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The Challenges of Teaching Practicality of Technical Theatre in Covid-19 Era: Case of *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel* Performance

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Abstract

*This work explores the challenges of teaching practicality of technical theatre in Covid-19 Era, using *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*'s production as a case study. It draws its fact through participant observation method of research as the researcher was part of the making of *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel* performance. This work establishes the need for collaborative effort in technical theatre and the necessity of physical contacts and team work is unavoidably necessary in order to make an aesthetically pleasing theatrical performance. It then states the challenges faced by teaching practicality of technical theatre during the Covid-19 era. We conclude that the current state of technical theatre cannot happen in isolation, creative collaboration is essential in creating a theatrical set. The collaborative efforts of the carpenter, designer, painter and builder are the hands behind every stage design in a production. It also concludes that, not all practical based courses in Nigerian Institutions are ripe for virtual teaching of which technical theatre is one because technical tools will be needed on both end to make virtual teaching effective.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Technical Theatre, Performance, Practicality

Introduction

The collaborative effort of theatrical performance makes the total uniqueness communicative, as theatre may not necessarily communicate the essence of its subject in fragment and isolation, communicating meaning and aesthetics in theatre is best achieved when all elements of

theatrical performance are in accordance. Thus, the necessity of physical contacts and team work is unavoidably necessary in order to make a healthy statement in theatrical performance.

One of the theatrical elements that explore and communicate with theatrical space is technical theatre. This element brings beauty and understanding of the settings of the performance, it gives information of where what is taking place. It enhances artistic and performative communication to its full meaning. This element had the picture of performance space and the picture of the settings way before the rehearsal begins. Technical theatre requires to start working before the actors ever take the stage, Morey (2005) once said:

The work required for a theatrical production to materialize starts well before the actors ever take the stage. There are typically many people involved, hundreds of hours put in, and countless meetings held along the way. Though every production and every theater works differently, there is a general progression of steps needed to produce a play.

What Morey called general progression is first individual before collaborative, it is in its collaborative state that performance is made, every units of performance are very deliberate in working towards the same goal. However, the interest of this paper is to explore the effect of pandemic on technical unit of theatrical production, as we all know that anything that involves more than two people or crowd is an advantage for the spread of covid-19.

The data collection of this paper is limited to Abiodin Akinsiku's *Esu and the Vagabond minstrel* performance. Akinsiku directed Osofisan's *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel* during the Covid-19. This paper explores the challenges faced as relates to the rules of Covid-19 that is not friendly to teaching and executing the practicality of technical theatre. The study adopt qualitative method of research and its discuss is centered on how practicality of technical theatre was taught to the point execution during covid-19 era in Lead City University, Ibadan. The researcher is an academic staff member in Lead City University, and a lecturer of technical theatre in department of Performing Arts and Film Studies. Thus, the source of data for this work is through participatory and eye witness. The relevance of this research is therefore an asset to the body of knowledge and its field of study.

The Challenges of teaching the practicality of technical theatre in Covid-19 Era

Performative language is adopted in this section for a proper communication. Therefore, the word *teaching* would be considered to be *execution* since the subject of this research is Practicality and the researcher seems to prefer execution because the driven question of this analysis is *how did the technical director of Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel execute set design for the production with the fact it is Covid-19 Era*.

The need for set and scene designer in film and stage suggest that technical theatre as a course is a gold well that should be adequately mined. The different areas of focus show ample of opportunities especially for students that undergo the process of teaching. Therefore, there are viable prospects in the practical teaching of technical theatre which can be explored by the teachers, the students, even our society. However, teaching practicality of technical theatre take a different turn in a time when the world is faced with pandemic. Covid-19, a newly discovered illness caused by the Corona Virus was first announced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in December 2019. By March 2020, the same organisation declared the outbreak as a pandemic that has spread across most nations of the world. The resultant effect of this outbreak affected the general cosmos of the world. The outbreak has required the need for several institutions to close down physical business and trainings. Obviously, education won't be left out especially in a developing country that has not taken advantage of digital learning in education. Nigeria educational system couldn't survive the fierce of Covid-19 and this would not have been an advantage for practical course base like technical theatre. The study of Tari, Selfina, and Wauran, (2020) noted that:

Several measures have been put in place by educational institutions in order to forestall the spread across the world. These measures coupled with the government declaration of lockdown and isolations have affected teaching in many ways.

The havoc caused by pandemic to general learning process, how it freeze the formal educational goal and practical based course were stereotyped. Ali, (2020) posit that:

Many educational institutions are left with no other choice but to adopt different online and virtual means of training and teaching students across the world. However, this

initiative been a new experience for both teachers, students, guardians and all major stakeholders in the educational sector comes with a number of barriers militating against its assurance of delivering quality education. Practical oriented courses that require physical or face-to-face trainings are more adversely affected.

Technical theatre falls within the purview of courses that require physical trainings because it is practical based. Though, Udenze, & Oshionebo, Balogun, (2020) asserts that:

The major barrier to teaching practical aspect of technical theatre in Covid-19 era is the weakness of online teaching infrastructure. Many online teaching platforms including different new media platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom have been adopted to facilitate learning during the Covid-19 era.

However, in response to the above thought, these forms of platforms may not accommodate the full aims and objective of practical based courses. For instance, teaching lighting, set design or sound management through a virtual platform may not capture the total apprenticeship experience that is the bedrock of professionalism in practical courses. Since the whole idea of practical teaching is for the students to execute the idea under a low supervision or no supervision. It can as well be assumed that only the theoretical aspects of such training can be successfully taught virtually.

Also, it is important that we note the importance of students' participation under the supervision of the instructor or the lecturer in teaching the practicality of technical theatre as it would help student understanding of handling and operating equipment, tools and props used in designing. The presence of the lecturer or the supervisor may serve as serious motivation and concentration for the students in workshop.

The gathering of students in workshop may be used as a tool for focus for other student while in the case of online teaching an individual may decide to be doing many things while teaching is going on and this make the attention of the person is divided.

Avoidance of physical teaching is a major setback in teaching practical technical theatre in the Covid-19 era. This is because the total objective of practical teaching in theatre is not for perfection alone but also to incur character and discipline of the profession. If Doctor cannot be made via virtual teaching for the sake of the integrity of the profession, in

this regard Theatre Profession cannot be obtained via virtual teaching for the sake of the nature of the profession.

Teaching the practicality of Technical Theatre in Nigerian Universities: A mirror of Lead City University

Technical theatre involves building complex skills that transcends the usual sole theoretical education. Teaching technical theatre entails preparing graduates for an unprecedented world. Achieving this then involves teaching the common skills like effective communication, problem analytic, team work etc. This is in addition to developing new sets of skills as required by the advent of modern technology needed to effectively function in professional practice.

This view is well supported by Abe (2016). Opines that:

The teaching of Technical Theatre calls for the ability to develop creative skills in students. Coupled with theoretical aspects of the course, students are expected to develop a new meaning for themselves through collaborations and team works. Hence, the practical aspect of technical theatre exposes student to mining new information. They are able to connect what is been thought to solve practical problems in the field.

It is then worthy of note that teaching practicality of technical theatre would produce combinations of different professional practice, embedded in a body of knowledge or a discipline that is called technical theatre. Meanwhile, Olaniyan (2015) gave the list of possible combinations that can be generated through the practical teaching of technical theatre, Olaniyan posit that:

There are several aspects of practicality of technical theatre in which students and teachers can decide to specialise on. The core subjects in technical theatre include lighting, props, costumes, make up, sound, designer etc. The combination of these different aspects is to ensure that teaching technical theatre exposes student to all practical aspects and also to provide the experiences they may need to be a professional.

Therefore, teaching technical theatre requires an all rounded professionalism to be in display by the tutors. The course being a high skilled based requires top notch quality teachers to guide and impact the

high end competencies and skills required for students to function maximally in practice. In relation to this, the study of Osarenren-Osaghae, and Irabor, (2012) states that “teachers’ quality in skill based courses like technical theatre is germane in engendering impactful teaching.”

In consonance with the above fact, teaching technical theatre practical does not only require excellent teachers, the nature of the course also requires that materials or resources in terms of equipment and tools are also readily made available. Bane (2007) asserts that:

The teaching environment for practical learning must be conducive. More importantly, the author opines that facilities put in place in workshops and theatre for practical training must be in synchronisation with what obtains in the industry.

Hence, teaching the practicality of technical theatre requires that training facilities are upgraded and updated from time to time in order to meet the present technological demands. Moreover, teaching the practical aspect of technical theatre is a collaborative effort between the teachers and learners. They must both see value in creativity and by extension, students are also expected to key into such values, question the authenticity, reflect and suggest ways of making concept taught more valuable. When this is done, the situation in practical classes becomes an avenue of sharing knowledge and information between the teachers and the students.

The curriculum is another fundamental factor that must be considered in teaching the effective practicality of technical theatre. Rantimi (2010) posit that: “practical theatre arts curriculum must be designed in such a way that dynamism is embedded in order to ensure that current and future realities are well taken care of.” In consonance with Rantimi, Oghuna (2014) assert that:

Teaching the practical aspect of the technical theatre must be geared towards the development of students’ logical abilities such that it fits practice in the current time and the future. Theatre art curriculum must be dynamic in nature. This is to ensure that as changes are being recorded in the field of practice, teaching pedagogy is also fine-tuned to meet the demands in practice.

This then reflects the notion that teaching technical theatre practical and indeed education in its entirety must be geared towards influencing student ability to enhance development in the society through their chosen academic discipline. Therefore, teaching practicality of technical theatre is

expected to equip students with skills that guarantee them financial independence.

An earlier study by Kaposi (2009) also suggests the importance of ensuring that technical theatre is not taught in isolation from current or foreseen future realities. According to Kaposi:

Practical teachings must incorporate the social, economic, cultural and educational reflection of the present. This encourages innovative ideas to be birth in student even before getting into professional practice. Students are able to stay on course with realities surrounding them.

This suggest that teaching practicality of Technical Theatre in respect to the curriculum must therefore be organised and systematic. Hershey, (2015) study proves the importance of organisation and systematic in teaching technical theatre. Hershey suggest that:

The need to ensure that teaching technical theatre practical curriculum accommodates technical production calendar. The classroom teaching should align with the technical calendar which will ensure that the theoretical aspect of the study precedes the practical aspect. This way, teaching is organised in such a way that students have already learnt in advance all they need to put into practice in the practical classes.

Findings from the study of Miller, (2016) project the potency of practical class as it involves many hands and many contributions. Miller submit that:

Students are more active in practical classes which involve working together in order to achieve a set goal. This way, lesser mistakes are made and students have the opportunity of generating new ideas and practicing such ideas.

These submissions present factors necessary to engender excellent teaching of practicality of Technical Theatre. That is, a presentation of ideal modalities necessary for teaching and learning the practical aspects of technical theatre. However, in meeting the demands necessary for the teaching of practicality of technical theatre in Covid-19 era, the major barrier militating against successful teaching of practicality of technical theatre is contact factor. Since the practicality of technical theatre is not possible without collaboration of two or more people, anything lesser may limit creativity. It is on this premise that this research derives its statement of problem and it focusses at looking into the challenges of teaching the

practicality of technical theatre. Also, if physical contact barrier can be controlled or guided against, this could be an attractive prospect towards the 21st century of teaching the practicality of technical theatre.

How did the technical director of Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel execute set design for the production with the fact it is Covid-19 Era?

This section consist of fact that were built on participatory method of research, the researcher was the Technical Director of the production and below are the pictures from building to performance. As it has been established earlier that technical theatre demands physical strength and collaboration of creative hands which is not Covid-19 friendly, one of the major challenges we faced during construction was timing; with more creative hands, we could have achieved the set construction in two days, but it took us a week because we tried to adhere to covid-19 measures.

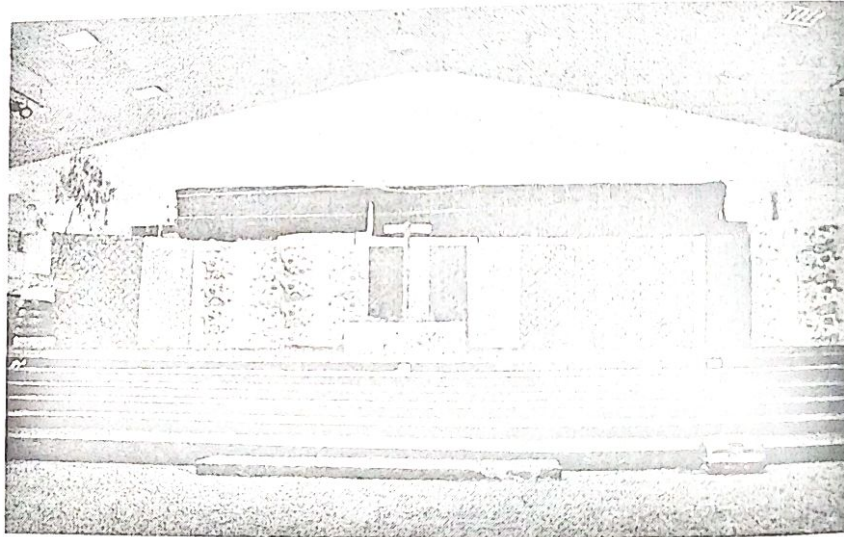


Figure 1: The front view of Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel complete set



Figure 2: The side view of the Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel complete set

The design process phase

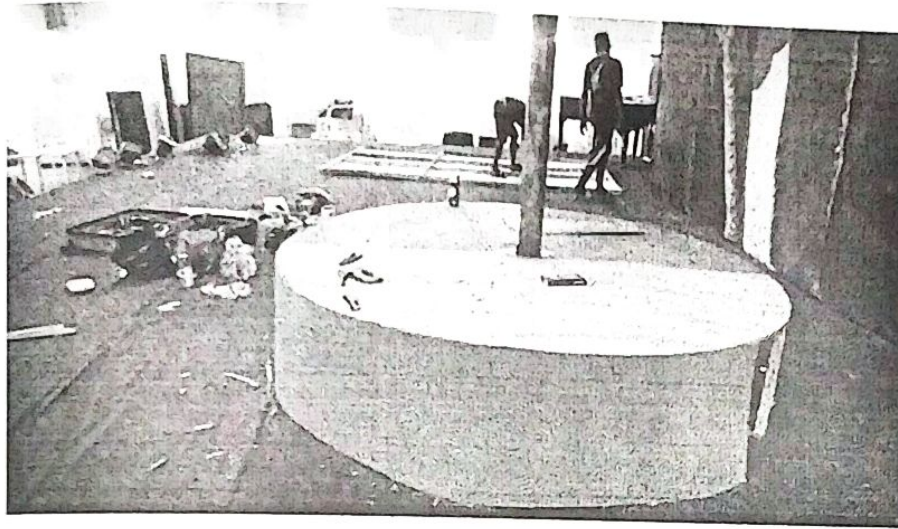


Figure 3: Making and arranging the flats and roundabout for the production.

One can see the distance kept by the people working, we have just only two people working at a time after the use of hand sanitizer. This makes the work sluggish and didn't give room to explore creativity as we were running out time and the limitation of human power makes the process hectic for people working.

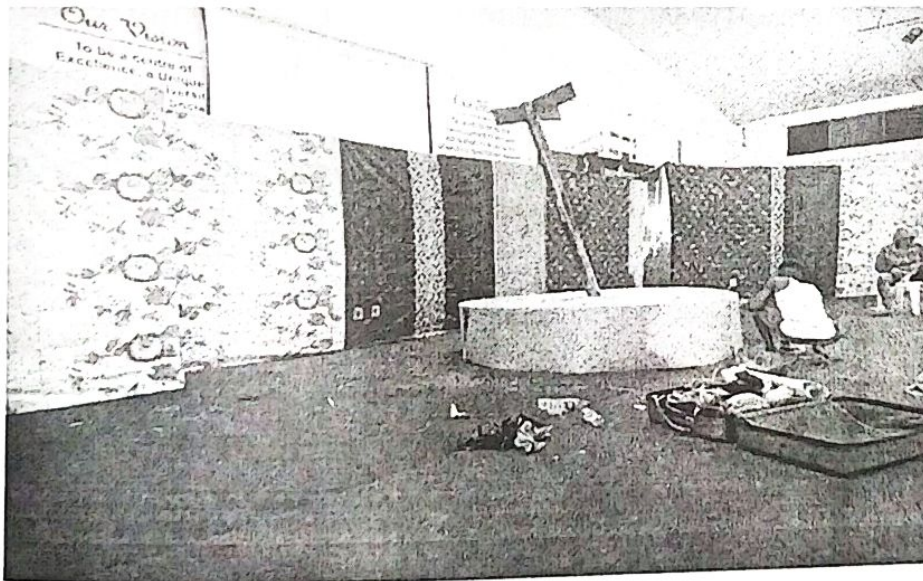


Figure 4: The Construction Process

Teaching was made difficult because students have to come in sessions and the maximum of them were four per day which only two can work at a time. So teaching and communication was very difficult, hectic on the part of the instructor because we have to repeat the same thing for every students. This method almost made us a theoretical based as all of them were not able to see the process from the beginning to the end. We were limited to basic and

we couldn't go advance because Covid-19 demanded that we be few at a time.

As we then subjected or limited by Covid-19 it is a suggestion and a reminder that Nigerian institution is not ripped for teaching practical courses in a virtual platform. Technical Theatre demands that you execute what you have as a model or in paper, when we remove executing and engagement part from Technical Theatre then it is more of an architectural and building work. This is to say the work of technical director doesn't stop at designing the set, the construction process must also be his concern.

There is absolutely no aspect of theatre that doesn't have to do with engagement, every theoretical thought must be applied and it involves human collaboration.

Conclusion

This research has made attempt in exploring the challenges of teaching practicality of technical theatre in Covid-19 Era. The research thrives on exploring the set design process of *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel* performance in Covid-19 Era. This research then concludes that the current state of Technical Theatre cannot be creatively seen without collaboration. The collaborative efforts of the carpenter, designer, painter and builder are the hands behind every stage production. It also concludes that, not all practical based courses in Nigerian Institutions are ripe for virtual teaching of which technical theatre is one because technical tools will be needed on both end to make virtual teaching effective.

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