore, in using community theatre for education that will propel social change, Bryan et al (2011) argued that it can stimulate critical analysis, organization and reinforcing growth of identity and self confidence. The codification of experiences is particular to the given community and emanates from their own experiences. Community theatre, according to them can intervene in several areas of community education and has proven itself to be more effective than many other forms of communication. These areas include non-formal education, health education campaigns, agricultural extension campaigns, community development projects intended to motivate self-help and mass sensitization campaign etc. Community theatre seems most viable in self- mobilization, education and collective action of people

Conclusion

Community theatre, as elucidated above, is a theatre of the people, by the people and for the people which uses the expressive medium of the environment, and which treats the actual problem of the environment, highlighting them and opening discussion on them so that solutions to these problems can be worked out. It is a participatory theatre that acknowledges the creative and collective potentials of people towards solving problems for the common good of all in a Community.

REFERENCES

- Alachi, J. A. (2008) *Theatre for Development in the Benue Valley Makurdi*: Bookmakers Publisher.
- Abah, O. S. (1997) *Performing Life: Case Studies in the Practice of Theatre for Development* Zaria: Bright Printing Press.
- Abah, O. S. (1990) Participatory Theatre: Issues and Cases in Hagher (ed) the Practice of Community Theatre in Nigeria Jos.
- Bryan, Martin, Moitse, Frances and Boeren Ad. Report of the Workshop on theatre for integrated Development, Mbabane, Department of Extra Mutal Studies, University of Swaziland, 1981.
- Burkey, S. (1993). *People First: A Guide to Self-Reliant, Participatory Rural Development*. London Zed books Ltd.
- Edeam, D. (1993). *Role of Development Journalism in Nigeria's Development*. Gazette.
- Eyoh, H. N. (1987). *Theatre and Community Education: the Africa Experience* African council on communication education.
- Garland, S. (2004). The researcher of Development Practitioner as Communication Actor,. IDRC Limitations of Development Communication Htm. 95/6/2005:6:31.
- Kidd, R. (1990). "People Theatre, Conscientization and Struggle" in Media Development London:vol. 27 No.3.
- Lawal, H. O. (2010). *Fundamentals of theatre Arts*. Glory Land Publishing Company.
- Machaga, J. D. (2011). *Theatre for Development: an Approach to Safer Sex education: A guide for Teenagers Parents and practitioner*: Markurdi: bookmakers publishing.
- Nair, K. And White, S. (1987). "The Development Communication Process: A reconceptualization Delhi SAGE Publication Ltd.

Okwori, J. Z. (2004) (ed) *Community Theatre: An introductory Course* Book Zaria. Tamaza Publishing Company.

Okwori, J. Z. (1994). Empowering the Disempowered: using Popular Theatre for Rural Transformation in Nigeria in Abah.

Rose, Kidd "Plays for Farmers: popular drama workshops in Northern Nigeria" *Theatre International*, 6(2): 1982, pp. 25-44.

Umar-Buratai, M. I. Community Theatre and Cultural Projection in Okwori J. Z. (2004) (ed) *Community Theatre: an Introductory Course* Book. Zaria: Tamaza Publishing Company.