

# TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE THEATRE PRACTICE: THE AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA, NIGERIA EXAMPLE

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## ABSTRACT

*Examples in Alternative Theatre practice across most nations in African as in many other developed/developing nations of the world which has come under various names but commonly referred to as Theatre for Development because of its role in addressing people's development, abound today. Similarly abounding are testimonies on its impact from earliest practices – from the LaedzaBatanani experience in Botswana, to Zambia Chikwakwa experience, and the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, Nigeria experience among the Travelling Theatre experiences in University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Makerere in Uganda, and University of Malawi in Lesotho among very many recent examples. This study, however, in highlighting the basic import of the concept of Alternative Theatre in the whole construct of using theatre as a viable conscientisation medium to spur people into action for self-actualisation, focuses on Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria experience in the development of the practice of Alternative Theatre, and explores the emergent trends in the course of the development which have popularised the practice in the academe, making it a legendary reference point, not only in Nigeria, but also beyond.*

**Keywords:** trends, alternative, theatre, development

## INTRODUCTION

*“The development of alternative ... theatre as a whole is described in terms of trends, as represented by the emergence of new types of approach to the production and distribution of performance”.*

**Baz Kershaw**

Kershaw's statement above is what sets the thrust for this study. From expounding on the basic import of the concept of Alternative Theatre, the study's pre-occupation will centre on investigation of the trends that have evolved since the inception of the practice in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria in 1975, and in its over three decades of existence; to highlight the inherent *process* that has become part and parcel of these trends and practice from one transitory phase to another – *process* that places Alternative Theatre as a viable tool of conscientisation and empowerment for the underprivileged. It will be necessary, therefore, to take the initiative in this preoccupation by defining the key operative terms involved.

## DEFINITION OF KEY OPERATIVE TERMS

Key operative terms stand out in this study as already indicated. They are: trends, alternative, theatre, and development. Trends in this context emphasise styles or methods of [theatrical] performance process *especially in its transitory inclination or amenability to change*. Alternative on the other hand highlights the option in the performance process; that is, that other possibility in the process that veers from the *status quo* – the established convention of practice. The practice here is 'theatre', and theatre emphasises an art form – a medium of expression and communication. There is a dominant art form in (de)focus here; a practice of theatre – that medium of expression and communication that has remained conventional with the mainstream practice, which the alternative is drifting from.

Etherton's (1988: 2) perhaps offers us a clearer understanding of the concept of Alternative with reference to its performance [*process*] nature that challenges the conventional "literary dramatic" style and stage performance nature [of theatre buildings], to seek for "a new social purpose for drama in performance", allowing for interaction with, and participation of "potential audiences". Therefore, "the kind of [alternative] theatrical practice that gave birth to the experience under discussion" in this study, as Samuel AyedimoKafewo (2007: 62) would say, "differs from the conventional".

Development on the other hand, may be seen from the perspective of an evolutionary process – "evolutionary development" (Yerima and Okwori, 1990: 37) – a process of transition *and progression* from one phase to another.

However, considering alternative theatre as cohesion, the development of Alternative Theatre as a whole, therefore, is described mostly in terms of trends, as represented by the emergence of new types of approach to the production and distribution of performance, the artistic expression, which Daniel and Bappa (2004: 19) see as "an alternative approach to doing theatre". Interestingly though, is the fact that this new type of approach is inevitably development oriented, than mere entertainment, and directed towards the underprivileged community or even semi-urban dwellers.

This type of development, while taking a new dimension in relation to the process earlier noted, says Saint Gbilekaa (1990: 28), "relates to the widening of the intellectual horizon, the raising of consciousness and the encouragement of dialogue and participation in issues relating to the peoples economic, political religious and social realities within their environment". It is a development whose definition AkanjiNasiri (1990: 48) wrote "implies a comprehensive and qualitative growth and improvement of society ... with regard to the individual and collective life of its citizenry"; and thus engenders an approach which employs all paradigms at its disposal in the process of achieving its goals. Here again, the duo earlier quoted conclude in affirmation that: "It is therefore, an approach which is committed to using theatre [in its totality] as a relevant medium and language in mobilizing people, particularly those in rural communities, towards self-reliance and development" in both participatory and interactive manner.

### **Origin of Alternative Theatre Development in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria**

The development of the practice of Alternative Theatre or Theatre for Development in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria is traceable to the establishment of the Drama programme in the university in 1975. Michael Etherton, who joined the university then, was instrumental to both the establishment of the Drama programme and this development, as he became the Head of the Drama programme. The Drama programme as it were then was still integrated within the Department of English in the university. Obviously, this development was spurred by the practice which was already gaining prevalence within the Southern African region, especially Botswana, and in Zambia where theatre had quickly assumed a means of addressing community's problems; and based on Etherton's experience from such background. Etherton was unequivocal in acknowledging this fact. He affirms in an interview with Adelugba that: "I was highly influenced by the work in Botswana – partly because Botswana work had developed from the work we started in Zambia" (Osofisan, 2004: 48). Both Professors Steve Abah and JenkeriOkwori also corroborated this fact in interviews with this researcher.

Abah acknowledges that the origin of this theatre which he simply identifies as indigenous theatre practice, perhaps, because its grassroot base, was "with an orientation of social commitment; in other words, the theatre that was concerned with issues, social issues of the environment within which it is situated" (83). Basically, therefore, its pre-occupation was the promotion of development ideas and wanting people to participate in the development process. It was this theatre of grassroot orientation that Michael Etherton has brought to ABU in 1975 when he started the programme. Initial efforts in this direction or experimentation, however, had been largely with university drama teachers "on an unofficial basis" according to Michael Etherton (1982), and involving "university students, adult educators and literacy officers, and young peasant farmers, in making plays which situate the problems of oppressed groups in a wider social analysis" (348). Interestingly, it is the 'actual *process*' of this experimentation, according to Etherton, that is most crucial, as it carries the thinking of the whole group forward.

## The Samaru Project

On the strength of Etherton's statement above, the development of the practice of Alternative Theatre in Ahmadu. Bello University, Zaria therefore, started officially or was institutionalised on the platform of the Samaru Project in 1980 after those initial experimentations. The Samaru Project, Samuel AyedimeKafewo made the researcher understand, is a street theatre project which was designed and projected to relate to the immediate neighbourhood of the university community, Samaru – the community hosting the University – by “taking ... performances to them” (Abah and Etherton, *SAIWA*, Issue 1). This is a development that hinged on the backdrop of the philosophy of the Zambian playwright and theatre activist, KabweKasoma who was quoted as saying that “the idea is you take theatre to the people, instead of expecting the people to come to the theatre” (11). Abah in 1985 further explained that “the crucial underlying intention of the Samaru Project is to raise [the] consciousness” of the people through a process of research, play-making and performance. (*SAIWA*, Issue 3). Associated with the above objectives is the further intention of the initiators of this project to use it to break the myth of the elitist hegemony that surrounded the appreciation of ‘Drama’ and ‘Theatre’, as the so-called ‘illiterate’ at the grassroot is capable also of being entertained. “The entertainment aspect”, explained Abah (1988) however, “is [only] a sugar-coated veneer, for the [real] substance of the play is serious social problems”. He further emphasised that:

The entertainment function is there to persuade people to confront those problems. [But] Another aim is to offer theatre both as a method and medium for social analysis. (23)

The Samaru Project says Samuel AyedimeKafewo (2004: 56): is the second of the two courses that involves students interacting directly with the outside community. This is done in the second year or what used to be part one of the drama programme of ABU. The other is Community Theatre in the third year, which is rather corollary to Samaru Project. These students must have of course received basic training not only in the style and techniques of performance, but also in gathering information or research.

The first level of this exercise, therefore, is *community research*. There is no specific agenda according to Okwori. They just enter Samaru and begin to interact with the community, asking questions on what are the pressing problems of the community and observing things themselves. Several of these problems and ideas are then brought back to the drama village.

*Analysis and scenario development* forms the second level in the exercise. Back in the Drama Village, the ABU Studio Theatre, [which appears in the Encyclopedia of World Architecture, is designed with a typical Hausa village in mind, complete with “Zaure” decorations and murals all reflective of Hausa culture], the information and observations made are analysed and prioritised. In plan, this Theatre resembles the mud-walled compound houses of Nigeria's Hausa cities, and is made up of four huts representing the village square where the Drama event becomes a communal activity (D. A. Aondohemba, in the Programme of the 16th edition of Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Festival, NUTAF '97). Then plays are formulated based on the issues. According to Yerima (1990), discussions and post-mortem performances during rehearsals are carried out by both lecturers and students within this *scenario development*. When the rehearsals are finally perfected, the play is then ready to meet the audience.

The play at this level is then taken back to the community for the actual *playperformance*. Abah clarifies to the researcher that “the plays don't perform on campus”. According to him, “the plays are performed [in the open and usually in the evenings] in the place, Samaru, for the people who gave the information in the first place”. Post-mortem discussions, as interesting as it turns, Yerima further highlights, are held with the people after the final performance; where the successes of such exercise now evolve. One of such successes, he emphasised, is that:

The villagers have become more aware of their rights and have started to ... question conventions which hitherto shifted their financial and social positions. [Also] A new form of entertainment has been introduced to the life of ... the people” (91).

Despite these avowed successes of the project, Abah, Okwori and Yerima are unanimous in acknowledging its attendant limitations. Abah (1985) expresses concern that the interaction which

started with the people during research, and which should have deepened with the exercise, unfortunately disappears as the project group diminished, and the people dropped along the line. Soon after the process of research and data collection, the project loses the people's perspective with the subsequent analysis of the collected data which takes place in the drama village and completely alienates the people whose problems it is supposed to address. The result is that those data are awkwardly anchored, and further often used to mystify the people. They are never given the tools; the experience and knowledge of this medium of drama. Also associated with the above, ironically, is the prejudice expressed by the students in interacting with the people.

Yerima (1990) identifies the discomfort of the people at the seeming invasion of their privacies or intrusion into their private lives with the exercise; as well as their mistrust of the commitment of its practitioners as part of these limitations. Worst also, perhaps, is the fact that the people recognise the limitation in the performances which often emphasise rather than solve their problems. These are besides the hostilities of some community leaders who feel rather threatened by the possibility of the people gaining awareness to question their increasing subjugation.

In his response in this regard, Okwori (2008) captures the limitations in the Samaru Project which he said is severally described as a migrant method in the following words:

The first year students ... go to the community, and after they finish the programme the community never saw anybody again until another first year students go again next year. And so this was beginning to pose a problem. The exercises were asking people about their problems ... not proffering solutions, and the students didn't have the capacity, the department did not have the capacity to intervene or bring about any positive change in the lives of the community people as a result of the theatre. So people were getting fatigued ... you came last year, what did you bring? This year then you are coming to ask us of the situation, and the situation has not changed for us. So there began a lot of critique from the people. (91)

Generally, there is already the criticism of this orientation of theatre for and not by the people; and because of its inherent limitations, internally he said, a lot of reflections were generated as to the viability of the project. It was, however, agreed according to him, that it was viable; but only needed to be taken beyond the characteristic migrant method of simply going to scoop information or extract information from the people, turn them into plays and taken back to the people. There was the urgent need, therefore, to make the people part and parcel of the process from beginning to the end, that by the time the students withdraw, the people themselves would have been left with the skills with which to investigate and continue to articulate their problems. So, the idea of the Community Theatre then came into being.

### **The Community Theatre**

The idea of the Community Theatre explained Okwori (2008), therefore, was that:

After the first year, in the second year therefore, the students will now go into a particular community and live with that community for a period of one to two weeks. They eat their food, share in their everyday work, do the same chores with them, and together the community will begin to develop rapport, they will begin to break down their defences and begin to have trust. And once they have trust, they will be able to share problems and together they can evolve plays and performances that address issues. The critical shift now is the process, that in engaging in the process of play creation, the people themselves are developing a sense of awareness and a sense of knowledge about their problems. Because they will now be discussing it and analyzing the problems in a way that they've not been doing previously, and so the Community Theatre then came to being as a corollary to the Samaru Project. (91)

Community Theatre is a rather participatory theatre in which the people themselves engage issues about their own lives for their immediate consumption and which promotes development by stimulating dialogue within them using their own familiar artistic expressions; like songs, dances, proverbs, mimes, local norms and cultures etcetera. It is a typical representation of grassroot theatre or indigenous performative mode. Therefore, it employs basic dramatic skills and techniques which the people can readily identify with and handle.

Like the Samaru Project, Community Theatre has its own process. Okwori has presented a detailed explanation of this process in his 2004 edited book, *Community Theatre: An Introductory Coursebook*. This appears in a number of steps.

Step one is the preliminaries which involves the students as theatre amateurs or people engaged in Community Theatre work linking with project communities to discuss the project, its modalities and logistics. Once the consent for the project is certified by the community given all considerations; in communication channels, tradition and cultural factors that may impede on its realisation, the organisational and operational arrangements are also determined and handled by the people or jointly with the group.

Step two is community research which is invariably borne out of the necessity to appropriately articulate the problems and issues in the community as seen by the people themselves. It involves a rather informal research and homestead approach in which the team of participants associating freely with the people, living with them, eating with them and sharing in their daily activities, engaging them on one on one discussions while observing and respecting their traditions and values in the process. It is a participatory approach in which the people are involved in their own research rather than outsiders coming to determine their problems for them.

Step three is data analysis where information gathered from the research are presented at an open community forum and extensively discussed by everyone as to how the issues came about, their effects, what can be done and possible consequences. Through this process, the people come to a critical understanding of their problems; prioritise them, and articulate strategies that may be used to overcome them.

Step four is scenario building where the outcome of the data analysis forms the bedrock for play creation and anchored around stories that will highlight and link the problems in a dramatic way, using appropriate cultural forms as determinants for the style of performance, such that it provokes discussion and challenges the people to take action. Care is always taken to allow the story evolve from the sensibilities of the people. The scenario is also seen as a plan of action which is amenable to change at any time according to the changing perspectives of the people.

Step five involves rehearsals. The process which normally takes place in the open involves the people trying out how to play the character and dramatise the story. They are encouraged to discuss actions and ideas being tried out as well as play [exchange] roles, with the problems being dramatised being blended with the artistic forms of expression used to formulate them. In doing so, they increase their awareness and understanding of the issues at stake; are conscientised and empowered, therefore. Hence, the rehearsal process is a process of collective creation and articulation which is capable of forging group solidarity and throwing up challenges in provoking action among the people.

Step six is actual performance and post-performance discussion. As soon as the play-making process crystallises, performance ensues. It is an extension of the rehearsal process, and also allows for intervention from members of the community. Performance draws the audience into the play as participants by engaging them regularly, as actors throw actions and debates to them, ask questions, call them as witness, request their support for arguments, and conspire with them. Actors are always encouraged to lead the audience on; tell them what they are about to do, distinguish between their person and characters they are portraying, ask for their comments and opinions over an issue, reach out in their mist, touch them and take sides with them. At the end of the performance, issues of the play are re-examined by all and strategies are planned for action.

The seventh and last step in the list is follow-through. Because the initial enthusiasm that usually greets such theatre experience is easy to just fritter away, perhaps, out of lack of will or motivation or resources to carry through with action-strategies agreed upon, their arises the need to revisit the communities to encourage and re-motivate them; as well as examine new areas of cooperation; or assess the impact of previous or on-going action.

Community Theatre from the foregoing, therefore, is a point of departure from the migrant method of doing theatre for the people to a participatory method of doing theatre with them and by them; engaging them in a process of their own development, using their own expressive mediums to



galvanise and broaden their awareness on the very forces that oppress them and ultimately and effectively spur them to action. That is why Abah (2008: 86) sees it as a process of “discussing development as a group, and catalysing the discussion rather than presenting solution to the community”. He says it is not about a theatre of solution. Rather:

It’s a theatre of problematising issues. By problematising issues, [he says] I am talking here about a process of stimulation; stimulating people to understand the details of the problem to be able to do analysis. Therefore to say, giving our understanding, and giving the way we now see the issue, a b c action are the ones we should take, or c d e actions are the ones we must pursue other people to help us to take, so that the problems here will be solved.

Abah argues that the kind of process of change this theatre prescribes, therefore, is such change that emanates endogamously rather than exogenously; such that builds from within rather than from outside. He is not, however excluding or writing off the outside in this discourse of theatre for development, but only maintains that that the outside must be sought from within; and that once that understanding happens endogamously, the process of reaching outside sources will be far more-clearer and more coherent.

After some years of practice, however, it was again discovered that even the Community Theatre itself was also limited. The reason for this acknowledged both Abah and Okworiis due largely to its curricular bent; the fact that it is based within the academia, and has to operate within the parameters of curriculum and the time it takes. Because of its curriculum bent, the unstable nature of students engaged in Community Theatre practice became inevitable; since “students come in” says Abah, “you are working with them; and they go, you have a new set. And you must start all over with that set ... [and] you must begin with the very rudimentary rubrics with the new set ... So the progress you can make with community is very limited” (87). Obviously, this is a very big challenge to the practice. Consequently, explains Okwori (2008: 91):

We do not have any means of intervening, we do not have any means of follow-up, because once the class that did the project has graduated from that class, it was not possible to ask them to go back to the same community and follow-up anymore, because they have already earned their grades and so on.

One other crucial level of limitation experienced with Community Theatre practice besides its curriculum bent and allotted time and which still persists, is funding. Abah (2008: 87) further explains, that:

In talking about the issues of change and building people’s consciousness and orientation, it needs time again and also needs resources, especially in terms of resources. What the university will provide is very limited. And you instigate community to be very excited about this new ways of thinking, news ways of doing things, and then at the same time you must say goodbye. And you haven’t laid enough structure for them to be able to say we will follow up on this avenue of funding this or that.

In view of all these enumerated limitations confronting Community Theatre practice, practitioners in ABU, Zaria were always brainstorming, to find a way out of the constraints which such limitations impose on them. From the Samaru Project, with its rather migrant nature, that never really encouraged the participation of the people it was meant to benefit in its best intentions, the development in trends in Alternative Theatre practice in Ahmadu Bello University had always been dictated and catalysed by emerging challenges. As the effort to combat the limitations in the Samaru Project gave rise to the birth of Community Theatre, Community Theatre with time also proved its own susceptibility. Once more, Okwori (2008: 91 – 92) informs us that:

At that point it occurred to us that this kind of practice can never have a final stage. It will always have to be a process, and each process, each stage that you to take it to will always have a limitation which needs to be conquered by further experimentation. So I think, and our philosophy about it and our trust and believe in it is that this is not the kind of practice that you can say that you have finally found it, and it’s going to be like this. It is constantly evolving. As I am talking to you, the way it is today it will not be the way it will be tomorrow eventually.

Therefore, again, the ABU, Zaria ‘collectives’ of Alternative Theatre parishioners were forced to put on their thinking caps to figure out how best they can practice Theatre for Development without these

constraints. So in 1989 they were able to get a funding from the Canadian University Services Overseas [CUSO] in Nigeria to bring together those who were practicing this kind of theatre from various fronts in Nigeria. During that meeting in which they brainstormed on the problems confronting several strands of Alternative Theatre practice, they agreed that it was important to start a Non-Governmental Organisation [NGO] devoted to the use of this practice, an NGO that will not be encumbered by the curricular constraints which was affecting the practice. That of course gave birth to Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance [NTPA] in March 1989.

### **Inherent Limitations in the Trends X-rayed**

Development in trends in the practice of Alternative Theatre in ABU, Zaria, Nigeria has undoubtedly been dictated and directed by emergent constraints or limitations in the process; challenges, which are being highlighted not only to evaluate the extent of constraints or limitations they place on the practice, but also to consider the challenges in the light their own merits. All the practitioners whom the researcher has interviewed in the course of this research have been unanimous in acknowledging the inevitability of challenges in the practice. These challenges emanate as a result of the fact that the practice is situated primarily within the academia and must operate within the parameters of curriculum. These challenges may be summarised as follows:

- a. Students prejudices, especially with the Samaru project
- b. Cooperation from host community
- c. The migrant nature of the Samaru Project
- d. Limited allotted time for carrying out projects [usually two weeks] whether the Samaru project or the Community Theatre project, as well as the flux nature of students involved.
- e. Inadequate funding
- f. Interests of funding bodies
- g. Organisation
- h. Security
- i. Sustainability, among others.

Interestingly, the 'collectives' at ABU had never at any point rested on their oars in the face of these challenges. The emergent trends in the course of this development, therefore, give credence to the above assertion; that the trends are only a manifestation of their concerted and indefatigable effort to rise above the constraints and limitations which those challenges had imposed on them. However, despite the fact that these challenges emanate as a result of the practice being situated primarily within the academia, this in itself, Abah says, "has its own advantage"; since such practice "must always be constantly subjected to debate, research and interrogation and the academic environment provides a wonderful opportunity for that". Otherwise, there wouldn't have been any need to propel the trends in the first place, by the efforts to rise above the challenges.

On the Samaru Project particularly, Abah sees the challenge it presents to students as a very wonderful learning process both in the way they articulate ideas and as a counter-challenge to their prejudices. It is, therefore, a development process for the students as well. Stretching the idea of the learning process, Samuel Kafewo says "in fact ... there is [really] no project that is a failure; because even when nothing happens at all [in terms of concrete result], it is also a lesson" (114). Alternative Theatre practice in ABU, Zaria Nigeria, therefore, even in its challenges has proved not only a meaningful development medium for communities, but also for students who are involved in the process, as well as lecturers who also use it as a platform to advance in their career.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In the light of the foregoing, there is no gainsaying the fact that necessity actually is the chief propeller of not just inventions but certainly innovations. The various trends, nay innovations which have been explored in the course of the development of Alternative Theatre practice in, Zaria, Nigeria have all been prompted and dictated by the necessity to overcome one form of limitation or the other that has plagued and encumbered the effective realisation of the objective/s of such concerted and committed efforts as directed at human development. This goes to confirm the simple fact that theatre's

potentiality, therefore, of expanding the frontiers for human development is inexhaustible; thus as far as employing theatre for development objectives is concerned, trends remain but a continuum, in the ardent search for appropriate aesthetics, and as such will keep on crystalising.

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