**A SURVEY OF AUDIENCE CATERING SERVICES**

**IN THE NIGERIAN THEATRE**

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**Introduction:**

In the theatre, one individual, the artistic director, is saddled with the responsibility of tapping, sieving and blending the skills, talents and vocation of all the other artists into a complete artistic, visual and auditory whole. This is an enormous task which requires ingenuity, creativity and hard-work. All the effort, time, energy and money spent in this endeavour will come to nought if at the end, there is no audience to appreciate the work of all the artists who laboured towards the production. Therefore, the whole idea behind any theatre activity is the presentation to an audience of a unified theatrical effect which has the capacity of arousing them both emotionally and intellectually[[1]](#footnote-1).

It has been observed that the place of the audience in the entire theatre structure and in the making of any theatre cannot be ignored particularly, as the theatre’s major and only target is the audience[[2]](#footnote-2). The above trend may provoke one into asking what an audience is or what constitutes an audience whom the various artists work for ?

**The Theatre Audience:**

A theatre audience is a group drawn together by an artistic event at a certain time and place, who are aware of themselves as a group and whose goal is to share in the event[[3]](#footnote-3). An audience is normally made up of various individuals from the society, probably with nuances in terms of character, temperament, wishes, aspirations and endeavors. On the other hand, it can be constituted by people who for one reason or the other, find themselves within a particular social strata. Members of an audience are drawn together by the theatrical event about to be presented and by their zeal, desire, anxiety and appetite for that particular event. As such, they have unwittingly established a relationship with the art form to be displayed and with other members of the audience. In traditional Africa as in ancient Greece, the audience is part and parcel of the presentation; it participates and responds to the event where necessary. According to Wole Soyinka:

“….. the so-called audience is itself an integral part of the arena of conflict: it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offering and incantations” considered[[4]](#footnote-4).

From whatever perspective it is viewed, the audience remains that entity, that body, which has lent itself to witnessing presentations, hence its importance. They are often present by invitation , volition or interest.

**Audience Catering:**

Since the audience is an essential element in any theatre presentation, it has often been described as a better half of the production. From the early stages of drama and theatre in ancient Greece, through the traditional forms of theatre in Africa to the modern period, audiences have existed either as worshippers, participants or at times as co-celebrants. It was during the Roman period that they began to gain prominence in the theatre, to the extent that their comfort, needs and interest were seriously considered[[5]](#footnote-5).

It is this realization of the inevitability of the audience in a theatrical experience and the fact that the Audience is the reason why the artist is there, that brought in the notion of audience catering. The rationale is as follows: members of the audience have forsaken other activities which are in competition with the theatre, to come to the theatre; they have come to celebrate, share and interact with the artist and other members of the audience; since productions often take place in the evenings it is likely that many of the patrons miss their dinner in order to attend shows, and so must be adequately compensated; the provision of audience catering services will to a great extent, provide a spring-board for the enjoyment and appreciation of the theatrical event, while at the same time provide an avenue for income generation for the theatre organization.

Uche Uwaoma sees audience catering as involving all strategies employed to provide incentives which guarantee the audience, their satisfaction in the theatre. These include the catering of certain comfort and relaxation to the audience who have come to watch a performance[[6]](#footnote-6)6. This writer views audience organization as that auxiliary service provided by a theatre organization or a representative, with the sole aim of instilling or injecting a cool-off effect or relaxation on members of the audience, as a prelude to enjoying the theatrical event. The services include: provision of concessions, good parking spaces, snack bars, in-door games, music and security services during the period when patrons are in the theatre.

**Audience Catering in Nigeria:**

During the pre-colonial period, audiences were not well catered for Performance often took place in the village squares, where audiences were exposed to hazards like the rain or the sun. In the same vein, audiences in moon-light performances are exposed to snake-bites and attacks by other night creatures. Invitees from neighbouring villages were usually only compensated for their long trek and pains by either being allowed to see the show free or by some of them getting free drinks[[7]](#footnote-7)7.

No seats were provided for them and so they had to stand for the duration of the performances. Besides, there was no concerted effort to make refreshments available to such audiences. Anyone who became thirsty or hungry in the course of the performance, had either to go home, or go into a nearby house and request for drinking water. Provision was not made for toilet facilities for the audience. There was no provision for first-aid treatment for those who became sick or injured as a result of collision while trying to flee from one masquerade or the other. All in all, one can safely say without mincing words that traditional Nigerian theatre audiences were not well catered for.

During the colonial era, the Europeans imposed their supposed “superior” art forms on Nigerians. These art forms which are mainly, variety shows and concerts, were practiced in the schools and churches. This culminated in the erection of many public halls, some for the Europeans and the others for the natives. Audience catering in this era witnessed little improvement in the sense that instead of the open arena at the mercy of the sun, performances were brought indoors, designed for same. There was also provision for the sale of snacks and confectionaries during performances, and seats were provided. But the auditorium was not tiered to improve audiences’ view.

Often, the halls were jam-packed with no air-conditioning facilities. There was effort to check smoking in the halls, and little security for audiences. As such, they were prone to theft, pick-pockets, hooliganism and injuries arising from fights in the halls. Audience conveniences where they existed, constituted some health hazards, and there were no intermissions. From the above, it does appear that audiences in this era, enjoyed a little bit of audience catering services, although much was still left to be done.

Audience catering in modern times has improved but a lot still needs to be done. In community performances, the provision of refreshments in terms of snacks, minerals and confectionaries are now done by petty traders who wish to seize such opportunities to make business gains, instead of the organizers inviting them. Amateur (commercial) theatres are sometimes so overwhelmed by the zeal and desire to maximize profit, that they do not pay any attention to audience catering. The partly commercial States Arts’ Councils only pay heed to audience catering when an important dignitary is visiting their theatre or when there is a command performance. Outside of this, the audience is left to cater for itself; cars are parked at owners’ risks, the concessions are not inspected or regulated, people are allowed to smoke in the auditorium. A common excuse for all these lapses is lack of funds.

The educational theatres seem to have an edge over others probably because they are a training centre for theatre students and so are constantly experimenting in order that its students may acquire the necessary skills required of them. However, much is yet to be done to achieve an ideal audience catering situation in the educational theatres. What more with the advent of secret cults on campuses, the educational theatres’ aim of forging a relationship between the “town” and “gown” is becoming a mirage. Audience members who park their cars to watch productions, do so at their own risk because the secret cult boys strike any time. Not even the campus security men can contend them.

It is true that educational theatre audiences are provided concessions but since these are contracted out by the school authorities, there is little avenue for regulating the quality and hygienic content of what is provided.

Another very important aspect of audience catering often neglected, is the provision of conveniences. One does not know who to blame, the theatre administrators or the audience, as arguments may arise that such facilities would be abused (and indeed has often been abused), by the audience made up of “undisciplined” students. As a result, such facilities do not exist. Where they do, they are kept under lock and key.

**Conclusion:**

With few years to the 21st century, Audience Catering in Nigeria is still in its infancy. It is very pathetic. It would appear that we have been paying lip-service to the importance of the audience in the theatre. Otherwise, how come the ideal audience catering situation is always achieved whenever a Head of State or any other dignitary is visiting the theatre? Are we afraid of displaying our dirty linen in public? Perhaps the reason why our streets are filled but the theatres are empty is because we do not cater adequately for our audiences.

It is important to note that theatre is in competition with other media like the cinema, the video, and the television. It behoves us then to cater adequately for the patrons who have sacrificed other activities to attend the theatre. Immediately a patron walks into the theatre premises, he should be made to feel as important and wanted as possible. The atmosphere should be one that would help him enjoy the performance.

It is our place to make sure that audience wishes, their societal aspirations are considered and reflected in the plays selected for them. Good Parking spaces and security must be provided for patrons who come with vehicles. There must also be provision for concessions and confectionaries. These help them relax their nerves during intermissions and contribute to the profit maximization effort of the theatre outfit.

Conveniences should be provided. If it is discovered that the audience abuse such gestures, the theatre administrator will do well to place somebody in charge to monitor and probably regulate the use of such facilities. Shows that last for more than two hours, must have a five to ten or fifteen minute intermission. There may be some problem here, as many people who did not pay for the show may seize this opportunity to enter the auditorium. To over-come this obstacle, exit cards instead of tickets can be used. The effect of soft musical background in the foyer, lobby and lounge where the concessions are, can bring amazing rewards. The Nigerian theatre administrator has to think seriously about audience catering, if his goal is to guarantee satisfaction, have a full house and maximize profit.

References

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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