ALTERNATIVE THEATRE PARADIGM: DEMOCRATISING THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Democratisation from time immemorial has been a people-oriented phenomenon. While development in the context of this discourse points to change – positive change, which involves the improvement of the quality of people's situation/condition; considering Alternative Theatre in the light of the above topic, therefore, implies the galvanising of the consciousness of the people towards active participation in addressing their development needs and aspirations. This simply emphasises the planning of activities aimed at directing this process of change essentially from the perspective of the people. Through the platform of Alternative Theatre – a veering from the conventional theatre tradition, this paper highlights the instrumentality and effectiveness of a remarkably burgeoning and diversifying performance tradition in democratising this development process.

Keywords: Alternative Theatre, Development, Development process, Democratisation

INTRODUCTION

The fact that theatre has globally crystallised into a changing phenomenon which could be adapted to any situation of development and viable also in redefining and reorganising prevalent economic, political and socio-cultural imperatives cannot be overemphasised. Africa's experience in this development as in most parts of the world are not divorced from what started as experimentation in theatrical form in relation to the growing political awareness in various parts of the continent at *post-independence* (Etherton, 1982: 347-50); and thus gave impetus to the emergence of a populist oriented new theatrical process of drama creation which rather became a valid alternative to the "traditional, formalistic theatre practice, [a valid] alternative to the usual discourse situated primarily within the academic, primarily functioning among the elitist group"(Abah, 1989: 5). Etherton (1988: 3) further throws more light on the concept of Alternative Theatre in his paper – *Popular Theatre for Change: From Literacy to Oracy*; arising from the challenge or opposition of the performance [*process*] nature of the new phenomenon to the conventional "literary dramatic" style and stage performance nature [of theatre buildings]: such that sought for "a new social purpose for drama in performance, [and] one which allows for interaction with [and participation of] potential audiences". Most significantly, however, this development could inevitably be explained by the inability of the hitherto dominant theatre tradition which we have inherited from the Europeans, just as the failure of most of its associated development plans/projects, to adequately address the concerns and development needs of target communities. In other words, Alternative Theatre has not only refocused drama from entertainment to issues of more social concerns, but has also through indigenous knowledge and values made it more participatory to target audiences/communities; which may have prompted Alternative Theatre's ascription as going back to the root, to the indigenous or traditional performance mode; an affirmation that in Africa, we have always had our own original and ideal performance tradition which remains a valid and better *alternative* to the exotic culture or ideology that was imposed on us, that besieged us, as much as it satisfied and remained instrumental to the satisfaction of the people/community's development needs and aspiration before its distortion. *Paradoxical, May be!* However, following the foregoing aforementioned wave, examples in Alternative Theatre efforts across the continent which has come under various names but commonly considered as Theatre for Development because of its role in addressing people's development, abound today as manifest testimonies on its impact – from the LaedzaBatanani experience in Botswana, to Zambia Chikwakwaexperience, and the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria experience among the

Travelling Theatre experiences in University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Makerere, in Uganda, University of Malawi in Lesotho among very many recent examples.

ALTERNATIVE THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES/MACHINERY OF DEMOCRATISATION

Theatre practitioners have come to realise that it is fundamental to the development of a people's culture to be with the people in creating theatre. (ZakesMda, 1993: 9)

In the discourse of Alternative Theatre, it is important to understand that development and participation are significant inseparable terms. ZakesMda no doubt sets the thrust for the discussion in this paper with his statement above. He realises the sheer futility that threatens any theatre effort that estranges the people and fails to actively engage them in addressing their development needs. Development and participation, therefore, are quite central to our focus here; they of course form the basis. Starting with development, Tor Iorapuu (2008) has this to says:

[It] is about people's freedom determined by their culture. It involves much more than economic growth, physical infrastructure or industrialisation. Rather, development should be perceived as an enhancement of human freedom. (4)

Soubbotina (2004) adds that, "in a broader sense the notion of human development incorporates all aspects of individuals' well-being, from their health status to their economic and political freedom" (7 - 8). What the foregoing explains is the fact that freedom is inevitably quintessential to all aspects of human development. That's probably why Iorapuu further quotes AmartyaSen's 2000 publication, Development as Freedom which perhaps draws the conclusion that "freedom is not only the primary end of development; it is also its principal means" (4). However, what rather prevails in Africa today is the Western notion or ideology of development (Mda, 1993; Nasidi, 2004).

For most governments in Africa, development means economic growth and technological advancement. The stress is on increased economic productivity, and the Gross National Product [GNP] is the most widely accepted measure of the standard of living. (Mda, 1993: 39)

The reason for this is not far-fetched; development is largely viewed from the perspective of the provision of infrastructure by the government. "Tangential to this bourgeoise [sic] concept of development is the growth and abundance of industries" which amounts to mere statistical evaluation that impacts rather insignificantly on the lives of the common man (Gbilekaa, 1990: 28). For Mda, this is not a proper indicator of development, since it does not even take into account the equitable distribution of economic growth; as peasants may end up increasing productivity and raising the GNP and the per capita income while they remain impoverished at the expense of the wealthier elites.

Interestingly, one still finds optimism in Kershaw's (1992: 20) statement that "dominant ideologies of Western societies … are frequently [being] challenged by [emerging] alternatives". Development, says Schumacher (1974) therefore, "does not start with [material] goods; it starts with people and their education, organisation and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped potential" (140). This thus necessitates the forging of a new concept of development; one that is people oriented; one that is freedom driven; that:

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. (Gbilekaa, 1990: 28)

This new concept of development, therefore, is one that engenders participation. This again is perhaps why Iorapuu, subscribes to [Hullen, M.H.M 1990: 21] the statement that emanated from The African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation which held in Arusha in February 1990, that:

It is manifestly unacceptable that development and transformation in Africa can proceed without the full participation of its people. It is manifestly unacceptable that the people and their organisations be excluded from the decision-making process. It is manifestly unacceptable that popular participation be

seen as anything less than the centrepiece on the struggle to achieve economic and social justice for all. (4)

 The charter in clear terms rejected all development theories that negate and dispense with people's participation. Little wonder why Abah (1990: 16) unequivocally asserts "that many development projects in developing nations have failed precisely because of the alienation of the beneficiaries of those projects"; who obviously having a mind of their own, are grossly denied the right of participating in deciding on issues that affect them. It is based on this new concept, therefore, that Alternative Theatre movement has found a productive anchor in development and participation.

The perception of development which Alternative Theatre upholds, therefore, is a broad spectrum development:

A comprehensive approach of a process of change that is primarily concerned with people's freedom, their social, economic, environmental and political relationships. This implies that 'development' is a planned activity aimed at directing the process of change primarily from the perspective of people … and the people who are involved are those whose lives will be changed and those who will be enabled by change in knowledge, skills and attitudes to improve the quality of their situation. (Iorapuu, 2008: 4 – 5)

This perception of development inevitably finds anchor at the level of the process of the 'planned activity' which is aimed at liberating the people. This process is emphasised in "participatory communication", utilizing the people's indigenous artistic expressions/traditional entertainment forms, their language, proverbs, songs and dances, puppetry, local norms and cultures, in what JideMolomo defines as a series of activities that involve a process of dialogue and interaction in which communities and other stakeholders increase their understanding of each other's knowledge and priorities, and work to identify mutually acceptable approaches and solutions to identified problems (2004: 27). The implication is that the people for whom development is meant must be able to be fully integrated into the process in willing participation. They must be able to exercise what Iorapuu called "freedom of control" over the process; which means that the process must not be foisted on them.

Alternative Theatre in its true context, therefore, presents a development model that emphasises a shift from an "exogenous or 'top-down' approach" which had characterised hitherto development plans, towards an "endogenous or 'bottom-up' approach" (Chinyowa, 2005) which recognises the 'creative' potentials of the people, their worldview, cultural background, and experiences, and the necessity to engage them in active participation to chart the course of their collective destiny.

In other words, it is a clarion call to jettison the orthodox pyramidal development structure that places the people at the bottom and denies them [feedback] the opportunity to participate in their own development; making them mere recipients of ideas created by others, which often mystifies their realities and renders them passive, dependent and uncritical. This situation only reinforces what Freire (1978) in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, called a "culture of silence" and which he vehemently attacked with his education theory of "conscientisation", which Gbilekaa says "enrols men in the search for self-affirmation" as it awakens their critical consciousness. (29)

This may have also informed Augusto Boal's ardent experimentations in using theatre as an extraordinary tool for transforming the "monologue" or dominance of such top-down development approach into a "dialogue" of democratic interchange between benefactors and beneficiaries. This is because "dialogue", according to Okwori (2000: 97) "leads to questions, to clarifications, to understanding, and to collective decisions". Boal's explorations, therefore, were based on the assumption that dialogue is the common, healthy dynamic between all humans; that all human beings desire and are capable of dialogue, and that when that dialogue becomes a monologue, oppression is only what ensues (Douglas and Mark, Interview with Augusto Boal).

Boal's approach emphasises and is interpretative of a dramatic experience where the audience are no more mere onlookers or spectators, but are part and parcel of the creative process – "spect-actors", rather than mere recipients of finished products. They are "active spectators", says Adrian Jackson (1992), and "the protagonist[s] of the theatrical action (Boal, 1993: 224). This is also, perhaps, a fall-out from Boal's conviction that the "spectator" is only turned to less than a man, voiceless and passive

and urgently needed to be humanised, to restore to him his capacity for action in all its ramifications (Boal, 2000: 155). For this reason, the people, he infers, no longer neededto delegate power to any character either to act or to think in their place; rather, they themselves have to assume the protagonic role, change the dramatic action, try out solutions, and discuss plans for change – in fact, they have to assume full responsibility for their liberation and development; since they and only they alone can wield the empowering weapon of the theatre (122).

In the light of the foregoing, it will be pertinent to throw more light on this discourse by expounding on the inherent machinery of democratisation in Alternative Theatre.

Process/Methodology in Alternative Theatre

As has been reiterated, the most significant point to note in any true context of Alternative Theatre effort is the level of involvement of members of the community/target audience in this process that is meant to empower and liberate them. In discussing methodology and process, therefore, it is important to note that there are no laid down or rigid blueprints of operation. Methodology and process have largely been determined by the approaches to development adopted by the individual practitioner (Daniel and Bappa, 2004). However, certain methods have become dominant from practice, since theatre's re-orientation from being taken to the people to engage the people themselves for their own interest, and have continued to be redefined towards realising the full objectives of Alternative Theatre and make it yet a continuous and alterable process.

Preliminary Stage

As the name implies, this is the preliminary or introductory stage in the process which involves resource persons, catalysts or animateurs getting in contact with leaders of target community to state identity and mission of group, as well as goals of the project and to obtain permission to proceed. In contemporary practice, the necessity to raise a representative group of the community at large to work in conjunction with the resource group also arises at this inception. This is important to ensure participatory representation and eventual continuity in the process.

Research/Data Collection

Generally, this is a period of information gathering and perhaps the most crucial in any Alternative Theatre process. "Research", noted Daniel and Bappa (2004) is the primary source of data collection which helps to achieve a broad understanding of how problems manifest in the society. According to them,

It also helps to stimulate involvement on the part of the community and ensures the presentation of a balanced view, a level of community consensus, a sense of involvement and participation by all beneficiaries. (20)

It is the time when the problems of the community are 'x-rayed' while resource persons interact with community members in order to identify such areas that needed priority attention. This process may also manifest in different approaches as the case may be.

Data Analysis

This involves analysis of data collected during the process of research. Data analysis is done with the aim of identifying issues of priority for the purpose of developing dramatic scenarios.

Scenario Building/Improvisation

Once data had been analysed, the next stage is to develop the drama outline. This involves defining the main theme and working out a story and characters [casting] based on the community situation.

Rehearsals

This is a process whereby stage presentation and dialogue is worked out through trial and error. Both the audience and the players are encouraged to critique the drama sketches at this period as comments and suggestions proffered often help to improve the performance.

Performance and Post-performance Discussion

The actual performance of the improvised sketches before the audience in the target community comes next, followed by evaluation time; when the drama is critically evaluated in relation to its significance to the life of the community. Community members are encouraged to ask questions and get clarified concerning certain approaches and processes as well as issues raised. This is aimed at opening up possibilities for further action. Through the relationship between the drama and their lives, the consciousness's of the community members are awakened to new realities about their problems; and from the discussions, they are made to realise their potentials and ability to initiate action to improve their situation.

Follow-up/through

This is another crucial stage of the process. It involves going back to the community to assess the steps taken to address identified problems of the community or assess the steps taken to sustain already initiated efforts at addressing the people's problems. This step is necessary in order to forestall the tendency of relapsing into inactivity that usually sets in immediately the initial enthusiasm that greets such exercise fizzles out. Mda (1993: 22) would not have been more emphatic when he sums up categorically that without follow-up action, Alternative Theatre effort only becomes an end in itself.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, the instrumentality and effectiveness of Alternative Theatre in democratising the development process in the continent by stimulating community/people-oriented development through its participatory methodology cannot be over-emphasised. It encourages the people particularly to take part in identifying their problems through participatory research, problem analysis, playmaking and discussion, all in a bid to chat the course of their collective destiny. The basic essence in the methodology and process outlined above, therefore, is conscientisation – the awakening of the consciousness of the disadvantaged in society "to understand societal configurations as well as have faith in themselves as vectors of change" (Gbilekaa 1997: v). In other words, it is an awakening of consciousness aimed at galvanising the people towards "real action" in finding solution to their problems; for change itself – the "real action", as Boal argues, lies with the people, for whom "the theatre [certainly] is a weapon, and it is the people [themselves] who should wield it" (122). This is to say, therefore, that this theatre is an empowering process; the people's liberation and development is only consequent upon the people's action based on their awakened consciousness.

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