**THE THEATRE ADMINISTRATOR AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

**IN THE THEATRE**

**BY**

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**Abstract**

The vision and yearning of any Theater Administrator involves basically the tripartite objective of guaranteeing satisfaction, having a full house and maximizing profits. But due to the nature of theater as predominantly a collaborative art and the variances in temperament, aspiration and vocation of the various artistic endeavors, conflict often arise which militates against the attainment of the above objective by the theatre administrator. This work examines some conflict in the play production (the theater production) and prescribes certain measures, which the theater administrator can adopt in order to surmount them.

 **Introduction**

There is in existence in every society, different organizations. These social units are consciously created for the purposes of achieving stated goals and objectives. They are designed to achieve specific goals and are vital because within organizations, one can achieve more goals than working individually. Organizations are working units where raw materials are translated or converted into finished products, which can give human beings satisfaction (Inyang, 43-44).

One of such organizations is the theatre. The theatre as it is known today, is believed to have started in Greece. Greek theatre originally arose in connection with the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine (Matthews and Platt, 61). It was at this stage tied tenaciously to religion. Theatre was not a commercial enterprise, rather, it was a religious exercise. Later, it was to be seen as a commercial venture and this marked the emergence of the theatre administrator as the organizing force and the pivot in the endeavour. Play production is its product.

In the theatre, the play production process involves series of activities designed towards embodying a story in actors on stage for the purpose of making an effect on the audience. It cuts across all the duties of selecting a play, auditioning, casting, rehearsals, the actual presentation before an audience and the appraisal of the said production. In carrying out the above-mentioned activities, much energy, time, money and other resources are expended.

A play production is a labourious exercise which involves many artistes including the Director, Assistant Director, Stage manager, Actors, Actresses, House Manager, Costume Designer, Production Manager, Props-man, Lighting Designer, Make-up Artist, Carpenters, Choreographer, and Stage Hands etc. It has been asserted that the success of any theatre, however, depends on the combined efforts of the above-mentioned artistes (artistic, non-artistic and technical sectors) and their ability to sell the already finished production to the public (Ozor, 49). But many of those involved in play production, come with different and varying ideas, orientations etc., which create hitches and perhaps conflicts.

One personality stands out as a pivot in the course of play productions. He is the Theatre Administrator. He facilitates the union of the artistic and non-artistic areas of production and is held responsible for the success or failure of any play production endeavour. Much has been said about his functions and roles but much attention has not been paid to his role as a conflict manager. This function is imperative as he is the personality that actually engages the services of all the other artistes and more so, as the slogan goes in the theatre, whatever happens, the show must go on. One of the requisite credentials of a good theatre administrator as prescribed by Innocent Ohiri (88-87) is the possession of human skill. This entails the ability to adequately supervise, communicate and interact with all the personnel involved in the theatre production. He goes further to assert that if the above ingredients are not employed, there is bound to be weak control and lack of co-operation. Ekong Udoeyop (51-52) seems to agree with Ohiri on the importance of exploring human skills. He continues by stating the consequences of ignoring this very vital aspect thus:

One need hardly emphasize how grave the consequences of over looking and sometimes willfully ignoring the influence of ‘human relation’ progress and the direction in which it is moving, however ignorant one may be of its nature. Organizations have often been destabilized and fluctuated because of this oversight; they have also caused economic recession and the downfall of many social associations and clubs.

The impetus to the above is given by Virgy Onyene (30-31). She opines that individuals are unique, complex entities with a variety of characters, some apparently fairly consistent and enduring while others seem more transient and tend to vary with the changing demands of our life situations. She goes further to explain that these differences are a product of two factors, heredity and environment.

A play production involves various artistes with varying talents, dispositions etc. The foregoing assertions indicate the necessity for the theatre administrator to effectively handle and harmonize the character traits and resolve conflicts where they arise. If this is not done, there is bound to be chaos of a great magnitude in the theatre and the predetermined tripartite aims and objectives of guaranteeing satisfaction, having a full house and maximizing profits opined by Chris Nwamuo (2) will be elusive. Based on the above, this work examines the function of the Theatre Administrator as a conflict manager, the options open to him and makes recommendations on how he can effectively execute this function.

**Conflicts in Play Production**

Going by the concept of artistic unity, which demands the presentation before an audience, a unified work, one cannot but agree with the saddling of all the responsibility of the production on a certain individual the Artistic Director. He has the task of tapping, sieving and blending the skills, talents and artistry of all the artistes into a complete artistic, visual and auditory whole. This reduces the risk of a segmentry production and makes for the blending of the various artistes into a complete whole but does not however eliminate conflicts.

There are times when the actor is so convinced that his own approach is best for the presentation of the character he is to portray on stage but the artistic director thinks otherwise. The actor who perhaps is a prominent figure and admired by many others in the production, may equally enjoy the sympathy of other actors and actresses. This disagreement may lead to the boycott of rehearsals and or disillusionment, thus casting a shadow on the envisage production.

The Lighting Designer, the Set Designer or Costume Designer may be constrained by the funds available. As such, all the initial ideas and grandeuric designs envisaged for the production will have to be pruned down. This may stir up the feeling that the production will not live up to its billing and consequently, will mar the reputation of the designer that has been built up over the years. In spite of all entreaties, he might threaten to walk out of the production.

Sometimes, the artistes view as grossly inadequate, the advertising and other promotional tools employed in publicizing the production. They see these as being non commensurate with the zeal and enthusiasm they are investing in the production. Because poor publicity may translate into poor attendance by the audience, they feel that the fulfillment often derived from being seen by many audience members will not be there. Apart from this chances of the production making profits are slim which equally means chances of their getting their full remuneration are also slim. The artistes may consequently become impatient, a very fertile ground for misunderstanding to grow between them.

The production is successfully concluded. Accounts made by the box office staff do not seem to agree with that of the Ticket Takers and the number that actually watched the production. There is a feeling of fraud somewhere. The box office staff are accused of fraud; they may have printed and issued their own tickets side by side with the actual theatre tickets. They attempt vigorously to defend themselves and blame it on lapses in the publicity. The head of the publicity is then moved to defend his course. While this is going on, it is discovered that some properties left by some members of the audience in the care of the Ushers and House Manager have gone missing. Accusations are traded. Before these are actually resolved, the artistes get to know what is happening and demand their due. They might feel that the Theatre Administrator is merely cooking up these scenarios in order to create confusion so as to deny them their due.

The actors may have the feeling that one or two of them are cast for roles that they do not have the requisite competence to handle because of their relationship with the director. They may view themselves as being superior and much more competent to handle certain roles in the production instead of the ones cast. This breeds personality conflicts, which may in turn affect the production.

The above scenarios do take place often in the theatre; be it the commercial, community or educational theatre concern. But the audience is oblivious of it. This may have prompted Stephen Langley (385) to assert that:

… it will appear to the audience that the performance “just happened as easy as pie!”. The audience will never know that the ingénue was replaced by another actress just last week, that the musical conductor walked out on the dress rehearsal, that the kettle-drums are borrowed from the local high school, that the roof leaks when it rains, that the mechanics are still trying to repair the air-conditioning… that the director donated his salary when no funds were available to pay for costume materials….

It is the duty of the Theatre Administrator to ensure that conflicts like the ones enumerated above do not occur during productions or are reduced to the barest minimum. This is important because they tend to permeate and affect the quality of the production presentation.

**Conflict Resolution**

As mentioned earlier, the Theatre Administrator is a pivot in the theatre production process and as part of his goals; he ensures that the business activities of the theatre outfit are directed towards performance goals. This he accomplishes by proper liasing of the efforts of the performing artistes and the administrative artistes like the box office manager, the ushers, the ticket takers etc, towards the provision of good quality production (Nwamuo, 37-38). The theatre administrator can effectively reduce or resolve conflicts in the artistic area of the production by communicating effectively with the artistic director. He should take time to explain the vision and the mission of his theatre or production to the artistic director and create mutual trust between them. Issues and decisions involving them should be arrived at after dialogues in which the pros and cons and the continued survival of the arts of the theatre are carefully considered.

The Theatre Administrator should ensure proper handling of the artistes by the artistic director. Here, he does not need to over-rule the decisions of the director rather he takes pains to explain to the artistes why and how such decisions are in the best interest of the artistes and the production. He needs to ensure that there is a harmonious working relationship between the artistes and the artistic director if he must succeed in his quest to bring together the audience and artistes. Effiong John (129-130) supports this view and opines that:

The need for harmony between the director and the actor as a vehicle for easy attainment of theatrical goals is what I have practiced. Even the most authoritarian and temperamental director working with a group of sensitively irksome actors, soon finds out the essence of compromise between the parties if theatrical successes must be recorded.

If the artistes are well handled and satisfied, they will be motivated to put in their best towards the success of the production. Regular meetings with them at the instance of the theatre administrator are quite necessary. At such meetings, they are briefed on the success so far of the production in different areas like publicity, acquisition of props, costumes and informed of the tasks left to be accomplished. Through this medium, he has the opportunity of hearing from the artistes on a one-to-one basis concerning their encumbrances, the hitches that may exist and proffer solutions and grant them the leeway to make suggestions towards the success of the production. Any artiste who is treated this way is bound to have a sense of belonging and an air of importance would have been created, leading to the desire to contribute positively to the production’s success. The artistes may then strive to ensure that they put aside all those things that may cause derailment from the original focus, which is the success of the production.

The above is bound to build confidence and trust between the artistes and the theatre administrator. They are then made to be loyal to him and ready to receive and implement directives emanating from his office without undue resentments. The production, the artistes, the theatre administrator and the theatre outfit, all will be better off.

It is equally imperative for the theatre administrator to hold regular meetings with staff in the non-artistic area of the production. At such meetings he will be afforded the opportunity of explaining his vision to the staff and guiding them towards the realization of their vision. He will get to know envisaged problems in this area and chart a path towards surmounting them.

He will do well and have the best interest of the production if he sets targets for these staff. If such targets are met the staff are compensated or given bonuses but if they are not met, some sanctions are placed. This approach (carrot and stick), is a potent tool in the hands of the theatre administrator. If any staff falters, it will be glaring and no other staff will be handed the blame. A healthy competition would have been bred among the staff, each striving to excel and meet the target in his own aspect. It equally fosters teamwork. This will reduce idle time and idle talks which sometimes lead to quarrels among staff.

It is expedient also for the theatre administrator to seal all loopholes, which may lead to his organization being defrauded. For instance, the box office staff can only come into contract with the tickets on the day of the opening. One may wonder what will happen to advance sale of tickets. It is simple. The advance tickets are made to be slightly different from the ones sold at the gates and they are placed only in the hands of trust-worthy individuals. This done, the probability of fraud would be reduced. Apart from this, the ticket takers are monitored to ensure that they do not collude with the box office staff to siphon money. Consequently, the accounts will be properly rendered and all the artistes will get their due and everybody will smile home after the production. These and more are the options open to the theatre administrator to ensure that he has a hitch-free and conflict-free production.

**Conclusion**

The Production Staff, both artistic and non-artistic involved in a theatre production have different and varying temperaments, vocations, wishes, backgrounds, orientations and different perceptions, which they invariably bring to the production. They need to be properly handled to avoid conflicts, which may in turn impact negatively on the production. The Theatre Administrator who is the engineer and the force that enhances the union of the artistes under the umbrella of a theatre production, is saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that conflicts between these personalities do not occur or are reduced to the barest minimum and that they do not impact negatively on the production which is the only product he has to sell and survive. The various options and suggestions made in this work will come in handy and useful in this regard.

If the aim of the theatre is to sell its products to the audience and cause them to desire to watch another production, if the aim of the theatre administrator is to excel in his chosen career, if he is to function well in his field, he must pay heed to the issue of conflicts during productions and the recommendations made in this paper will help him ward off conflicts during play productions. This is one of the functions he must perform in order to excel.

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