**ENHANCING INTERNAL FINANCIAL CONTROL IN THEATRE ESTABLISHMENT IN NIGERIA**

**BY**

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**Abstract**

The objective of theatre establishments as business concerns remains predominantly to cover costs and make profits. Of all the avenues generation, gate-takings remain readily available and have been used by theatres for centuries now. But due to fraudulent activities, theatre establishments can be short-changed. Consequently, revenues can be lost and the establishments unable to meet their obligations; taxes, honoraria, rents, wages etc. it is therefore imperative to adopt measures that would strengthen gate-takings as revenue machinery, devoid of fraudulent practices. This work examines theatre as a business and prescribes measures that can be adopted to safe-guard gate-takings, as part of internal financial control in theatre establishments.

**Introduction**

A business is described as any human activity which concerns the production and distribution of goods and services through a socially organized system of exchange (Etuk 3). Etuk goes further to assert that when mention is made of people going into business, the mind often focuses on the opening and running of either a petrol station, a retail store, a poultry farm, a small factory or processing plant or simply serving as general contractors. Business is much more than these. It is an interdependent endeavour involving people who co-operate and relate with each other either as entrepreneurs, customers, employees, investors, agents or managers with the sole aim of attaining mutual objectives. Theatre and its activities fall within this parameter.

Businesses do not exist or operate in a vacuum. They rather function within the ambience of an environment. The environment here refers to the external variables which impact and influence the business in question. Etuk sees business environment as having the general meaning of external factors that surround and potentially affect the activities and behaviour of a particular business organization. These include economic environment, legal environment, socio-cultural environment, moral environment, physical environment and behavioural environment (4). Theatre equally comes under the influence of its environment. In fact, theatre draws its raw materials from the environment and the end product is pushed back or injected into the environment to make it better-off.

To succeed, managers of businesses must pay attention and understand the imports of the business environment mentioned above. They must equally grasp the intricacies of the internal strength and weaknesses of the business which help to sensitize managers and enable them take good decisions. The internal environment becomes very important because without putting the factors therein in their ship-shaped order, the business may not be organized enough to put forward worthwhile products or services or the business may not be in position to cover costs and make profits. It may become insolvent. As such, the business may be liquidated. Aluko et al point out that the internal strengths and weaknesses can be found within the organization and are under the influence and control of the manager. It is therefore possible for the weaknesses to be worked on and improved (58). This may be the reason why certain businesses often need and adopt different measures to control the internal environment. As Gbede opines, “Only profitable business survive” (73) and survival is partly dependent on the ability to control the internal environment and theatre as a business concern must recognize this fact. Therefore, this work examines the internal measures that can be adopted to ensure adequate financial control, particularly, over the gate-takings of a theatre outfit.

**Theatre as Business**

The realities of existence in a capitalist world, where survival is dependent on the commercial successes one can attain, makes it imperative for theatre productions to secure paid audiences. The artistes must live up to expectations with regards to paying outstanding bills – electricity, sanitation, water, school fees and other demands of the current society. Inability to react adequately to these demands means they will be left and forgotten in the backyard of history.

Within the traditional African and antiquated Greek, Roman and Medieval communities, theatrical presentations were part and parcel of the social and religious functions of the community. Attendance was seen as an avenue for the fulfillment of one’s religious and civic duties. Fees were not charged. The church and the state (community) where applicable, took care of the expenses incurred in the course of the presentations. Certain wealthy individuals within the communities were often saddled with the responsibility of footing the bills for these presentations. Cameron and Gillespie indicate that:

In all three cultures, as well, the presentations of drama were viewed as an integral part of the citizen’s or the state’s responsibility to its religious life: in medieval times, lay people, both individually and in organized groups, devoted time and money to see that plays were properly mounted and acted; in Rome, the state paid for the productions and allowed all citizens to attend without charge; in Greece, the state and selected wealthy citizens shared the financial burdens of production (245).

Worthen informs that, specifically, in Archon, a city magistrate had the honour of selecting wealthy citizens to finance one of the three principal tragic dramatists competing for a prize at the festival, City Dionysia in Athens, Greece. He posits further that the sponsor, called a Choregos was responsible for hiring the chorus of young men who sang and danced in the plays. It was also his responsibility to hire musicians and provide costumes and other support for the playwright to whom he was assigned. Worthen states that serving as a Choregos was both a civic duty and an important honour which was equivalent to other tasks imposed on the wealthy, like maintaining a battleship for a year or training athletes for the Olympic Games (13-14).

Brockett confirms the above assertions stating that after about 501 BC, a large share of the expense of play production was borne by the Choregoi (singular Choregos), chosen by the Archon from wealthy citizens who performed this duty in rotation as part of their civic and religious responsibilities. The Choregos was responsible for underwriting the training and costuming of the chorus and probably paid the musicians. Because he bore the major financial burden, a Choregos could do much to help or hinder a playwright. But most Choregos must have been generous perhaps because prizes were awarded them in the course of discharging this civic and religious responsibility (24).

Though it is difficult to ascertain when exactly audiences and patrons started paying fees to watch presentations, it would seem that commercialization crept in after the fall of the Roman Empire. Cameron and Gillespie assert that at the fall of the Roman Empire, many historians believed that drama, dance, music, juggling etc. terminated. However, it was discovered that remnants of the professional performers traveled to places like Italy, France and Germany, “plying their trade and eking out a living”. From that time on, especially when presentations were moved out of the church, audiences continued to part with something in order to see theatre productions (249). So, at this point, theatre became a business; beyond the religious and civic inclinations. The main source of revenue for funding theatre activities then became gate-takings.

During the 16th century when opera came in as a strong force, productions were sponsored and bills paid for by the nobles, who maintained a court for presentations. Some of them even maintained a troupe whose responsibility it was to entertain the nobles and their guests with drama, dances and music, sometimes in a medley or independent presentations.

When theatres designated primarily for artistic productions were built, such as Teatro Olimpico, started by Andrea Palladio (1518-1580) and completed by Vicenzo Scamozzi (1552-1616); Red Lion theatre in London, the Playhouse at Newington Butts, and a number of others (Brockett 136 and 165), the floodgate was opened for artistes and audiences to mingle in a functional exercise where both traded artistry for money or money for artistic satisfaction. The trend has continued till date. The impetus to this is given by the wave of capitalism creeping though all nations. The old way of seeing issues from a communal perspective has faded. Everyone aims at making it to the top and success is measured by the depth of one’s bank account, the fleet of cars and houses one has acquired. Theatre and its artistes exist within this socio-political and economic environment. The prevailing state of affairs in comparison with what transpired in ages past is aptly captured by Nwamuo:

Traditionally, Nigerian society which thrived on goodwill, generosity, extreme hospitality, caring, loving and being one’s brother’s keeper is fast opening its eyes to the realities of modern living …. Everybody is working hard to live at a certain level of comfort. American individualism seems to be creeping fast into the society, as people now think of themselves and their nuclear families first before their extended families and their neighbours (44).

In order to attain the goals of maximizing profits, the theatre must seek patronage. Theatrical productions involve a number or artistes; actors, actresses, directors, set designer, costume designer, lighting designer, sound designer, stage managers, carpenters, electricians etc, who must be remunerated at the end of the production. Their hope lies in gate-takings and other forms of revenue generation. Nwosu asserts that between 1960 and 1965, Nigerians imbibed the theatre going culture, which saw them visiting theatres with their families for relaxation. He opines further that this was due partly to the fact that the present materialistic tendencies and the mad rush for wealth acquisition had not pre-occupied the minds of the citizenry (173). Such patrons, paid fees which gained them entries into the theatre to see the presentations.

In the theatre, one of the readily available means of generating income is gate-takings. Right from time, when theatre shrugged off the civic and religious inclinations, gate-takings has remained a major source of revenue to the theatre. But Ohiri argues against reliance on gate-takings in the theatre, citing the current wave or terror (armed robbery, cultism, rape, political killings) as a strong and potent factor, which has succeeded in driving potential audience members into their homes, thus affecting audience turn-out to the theatre. He further argues that contemporary theatre practice does not recommend reliance on gate-takings; rather it is as dynamic, elaborate and lucrative as the theatre manager is versatile (147).

In as much as theatre cannot rely solely on gate-takings, it cannot do away with it out rightly. Gate-takings provide the avenue of exhibiting the organization’s skill in the art of audience management. It helps bring staff of the organization in contact with the organization’s patrons and forges a relationship between the two entities. Feedback which the theatre outfit cannot get through conventional means could be gotten through this medium as some patrons who are apprehensive of using the conventional methods may seize the opportunity of the contact to whisper words of encouragement, criticism and suggestions. Apart from these, productions without gate fees are predominantly sponsored by organizations or the government (command performances). The audience members accredited to watch such productions often have the same background; government officials, politicians, company personnel etc. The opportunity of catering to a heterogeneous audience and communicating the production’s message to people from diverse backgrounds and vocations is lost in this case. This paper is neither advocating for the over-reliance on gate-takings nor is it for the total abolition of gate-takings, rather it stresses the need to strengthen it, for additional revenue. The impetus to this is granted by the fact that there is disparity in the income level of many citizens. Very few can afford to sponsor productions thereby earning invitations for such productions. If we actually want to expose many to the cathartic messages of the theatre, then the others who may not have the way withal must be allowed to have a feel of the theatre by charging gate fees.

Apart from this, many citizens have developed the notion that presentations which have no gate fees attached are not worthwhile. Gondo avers that pricing (gate fee), is a primary variable in the perception of audiences in Nigerian theatre, concerning performance availability and quality (57). So if theatre must continue to succeed as a business, the different channels of raising income must be strengthened and controlled effectively, one of such being gate-takings. If this is not done, the theatre would be unable to meet its obligations; taxes, rents, wages, honoraria etc and consequently will go into oblivion. Therefore, the idea of taking measures to safe-guard gate-takings is apt.

**Gate-Takings and Internal Control**

Any theatre which operates as a business concern and has gate-takings as one of its sources of revenue, must also have a “material” which is exchanged for money. Often the material is a ticket which entitles the patron a seat in the auditorium for a production. If the issue of tickets is not handled properly and checks and balances instituted, the theatre outfit may loose revenue through fraudulent practices by staff. The auditorium may be filled with patrons but the returns not commensurate. This arises from deviant behaviours often exhibited by staff, which affect the organization one way or the other. Every staff is expected to identify with the wishes and aspirations of the organization (in this case, theatre) but this is not always the case. Some staff often have ulterior motives which are inimical to the growth and success of the organization. Theft, pilfering, collusion, corruption, sabotage and other vices are known practices often exhibited by some staff in theatre organizations. These manifest in different forms and often tell on the revenue generated by such theatre organizations. Thus, it becomes difficult if not impossible for such theatre outfits to break-even and make profits. Costs cannot be covered by the organizations while the staff involved in these sharp practices line their pockets. Eventually, these theatre organizations may become bankrupt and finally liquidated. But in an ideal situation, every staff as mentioned above is supposed to share in the wishes and aspirations of his employer. Inyang attests to this fact by asserting that:

The non-managers or employees have equally important ethical responsibilities for the company. They are expected to exhibit high ethical standard of behaviour in the work place and avoid negative behaviour that will affect the company’s image financially and economically. For example, employees pilfering in the workplace, falsification of records, divulging official information to unauthorized persons, are some of the unethical behavior that must be avoided by employees (137).

Due to the variance between what is ‘ideal” and that which is “real” in many theatre working environments, it is imperative for the theatre administrator to adopt certain measures to instill internal control and ensure proper handling of the ticket. The measures below will be significant in this regard.

**Printing of Tickets with Security Marks**

One very important check is to ensure that the tickets are printed by reputable firms with the requisite know-how in the handling of security documents. Such outfits should not be within the locale of the theatre company. This makes it difficult for the tickets to get into wrong hands. If indeed it does, the cost of getting it to the point of usage helps defeat the fraudulent motive. The tickets should also vary with production or with the periods of production.

The tickets so printed must bear security marks. The marks should only be detected by personnel who by virtue of their position in the theatre company are exposed to this secret. The import of this is that even when staff collude to either print fake tickets or smuggle fake ones in, they cannot switch them for the genuine ones when their escapades come to light due to their ignorance of the existence of security marks on the genuine tickets.

When the tickets have been delivered to the theatre company and are to be issued out to the various selling points or outlets, one thing or item should be inserted to make it different from the others not issued out. It could be the signature of one of the senior staff or the stamp or seal of the company. This serves as an extended security mark and prevents the printing company or their staff engaging in ticket racketeering.

**Selling and Collection Points**

The points where the tickets are purchased should be different from where they are certified for the patron to be admitted into the theatre. This is to prevent the staff from conniving. Some patrons are not quite acquainted with the operations of theatres, and so may hand over their tickets at the point of entry. The staff may then transfer the ticket back to the selling point, where it could be re-sold.

The idea of separating the collection point or gate from the point of ticket sales will make it rather difficult for staff to collude and execute this nefarious activity. If they attempt to do this, their absence from the duty posts will give them away. It is however worthwhile to encourage patrons to buy their tickets before hand.

**Seat Numbering**

It is beneficial to the theatre company if the seats in the auditorium are numbered. If the hall is hired on ad hoc basis, the company can make provision for temporary numbering of the seats to tally with numbers on the tickets to be issued out. Handling this in an ad hoc basis gives the company an upper hand because it can alternate or change the numbering pattern in order to beat fraudsters. In the course of the production, if it is discovered that two (2) tickets carry the same seat number, one of them obviously is fake. It can be traced to the selling point and probably, the production point. That is if the genuine and fake one cannot be detected after examining the extended security mark.

**Use of Exit Cards**

Patrons who are inside the theatre should be given Exit Cards if they desire to go out for a while and return to the theatre. Should they want to leave in the course of the production, the card is kept back. The tickets should be torn at the point of collection and should not be used as an exit card.

One may wonder what would happen during intermissions, where the audience members are allowed to ease off, take snacks and fresh air. There is hardly any intermission during theatrical productions in Nigeria. This makes the use of exit cards tenable. Again, adequate measures should be taken to ensure that the cards are not equally faked.

**Personnel Assignments**

No personnel of the theatre company should be involved in more than one of the tasks from printing of the tickets to the point of collection. Through this measure, it is easy to trace and identify the point through which anomalies occur and easily sealed up. Apart from this, the personnel should be swapped from one position to another, as banks and some financial institutions do. Consequently, they become acquainted with much of the tasks in the establishment, but are not allowed to stay long enough on a particular duty post to defraud the establishment.

**Tickets Disposal**

At the end of each production or the run of a particular play, the used tickets should be disposed off or burnt after stock-taking, except suspicious ones, which should be kept for investigations. With this, chances of used tickets being represented in future productions are equally reduced.

**Conclusion**

Over the years, theatre has remained a veritable avenue for exposing people to the foibles of human existence. It is one of the platforms for the expression of self. It exhibits our perceptions of society and the world at large, as we have come to see and respond to them and the way we have communicated our understandings (Sporre 12). It inheres the fundamental characteristics that make us humans, that is our ability to intuit and to symbolize and reflect human reality; our hopes, dreams, fears, expectations, disappointments and accomplishments.

Theatre has performed this significant role for centuries, first under a religious umbrella where it served as a vehicle for the interaction between the physical and the spiritual realms. Later, within secular parameters where it became a business, drawing materials and inspiration from the society and injecting the final product into the society as a refining and cleansing agent.

The strategy for achieving these laudable aspirations is exposing the populace to potent theatre messages. For one to experience these messages, one must be willing to part with the gate fee which entitles one to a seat in the auditorium. The gate fee (usually money exchanged for a ticket) is primary revenue generation machinery for many Theatre organizations. Their sustenance and survival to some extent hinge on it. But some staff within theatre organizations often engage in practices which negatively impact on gate-takings thus revenue generation and impede growth of the outfits. This necessitates the institution of internal financial control to stem such anomalies. It would be interesting to know the rationale behind and motivations for such deviant behaviours by staff that should and are naturally expected to share in the aspirations of their employer.

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