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# A MODEL DRAMATURGY FOR ARRESTING EXTREMIS IN ZAINABU JALLO'S STYLISTICS IN *ONIONS MAKE US CRY*

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## **Abstract**

The paper examines the play, *Onions Make Us Cry* by Nigerian playwright, Zainabu Jallo, in search of a dramaturgy that provides a suitable stylistic model for playwriting that is reflective of the Covid-19 pandemic. Globally, the pandemic was a totally new experience for most societies. The onset of the outbreak signaled an apocalypse. Soon, it altered potentially forever the way human society conducts itself, especially in terms of inter-personal interaction. The present study focuses primarily on aspects of the stylistic representation of the situation of the protagonist in Jallo's play, Melinda Jindayi, looking at how the vehicle of language transmits her situation. This exploration aimed to uncover how Jallo's style can be utilized in dramatic rendering of characters in the Covid-19 period. The study finds that Jallo's stylistic psycho-graphic dramaturgy in *Onions Make Us Cry* richly arrests the frame of mind of individuals in a situation of extremis. Such a situation is characterized by angst, tension, and loss. Jallo's rendering of it presents an alternative approach to playwriting that can be gleaned into in composing drama capable of projecting the new-normal that is Covid-19. Through a content analysis of the play, the paper concludes that Jallo's play uses a stylistic approach that can be adapted to arrest the experience, especially in its stylization of isolation and loneliness.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Stylistics, Extremis, Apocalypse, Playwriting.

## **Introduction**

In a recent interview with Ainehi Edoro entitled "Giving the World a New Kind of Literature" which appeared in *Brittle Paper*, award-winning Nigerian novelist Ben Okri states that one of the truest tests of a literary classic is its ability to renew its relevance after the death of its author through the performance of what Okri calls "the feat of resurrection." Okri states that: literature begins with the dead. For that is when we can start to see the meanings of their works which may have been concealed from us when they were alive. Their body of work derives new authority from death. Then a literature begins to cohere. The books read us. They move from their fixed sphere of time and come alive in a new way in ours. They are no longer what we thought they were. Then the works really begin to speak. It is only now,

with many of the pioneers moving on to a higher sphere, that the literature moves to a higher sphere too. They take us up with them.

In complete agreement with Okri, this paper extends his position to a text's ability to reinvent its pertinence away from the life or initial motives of its author. In other words, regardless of whether an author is alive or dead, a great literary text can suddenly acquire a fresh implication in a context detached from the one its first readers, and probably the author, had confined it. This applies to Zainabu Jallo's play, *Onions Make Us Cry*, which immediately came to mind when reflecting upon how best to dramatize the age of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been a prolonged moment of extremis for the whole world. Its outbreak sparked a global apocalyptic angst, and then neurosis ensued and continues to last. A *new normal* was created. To render this kind of reality in drama, an unconventional stylistic mode is required. The stylistics of drama continues to remain relatively unexplored, as asserted in the following assessment by Culpeper, Short and Verdonk:

If we compare them with poems and fictional prose, play-texts have in general received relatively little attention from both ... literary critics and stylisticians. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that spoken conversation has for many centuries been commonly seen as debased and unstable form of language, and thus plays, with all their affinities with speech, were liable to be undervalued. (3)

There is an assumption in certain quarters that dramatic texts cannot effectively be appreciated except when performed on stage, as J. L. Styan argues in a famous proclamation: "The fullness of music is only heard in performance, so it is with drama;" and Stanley Wells states that "the reading of plays is a necessarily incomplete experience" (Culpeper, Short and Verdonk 6). While these assertions may have some truth, the stylistics of a dramatic text can be understood in terms of its overall aura and atmosphere, the general attitude towards life that it manifests. This can be appreciated regardless of whether the drama is studied as a text or performance, and whether it is prototypical or not in its discourse structure (McIntyre 2-6). McIntyre also discusses a play's point of view on the plane of psychology, which refers to "the choices an author makes with regard to the various ways in which a story might be narrated" (41).

The Covid-19 outbreak which has affected all continents in the world, including Antarctica (Power and Dewar), has created what has been described as a 'new normal' by the World Health Organization, where virtually all aspects of human activities have been re-imagined and appropriate responses and measures introduced and implemented at global, regional, national, domestic and individual levels. While the scale of the pandemic differs

between countries (and in the case of Nigeria, between states), the disease rapidly propagates in the vast majority of situations, affecting an increasing number of people, mutating in its variations, and creating anxieties that are arguably unprecedented. As various fields adjust to the new realities of a Covid-19 world, and hopefully prepare for a post-Covid world, the fields of playwriting and drama criticism need to up their ante as well, so to say, by conducting a search for a stylistic approach that can succinctly and effectively arrest the Covid world.

There is need to look at our existing array of dramatic styles to consider which approach to playwriting can best represent the traumatic experiences of societies (and individuals) affected by the pandemic. This paper attempts such a task, critically examining Zainabu Jallo's play, *Onions Make Us Cry*, uncovering within it a stylistic approach that seems capable of lending us a creative model to adopt. Egwuda-Ugbeda and Ezeah state that in the play, "The playwright captures a fresh style which is hardly employed by most playwrights of this generation" (71). According to Egwuda-Ugbeda and Ezeah, their study has "established that as a psychograph and psychogram dramatist, Zainabu Jallo graphically and descriptively exposes the problems prevalent in not just contemporary Nigeria but the global community: Domestic Violence, Terrorism, Religious Crisis and other frustrating individual experiences" (70). It is important that we examine this stylistic approach in the light of the Covid-19 *new normal*, so that we may be able to draw conclusions as to the applicability of Jallo's style to the *frustrating experience* that Covid-19 no doubt is. The paper will firstly, examine the stylistic approach of Zainabu Jallo's *Onions Make Us Cry*; 2 secondly, explore the representational potentials of Zainabu Jallo's *Onions Make Us Cry* as an approach for representing extremis, and thirdly, discuss the implications of Jallo's dramaturgy for praxis and playwriting in the Covid-19 new normal.

### **About Zainabu Jallo and *Onions Make Us Cry***

Zainabu Jallo is a Nigerian-born scholar, playwright, and photographer. Jallo lives between Switzerland and Brazil. Her academic and creative works have been supported by fellowships at the Sundance Theatre Institute, Institute for World Literature, Harvard University, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, Residenz Theatre Munich, Chateau Lavigny, and House of Writers in Switzerland. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, England, and UNESCO Coalition of Artists for the General History of Africa. She is author of award-winning plays *Saraya Dangana* (2008), *Onions Make Us Cry* (2011), *Holy Night* (2012), and *My Sultan is a Rockstar* (2015). Her other plays include *The Revolutionary Carrot* (2014), and *White Elephants* (2018). She is currently a Doctoral researcher at the Graduate School of Humanities,

University of Bern and the Department of Anthropology, University of São Paulo. Her scholarly interests include diaspora studies, iconic criticism, and Material Culture. Jallo was a winner of the 2018 Camargo Foundation's Cultural Diaspora residency alongside seven other black writers from Africa and the United States, among them Femi Osofisan.

As a participant in Contact Theatre's 'Contacting the World Project' held in Manchester in 2004, Jallo began to share her work with other writers from around the world. From 2007, she has been participating in the New Writing in Drama Project by the British Council and the Royal Court Theatre London where she developed *Saraya Dangana*. Similarly, *Onions Make Us Cry* was first created at The Royal Court Theatre London in August 2008, where she was a part of a residency for international playwrights. In 2009, she was offered a literary fellowship at the Global Arts Village, New Delhi where *Onions Make Us Cry* was first presented. Jallo facilitated master classes at the Port Harcourt Garden Literary Festival in December 2010 alongside Wole Soyinka and Helon Habila. She was also a nominee of the 2010 Future Awards for the Creative Artist of the Year. She continues to write abstract essays which she debuted with as a writer. *Onions Make Us Cry* has been described as "an absolutely fascinating unusual play" in which "the playwright dares to create a fresh style with poetic dialogues and a brilliant use of metaphors!" by Maestro's Media. For the play, Jallo was nominated for the 2010 edition of the Nigeria Prize for Literature sponsored by the NLNG. *Onions Make Us Cry* has been described as a play in which Jallo "uses her telescope to delve into the internal system of the society which projects whatever that is buried within the ambience of the society" (Egwuda-Ugbeda and Ezeah 75). The play was performed at the LARK, a festival of plays in New York in March 2011 and at various locations across Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States, according to Maestro's Media.

### **Style in Drama: A Review**

Short argues that dramatic texts are worthy of being studied seriously on their own. He points out that while performance is crucial and "as deserving of study as dramatic text" (7), the two are linked. Short first of all gives arguments in support of the self-sufficiency of reading play-texts, then points out that play texts give inferences that are inalienable to a good directorial or acting realization of a play as performance. Drawing instances from the TV series "Fawlty Towers", Short introduces useful frameworks by which useful inferences can be tapped from a play's dialogue (10). There is, he notes, what is usually called "the meaning between the lines", as well as stage directions which he describes as "how the play should be staged and performed" to guide both director and actor (9). Short's work gives a

compelling argument in favour of the stylistics of dramatic texts. His conclusions on how performance relies on text are crucial, stating:

I would want to claim (a) that what I have outlined in terms of performance is extremely likely, given the evidence, (b) that an alternative way of acting ... should be in principle supportable in a similar way, and (c) that much more about performance is specified by the text than many drama critics would have us believe. (Short 12)

The linguistic significance of the text, hence, as Short details, includes the fact that it gives background information through schema-oriented language, implicative/inference, politeness, turn-taking conventions, speech acts, socio-linguistic conventions, grammatical structure and lexical patterning (13). Herman explores how conversational analysis as propounded by ethno methodologists can be employed in the analysis of dramatic texts. Specifically, she takes a look at a conversational concept - "the turn" - which basically relates to how time is apportioned between speakers in discourse (19). When one speaks, one takes a turn at speech, and as the speech alternates, turns inadvertently alternate as well. According to Herman, dramatic dialogue is a multi-input form, and raises the problem of how to distribute and manage turns (20-23). She first takes a brief review of conversation analysis, then interrogates the implications of turn-taking to the appreciation of situation and character in dramatic texts. Taking a sample from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Herman examines how choice of speaker, length of speech, pauses and interruptions determine the way readers interpret a character's speech. Another important dialogic feature is silence, of which Herman claims that:

Gaps can stretch from initial non-responsiveness followed by a response to full-scale silence. In the former case, when initial silence occurs between turns, gaps may constitute switching pauses when it is unclear as to whether the silence should be attributed to the first or second speaker or both. An initial stretch of silence in response to another's speech can also be interpreted as caution, the speaker following the 'think before you speak' maxim. If nobody were selected or a potential next speaker does not self-select, the gap that follows can bring about closure. (21)

One other important dramatic-dialogic convention is the deployment and handing of odd talk, which Simpson elaborates in an essay of the title, with a curious sub-title: "Studying Discourses of Incongruity" (34). The significance of the essay to us partly rests upon the drive behind its curious sub-title, since Simpson's work explores the aberrant language that characterizes the Theatre of the Absurd. This is not far-fetched from our concern with the language of



extremis, which is significantly marked by deviation from the normal. "Odd talk" is one clear aspect of absurdity, says Simpson (35). Through excessive politeness, for instance, Simpson (42-3) demonstrates how the detective in Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* is able to soften up Monsieur Choubert, following this up with a sudden and savage cross-examination. The deviation which characterizes language in absurdist drama is also explored by Simpson, with example from the Monty Python's Flying Circus series. In respect to this, Culpeper et al note of a particular episode: absurdism is often linked with humour, and Simpson goes on to explore a small extract in the Monty Python's Flying Circus series where two men meet for the first time in a bar. Instead of the platonic talk which normally characterizes such first meetings, we observe one of the characters asking a series of highly personal questions of the other, generating considerable humour and the effect of absurdity at the same time (34).

According to Simpson, like other approaches to conducting stylistic analysis, exploring odd talk, "offers a valuable analytic and critical method for explaining text(s)" (35). He adds that "It has become an axiom in discourse stylistics that the study of non-routine patterns ... can inform the routine and unexceptional in interaction. A study of 'miscommunication' thus offers a vantage point for observing what is communicatively commonplace (35). Important to the study of dialogue in drama is the context of discourse, which according to Simpson covers three aspects: physical context, which relates to the actual environment of interaction; personal context, which relates to "the social and personal relationships of the interactants to one another", and cognitive context, which refers to "the shared and background knowledge held by participants in interaction" (37). Hence, odd talk is a "context-sensitive phenomenon and context becomes the first primary consideration in drawing up a model of talk" (Simpson 39). With specific regard to odd talk in drama, Simpson states:

It is a truism to say that drama dialogue differs from everyday speech. Drama dialogue clearly is fabricated interaction between fictional characters, mediated and controlled by playwrights in the first instance, and, in the case of dramatic performances, by directors and actors in the second ... So while everyday speech and drama discourse are not homologous modes of communication, they are none the less parallel, and expectations about well-formedness in everyday speech form the benchmark against which aberrant and incongruous discourse can be measured. (42)

Bennison explores how play-text readers are able to form judgments on personalities of characters through the medium of the words chosen by

playwrights. The essay demonstrates that it is possible to understand the process by utilizing discourse analytic and pragmatic frameworks. Through an investigation of the formation of the character of Anderson in Tom Stoppard's play *Professional Foul*, with focus on four major traits, Bennison first of all undertakes a discourse analysis (examining turn-taking, turn allocation, turn-length, topic control and topic-shift), then a pragmatic analysis (with focus on Grice's cooperative principles and politeness). Bennison reveals that changes in a character's conversational behaviour serve as guide to appreciating change in character trait. He argues that, in order to sufficiently capture the richness of a play character's personality, a plural approach to linguistic analysis that adopts variant framework is necessary. Central to Bennison's article, therefore, is the assumption that theatre-goers or play-text readers inevitably partake (more than anything else) in forming judgments relating to the characters in the dramatic story. After all, as Downes states, "A real person is a theoretical entity for his interpreters, to which they assign those intentions that make sense of what he does. A character in drama is an analogy of a person and is interpreted in the same way" (Quoted in Bennison 68).

Bennison's work aptly manifests the underlying significance of discourse analysis and pragmatics to the field of linguistic stylistics. This hence, supports the argument of Culpepper, Short and Verdonk that "to explain the dynamics of plays properly, we need much help from areas of linguistics - notably pragmatics and discourse analysis - which do not play a leading role in the analysis of poetry or prose" (3). Another important essay on the stylistics of drama is Culpepper, entitled "(Im)politeness in Dramatic Dialogue." The article is composed against the backdrop of the relevance of social cohesion to successful communication in discourse. Speakers try to remain polite to one another in order to sustain cohesion. Culpepper examines what roles impoliteness plays in the dialogue of the dramatic mode. Impoliteness enables plot to develop because it breaks down the harmony of the story-world and consequently enables action and reaction which create conflict. Culpepper's focus is on the film "Scent of a Women", in which he analyses three extracts from the dialogues of the characters Charlie and Colonel. The radical point of departure between Culpepper's essay and popular works in the area is that others have focused chiefly on politeness, while he argues that impoliteness is more crucial to drama than politeness, because it is impoliteness that initiates or heightens conflict (85-6). According to Culpepper:

In drama, impoliteness is not thrown in haphazardly for audience entertainment: it serves other purposes. Conflict in interaction appears either as a symptom, or as a cause of social disharmony, and where there are tensions between characters we are more likely to see development in character and plot. (86-7)

In "Three Models of Power in David Mamet's *Oleanna*" Jean Jacques Weber explores the social context (issues of power) and the cognitive context (the schemata) as well as how the two interact in drama. According to him, readers' appreciation of the cognitive words of characters as well as their dialogue relies on their own world-view and assumptions (123). The exploration of power relations between two characters in "*Oleanna*", a university professor and his female student, is apt, since the relationship typifies variation in stature between interactants, the power dynamics in which most readers would be familiar with. Weber's argument is that although the text attempts to tie the reader down to one specific conception of power, it remains possible for readers to free themselves from this assumption by interrogating it. Weber's emphasis on the significance of schemata to interpretation, pulls the essay into the realm of literary as opposed to linguistic stylistics.

Velerie Lowe's "Unhappy' Confessions in the *Crucible*" is hinged upon the revolutionary works of J.L Austin and John Searle, which transformed the view that language merely expresses into the realm of linguistic action. Lowe applies Austin's and Searls's speech act theories to the character Tituba's confession of witchcraft in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Through incongruity between locutionary and illocutionary forces, Lowe shows that Tituba's confession is invalid since she herself does not believe herself to be a witch. First, because she is a slave, Tituba has no liberty to deny; second, she utilizes the confession to avoid being executed. It is important that Tituba's confession is interpreted differently by other characters on the one hand, and the audience on the other. According to Lowe: one of the advantages that fictional dialogue has over natural conversation ... is that we often have access to information that is denied to us in real-life situations, for example, an awareness of the truth or falsity of characters' utterances often allows us to judge their integrity with greater accuracy than that of our real life co-conversationalists (128).

Sikorska (1994) explores the nature of communication in drama, stating that "communication in drama is primarily concerned with characters expressing themselves by means of language" (196). Her essay, entitled "The Language of Entropy: A Pragma-dramatic Analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*" explores the nature of Absurdist dramatic language. Centring her work on the assumptions that entropy is an inalienable concept in literary communication and the relationship between literary language and the real world, she argues that linguistic deviations are pertinent to the creation of the theatre of the absurd, hence her programmatic approach, given that deviation is at the core of pragmatics and style (206). Richardson reviews various methodological issues in the study of dialogue in film and television drama

(population drama). After exploring two preceding studies on dramatic dialogue style, one by McIntyre and another by Koloff, Richardson concludes by defending logocentric analyses. Richardson also recognizes the challenge posed by dialogue in popular drama, since screen plays are work-in-progress and transcriptions would almost give rise to completely separate works. Because popular drama productions are not made of works alone,... to take them seriously is to be willing to go beyond linguistic analysis" (382). The approach is useful for the present study, since *Onions Make Us Cry* is a play-text, and the problem of "poverty of data" (383) for stylistic analysis is arguably solved.

### **Stylistics of Extremis in *Onions Make Us Cry***

Elam has argued that in drama, characters are more than anything else "participants in speech events" (83). This highlights the supreme place of utterances in appreciating character. According to Egwuda-Ugbeda and Ezeah, in *Onions Make Us Cry* "The feelings, the psychological demeanour, the traumatic experience, the loss of ego, and the "destruction of womaness" in the three characters; Malinda Jandayi, Lola Gambari and Ellen are psychographically and psychogramatically enunciated and adequately dealt with" (75). One of the most stylistically successful aspects of *Onions Make Us Cry* in revealing the psyche of the protagonist, Malinda Jandayi, is the way the playwright allocates turn to her. Malinda always *dominates* conversation, and her turn-length is an important indication of her state of mind as well as her place in the drama - "the more important figures are seen (or heard) to speak throughout the drama" (Elam 83). But her length of speech also indicates aloneness: she speaks *alone*. In addition, her word-choices, as well as the near-absurd subjects she dwells upon in conversation are nearly all the time enhance our appreciation of her state of mind as an acutely depressed female. These techniques used by Jallo help the audience appreciate the state of a mind no longer *societal*, a mind basically in isolation. This approach helps to realise the dramatic element where "relationships between people are constructed and negotiated through what they say" (Thornborrow and Wareing 97).

The very opening of Situation One of the play is an important indicator of the state of mind of Malinda. In a monologue that lays out the setting of the play and helps us become familiar to the heroine, we see who Mrs Jandayi is, and at once, we begin to recognise that her language is not one of a normal woman. She states:

Ward six  
The first room of ward six  
Here I am for a fix.  
(Looks about the room)

Quite impressive. The room  
 Reeking with doom.  
 Or it could be of a woman's ghost.  
 Or of ghosts of women?  
 My host.  
 A patient in ward six  
 The first ward of ward six  
 Today she is a ghost  
 And a host.  
 Here now is Malinda Jandayi  
 Wife of Daniel Jandayi  
 DJ  
 Chairman of PPJ  
 People's Party for Justice.  
 Whose justice?  
 What people  
 Not anymore  
 He isn't anything anymore  
 Doesn't occupy any material space  
 No space  
 In this space... is me, Malinda.  
 I chose to speak  
 My peak of indignation  
 For everything  
 (*Looking about desperately*)  
 Where is my ghost? Where is everybody?  
 My ghosts!  
 Psychotic psychiatrists. (Jallo 2-3)

In the very first line of this soliloquy, as if in answer to a question, Malinda reveals her location, therefore establishing the play's setting: "Ward six". As if in realisation that the line is not specific enough, she adds in the following line "The first room of room six." The reader is at once informed that they are dealing with an abnormal person, in this case, the victim of acute depression about to stand trial for the murder of her husband. After establishing her position, Malinda goes on to state her situation: "Here I am in a fix", she declares. Immediately after, she describes her condition nevertheless as "Quite impressive". We find ourselves at a loss almost instantly, for there appears to be, in a normal situation, nothing impressive about being in a fix. After all, she herself soon enough tells us that the room she is in reeks with doom. The room in fact, is soon again historicised, for the reek might not be

hers alone, but of the innumerable depressed women who had been driven to lunacy, and who had over the years been interned in the same room. This recalls at once the reek of old slave stations at the shores of the great Atlantic, where slaves were held until transportation was ready for their distribution to diverse camps and then plantations etc across the Western world. Carefully, and seemingly senselessly, the protagonist reveals her expressionist manifesto: she is out on a tell-tale to lament the agonies of womanhood.

Later in the same soliloquy, we hear that Malinda's husband, Daniel Jandayi, was a politician. His death is not directly told to us, yet, linguistic evidence exists that signals to the fact that he is no more. Malinda says that "Not anymore / he isn't anything anymore / Doesn't occupy any material space / No space / In this space ... is me Malinda" (3). Here, Jallo deliberately makes Malinda speak in stutters, not directly revealing her message, but as typical in a mind weakened by years of abuse (although paradoxically hardened thereby also), Malinda can only hint at the fact that she is her late husband's killer. Hence the fact that "space" belongs to her now: she has conquered, yet too wearied to celebrate. The recurrence of diverse negative words in the monologue can be an indication of depression, as earlier argued in the preceding chapter. These include: fix, reeking, doom, ghost, patient, anymore, indignation, desperately, psychotic, poky, etc. Addressing her nurse and soon to become friend, Lola, Malinda states later in the play:

Go ahead, pick up your note pad and write.

*(Demonstrating)*

Case number one, Mrs Malinda Jandayi

Age: 36

Room one of Ward six.

And might I add, in the critical cases ward.

Today being the sixteenth day of her mute mode

Speech is uttered that might crack into the Jandayi code.

She talks of a certain black cat

On some mat ..... [sic] squashed by a fat

man... so flat. I strongly suspect some form of unconscious conflict with these incoherent and disjointed talk.

It just could be the worst form of

depression, but that, I will have to

confirm through... *(To Lola)* what did you

call it again, a chit chat? Chic chat or a

cheap chat? (Jallo 6-7)

Malinda uses a meta-dramatic language here, mimicking medicalese and as well, dramatizing her state of mind. She shows us important information about her state through exploring medical records and conducting a kind of self-diagnosis. Rather than allocate these revelations to Lola the psychiatric nurse, Jallo leaves them to Malinda herself to assert, given that her depression is the result of years of abuse which have schooled her immensely. Malinda understands her condition, as the doctors would diagnose it to be, but here sarcastically tells us that their diagnosis would merely be abstract, removed from the hard realities that formed her condition. She allocates to her case a “number one” position, hinting that it is a most severe condition, intensifying the fact that she is in room one of ward one, “the critical cases ward”. She refers to her state of silence as something called “the Jandayi code”, suggesting that it is severe beyond existing medical knowledge, hence the ascription of a new term to it. The allusion to a mysterious “black cat” signifies terror, for the evil associated with blackness is a universal tenor. The character herself describes her talk as “incoherent and disjointed”, which could indicate “the worst form of depression” (7). In all, Jallo uses language to indicate the state of mind of a victim of violence whose wit has been sharpened by her condition and experience. Again, the recurrence of diverse negative words in the monologue can be an indication of depression, as earlier seen. These abound: case, critical cases, mute mode, crack, black cat, squashed, flat, suspect, unconscious conflict, incoherent, disjointed, worst, depression, etc.

The treachery of men takes centre stage in another monologue by Malinda in Situation Two of the play text. She states, again addressing Lola:

Ellen is the name of the lady who stays in  
 The next room, right? (*Lola nods*) well she  
 Keeps yelling into my sleep at someone  
 Called Joe, who lured her into believing  
 They both will take on the role of man  
 And wife. On her finger, he put a  
 Diamond ring, in her head, crystal hopes.  
 He is married to another. How do you  
 Expect me to be alright, stuck in a  
 Situation I do not want to be in. she talks [sic]  
 Like Joe is sitting there with her, when she  
 Begins to scream, I guess its  
 Zipporah ... you know, the other lady Joe  
 Ran off with – she sees. (Jallo 17)

The monologue is informative in its content, but the kind of linguistic choices made by Malinda enforces this. The fact that the lady next-door, Ellen,

was “lured” by a certain Joe, “into believing they both will take on the roles of man / and wife” explains why she cries out all the time in anguish. She, like Malinda, is a victim of male vice, in this case of deception. She is depressed because she was used and dumped. The structural delivery of the fact of the *case* is important. First we are told that Ellen yells. Then we are told she was deceived. Then we are taken to the specificities of the deception: she was in fact engaged. “On her finger, he put a / diamond ring, in her head, crystal hopes”. Then came the bombshell: “He is married to another” (17). That the name of the other woman is also mentioned is also important: Is Zipporah safe from Joe’s deceptions too? There are again negative words, based on context, in the monologue: yelling, lured, stuck, scream, ran off, etc. The most forceful stream of consciousness is delivered by Malinda in Situation Four of the play. Malinda states:

... In my  
madness... (*Her voice becomes distant*)  
In my madness, I’m saner than ever  
In grand fear and high fever,  
Lived in a lovely white house. Turned out to  
be Hades.  
One after the other, I raised my babies  
With a broken tooth, bruised limbs, cracked  
ribs, countless black eyes... shifted jaw  
All these, against the law.  
Smiled at them, “Daddy loves you” I’ll quiver  
I had died many times but I carried on, a diva  
Nobody, no one knew Malinda  
I cannot boast of knowing her either  
Not even DJ, whose eyes, bloodshot will  
ask... beg for a scream, for a tear  
Oh no, not for you anymore, not a tear, my dear.  
....  
Into pulp, I turned scores of times...  
Malinda? Always the diva.  
Beware what you envy, I think to the  
obsequious eyes .... (Jallo 27-30)

Here, Jallo presents Malinda in self-exploration. In this stream of consciousness, probably, the most significant linguistic feature of the text is how Malinda is able to use the informal code to get into Lola’s psyche. Early on, she shocks us with the paradoxical declaration that “In my madness, I’m saner than ever” (28). There are diverse phrases that enforce the deranged state



of mind of the protagonist: madness is repeated twice in the monologue. Other phrases include: fear, high fever, Hades, broken tooth, bruised limbs, cracked ribs, countless black eyes, shifted jaw, quiver, bloodshot, scream, tear, pulp, guilt ridden gestures, loathe, desperately, dainty face, tons of pain, hate, disappointingly vulnerable, kill a lover, etc. The force of irony and sarcasm also permeate the utterances, and the brilliance of Malinda reveals itself once more in the monologue. That Malinda is allowed so long a turn in the discourse is evident of the significance of her revelations to the play's core. In all, everything Malinda utters signals an angry woman that is, as she herself says, at a place where she does not want to be.

### **Summary of Findings**

The reading of Jallo's *Onions Make Us Cry* makes manifest various stylistic tools that can be utilized in dramatizing a moment of all-engulfing extremis, such as the age of the Covid-19, the pandemic that gripped the world in early 2020. Some of these are enunciated below.

1. **Dramatizing Loneliness and Isolation:** One of the most dreaded phenomena in human existence is being alone. Loneliness may have its merits, such as its promotion of meditation and reflection, sobriety and the exploration of intuition. But overall, it is rarely craved, not for long at least, and when we find ourselves in it, we become, to use the Nigerian parlance, 'something else.' One of the main lessons for the Covid-19 age in *Onions Make Us Cry* is its rich representation of the situation of loneliness. When alone, the human is in company of their demons, or with their buried angst and anguishes, the deepest trepidations that they seek to overcome. Zainabu Jallo presents for us a recipe for dramatically representing this situation. Isolation in Covid-19 means having to stay in hotels or other isolation centres while waiting to be allowed into a country, or being quarantined. In situations like this, reality trickles in through the news, through the walls, as Jallo creates (17). The psychiatric ward where Malinda and Ellen are housed is akin to the Covid isolation centres. The patients never meet, yet Malinda is able to discern Ellen's story – how Joe betrayed her – through the walls.

2. **The Consequence of Women in Domesticity - With Men:** The idea of women being the fortress of the home front is probably universal. But the image that comes to mind of a woman minding the home brings with it the image of an absent or barely-present man. We think that is normal, even if sometimes unfair, until a pandemic strikes and men are tied to the home front in domesticity: conflict erupts. Studies have shown that during the lockdown period, domestic violence peaked across Nigeria. We see from *Onions Make Us Cry* a model way to render the increased rate of domestic violence widely documented during the Covid-19 lockdown period, as captured in Thomas et

al's *The Gendered Contagion: Perspectives on Domestic Violence during Covid-19*. The refusal of Jallo to allocate voice to men in the play is one such style: because they are already guilty, or speak even when silent, the play totally leaves out the men's point of view in the dramatic voice.

3. **Newness of Society after Lockdown:** In the period following the lockdown, having become accustomed to loneliness or extremely limited socializing, humans begin to relearn how to socialize. This newness, even strangeness, that comes in the workplace and school presents a unique experience not witnessed for a long time globally, and possibly never before in some societies. The sense of shock in re-meeting is represented in Jallo's dramaturgy, as we see Lola and Melinda 'meet' for the first time in Situation One of the play.

4. **Representation of Art Therapy as a Coping Mechanism:** Throughout Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, a lot of the world had no choice but to resort to art as a source of therapy, as a mechanism for receiving mental health and psycho-social support. This process of course occurred both consciously and unconsciously. For example, Netflix viewership spiked during the lockdown. Jallo presents a sense of this in *Onions Make Us Cry*, with Melinda's persistent request to Lola to get her good music of a global nature to help her attain wellness.

5. **Turn Management:** In typical drama, utterances are of four kinds: dialogue, monologue, aside, and soliloquy. Interior monologue which mainly characterizes prose, is occasionally whisked in. Dialogue is of course by far the most prevalent, and is mainly characterized by turn-taking between two or more characters present in a scene. Turn-taking shows power relations, reflects democracy, and so on. In Jallo's dramaturgy, there's a unique technique that I don't recall seeing in another play: one character taking double turns before another character speaks. The technique seems perfect for a locked down character, characters generally in an incoherent world.

6. **Absence-Presencing:** Covid-19 has deepened an emergent modern phenomenon, one that may be called a state of *absence-presence*, where people are able to be where they are not. By this, we are talking about the rampant use of electronic media platforms for communication, sophisticated aspects of Web 2.0 and indeed, Web 3.0, including meeting applications like Trello, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the like which enable people to be where they are not. One is now able to attend a conference in Dubai, Singapore, New York, Delhi or Johannesburg while doing a big job in their toilet in Abakaliki. A woman can conduct an interview for hopeful job applicants scattered around various parts of the world while she receives a befitting hair styling in a saloon in Gombe. How to transport (teleport) this into drama could be tasking, but Zainabu Jallo comes to the rescue yet again (13). Despite the walls being soundproof in the

hospital, Melinda Jindayi is able to hear what goes on in the next room in her Ward (17). This is telling of the Covid-19 age: a girl in India forgets she is on a zoom meeting and she picks a friend's call, and the participants of the meeting are able to hear intimate details of her conversation with her friend, which manage to leak and go viral. Although in a room, away from everyone physically, she's not alone thanks to walls that literally have ears.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined *Onions Make Us Cry* by Zainabu Jallo. The primary concern of the analysis was to identify the stylistic relevance of Jallo's dramaturgy for the task for creative writing in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic. The study finds that Jallo's play uses a stylistic approach that can be utilized to arrest the experience, especially in its stylization of isolation and loneliness, turn management in dialogue, domestic violence arising from co-gender domesticity, and so on. In light of the findings of the project in the diverse sections of the play text that have been analysed, the study concludes that Jallo's dramaturgy contains broad elements that help in enabling a rich understanding of the theme of psycho-social crisis, personal and communal depression, and given the application of creative techniques to the text, it shows that dramatic texts can indeed be put to use in representing the Covid-19 global extremis using the model. The implication of the findings of the present study is that dramatic texts continue to renew their meanings as social reality of the audience change. Similarly, the praxis of the field of drama and theatre criticism as well as creative writing, asserts its dynamic nature. There can never be just one single interpretation to a dramatic text.

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# A TECHNICAL REPORT ON THE VIRTUAL PRODUCTION OF *MARGINALIZED EARS IN A PANDEMIC ERA*

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## **Abstract**

The Covid-19 (corona virus) pandemic and its attendant lockdown in Nigeria stifled physical productions and unlocked limitless possibilities for virtual productions. Having observed that rural dwellers constitute 49.66 percent of the total Nigerian population as at 2018, according to the National Population Commission (NPC), and having observed that the media focus in Nigeria is mostly urban-driven, some lecturers in the Department of Theatre Arts, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria, embarked on a Theatre for Development (TfD) research to substantiate the mental state of the under informed, who constitute a significant segment of the Nigerian population in the hinterlands. The research aims at demystifying the burgeoning misinformation, rumours, claims and misconceptions about Covid-19 that circulate among these rural dwellers. This paper recounts the Virtual Production Techniques (VPTs) adopted in the production of the TfD documentary as most of the producers were in different states (the trio of Ameh Denis Akoh, Charles Emokpae and Chinda Michael - Abakaliki, Charles Okwuowulu - Enugu, Casmir Onyemuchara - Owerri, and Christopher Akpa - Nsukka) of the South Eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria, at the time of the virtual production. The technical report underpins the virtual techniques adopted in co-creating a video script on corona virus in Igbo dialect of the community dwellers (spread across Abakaliki, Enugu, and Nsukka with the aim of determining the level of (mis)information that has permeated these communities as well as developing strategies for the virtual TfD documentary production. The technical report will not focus on the objectives of the TfD research but on the director's (Charles Okwuowulu's) and editor's (Chinda Michael's) perspectives and contributions towards virtual documentary production in the pandemic era. The researchers used the participant observation and literary methods to conduct the research. It was found that VPTs are more cost effective than the traditional production techniques, if planned and utilised properly. This article concluded that the virtual production technique can be applied not only to movies, but also to documentary films, at no extra cost. It recommended that filmmakers who feel restricted by the pandemic or any such situation should apply the VPT to keep working, as it will basically allow for the adherence to the rules and regulations setup by local authorities, to prevent or curtail the spread of the corona virus.

**Keywords:** VPTs, Pandemic era, Technical report, *Marginalized Ears*, Documentary.

## Introduction

Based on Chernova's *Five Reasons Virtual Events Are Here to Stay*, the word, virtual is linked with simulated video or graphic images. It is often used to describe productions realised in different climes at different or the same time frame. As a production terminology, virtual production buttresses the possibilities offered by modern digital technologies to achieve production in cyberspace (par.1). Thus, it affiliates such Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) as visual effects to achieve production in simulated space. Virtual production, therefore, implies a type of production that thrives on the digital space, deemphasizing physical contact(s) often associated with the traditional/conventional style(s) of production. With the compulsory lockdown, imposed by the 2020 Covid-19 safety measures, filmmakers resulted to Virtual Production Techniques (VPTs) to achieve various productions. Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* (<https://youtu.be/Dy7E2BdunAI>) shot virtually at the heat of the lockdown explicates this claim. Obi Emelonye is one of the multiple awarding-winning directors in Nollywood. While he (Obi Emelonye – the director) was in the United Kingdom, his two major artistes were at different locations in Nigeria at the time of the shoot. According to Obi Emelonye, the shooting was realized through the digital phones of the artistes (Emelonye).

Correspondingly, six lecturers in Theatre Arts Department of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria embarked on a virtual documentary production during the pandemic. The production process took the form of Theatre for Development (TfD) research which aimed at putting to evidence/substantiating the mental state of (under)informed Nigerian population in the local communities. The TfD documentary producers were in different states and thus, the documentary was realized by virtual techniques. Ameh Denis Akoh who was in Abakaliki was the chief researcher, whereas Charles Okwuowulu who was in Enugu was the director of the virtual documentary as well as a coordinator of a TfD programme in Enugu. Casmir Onyemuchara who was in Owerri coordinated a TfD community in Owerri, whereas Charles Emokpae who was in Abakaliki coordinated a TfD community in Abakaliki. Christopher Akpa who was at Nsukka as at that moment coordinated a TfD community at Nsukka and Chinda Michael who was in Abakaliki provided technical support towards the virtual recording of the TfD documentary. From director's and editor's perspectives, the technical report examines the virtual techniques adopted in co-creating a video script on corona virus in Igbo local dialects of the community dwellers (spread across Abakaliki, Enugu, Nsukka and Umuahia), in the south east geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

## **The Concept of Virtual Production Technique (VPT)**

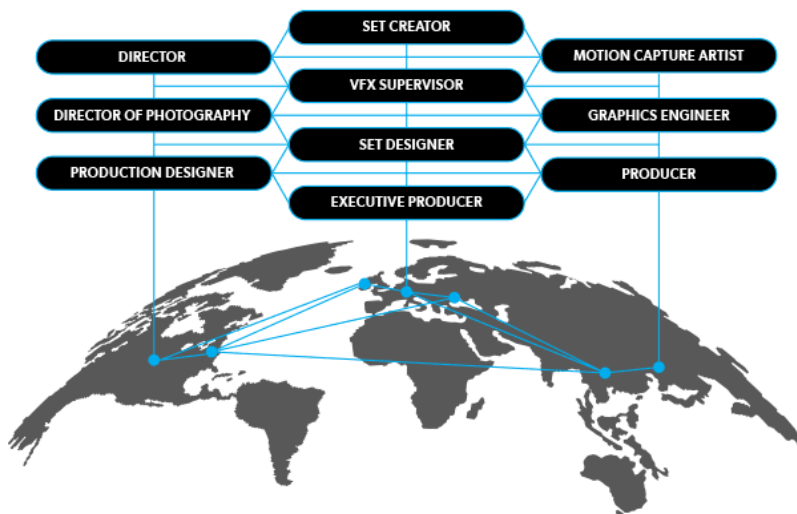
Virtual production is historically traced to the American film industry, also known as Hollywood, with films such as *Lord of the Rings (The Fellowship of the Ring)*, and *Avatar*, where actors were directed on the mocap stage, while the director simultaneously viewed the performances in the Pandora environment (“Virtual Production is Where the Physical and Digital Worlds Meet”). This definition of virtual production foregrounds Mocap stage and Pandora environment: two different spaces that enable production. The mocap stage is simply the motion capture stage, where sensors and trackers are mounted on the actors and/or around the stage that actors play on. While the Pandora environment is the final output or that which is very close to what the final production will look like. In other words, the Pandora environment is the director’s monitor, from which he views the action which is put to reality by the application of tentative graphic or computer-generated elements. Thus, virtual production is that production that is being directed through a screen or a monitor which displays the live actors and their digitally created environment. (“Virtual Production is Where the Physical and Digital Meet”)



*Motion capture stage with motion sensors and trackers  
(<https://mocapmulti.com/about-mocap-militia/>)*

According to Suissa’s “How We Made Film Remotely”, virtual production has also been researched, and observed to have the capacity to efficiently and effectively run from stages of preproduction through production and postproduction with zero contact as evident in the cinema premiered film – *Depart*. Honthaner refers to such production technique as the

Remote Collaboration Technology (463–464). In such production technique, crew members can interact with each other from different parts of the world for effective ensemble of a particular production. He claims that “remote technology has made it possible to create virtual private web networks that allow directors to upload dailies from anywhere in the world, and to work with their editing team, no matter where any of them are located” (Honthaner 464). Hence, the remote collaborative technology is a type of virtual production technique (VPT) that can be said to have been utilised when a director directs his/her actors away from the actual location of his/her actors or crew members, possibly through a digital means such as an online monitor, a zoom application set up or by giving vocal directives through a digital gadget such as a cell phone (Honthaner 464).



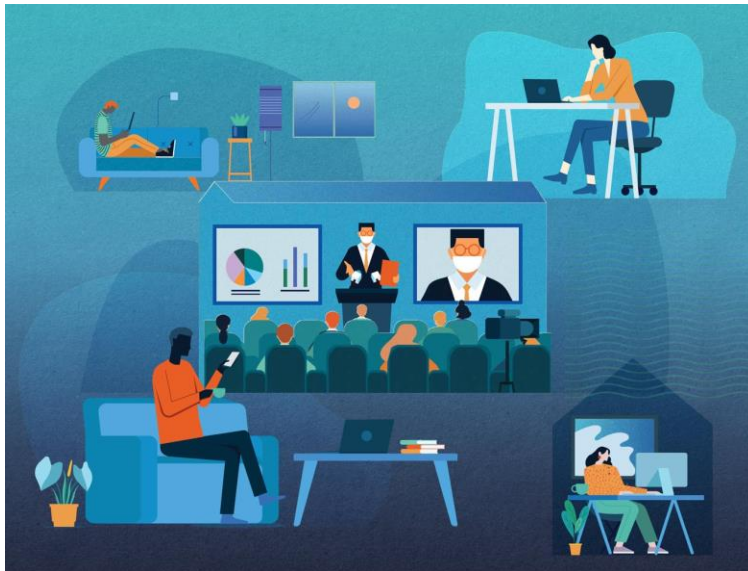
*Illustration of a communication channel in a virtual film production  
(<https://www.perforce.com/solutions/virtual-production-software>)*

Chernova, in his paper entitled – “It’s Time to Consider a Remote Production Service”, articulates four advantages of virtual video production. According to him, the first is for safety and security. Accordingly, “with the global pandemic in full swing, the demand for remote video production workflows has skyrocketed. Organisations are looking for ways to create a lot of videos quickly – but most importantly, safely”. This statement is affirmative on the basis that in such times of the corona virus or any other life-threatening pandemic, no actor, director, producer, cinematographer, sound man, camera assistant, makeup artist or any other crew member will want to take the risk of contracting the deadly virus by working together physically in the production environment or the filming set. This view is supported by Autar,



documenting his win on a filming contract as at the time of the pandemic. He asserts that:

At the height of the pandemic, I was approached by Autodesk to direct a large cinematic documentary campaign in Sydney. The problem was that I was in Hong Kong and even though I was allowed to enter Australia, the quarantine and incoming flight restrictions made it very difficult to travel between Sydney and Hong Kong. To make matters even more complicated, the clients were based in the United Kingdom and in the United States. The team and I needed to find a solution that would allow me to direct the shoot remotely and that would allow the clients to monitor the feed and view instant playback to approve takes. (Autar)



*Illustration of a virtual conference (Chernova)*

*(<https://www.epiphan.com/blog/five-reasons-virtual-events-are-here-to-stay/?amp>)*

Another ideology based on the benefits of virtual production that Chernova pointed out is cost effectiveness. He states vividly that virtual production can eliminate all the travel costs affiliated with moving both talent and crew. This is an obvious point as conventional filming styles entail the gathering of all crew members and talent to the shooting location, where the set-up is made on production design, makeup, lighting, and the actors are rehearsed, before the director gives final instructions to his/her artistes on set. This is why Vlado Struhar, a Slovakian film director and programmer, argues that “it is a waste to move the crew around the planet and accommodate them

in every location, when most of them can sit in their office and collaborate on multiple projects remotely” (Kumar 1). Apart from the cost of transportation, accommodation cost is also a point of relevance when considering the virtual production technique. This is because members of the production do not need to leave their areas of residence in order to play their roles or carry out their technical responsibilities. This can also be routed down to feeding cost, because as far as the talent and crew are not travelling away from their homes, there is a likelihood that they will still feed at least partially from their personal kitchens or pockets, thereby minimising feeding cost of the production. Still on virtual production’s cost effectiveness, Chernova writes that hiring a physical crew to shoot a video is of no necessity as one can “get access to the professional expertise of remote producers – for both filming and post-production – without any added costs (par.1).” This could be a publicity stunt by Chernova, through his paper, for the aim of advertising a virtual production house called Videoric, but even at that, it informs readers and researchers that there are already established production houses that specialise in rendering professional services in the areas of virtual production or remote collaboration technology, which helps to minimise more than just travel, accommodation and feeding cost.

Chernova, further contends that Videoric is very similar to having physically present professionals on the set, but of course at a more cost effective ground, and without the stress of managing and installing complex equipment. This remote video production solution also offers an Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology that improves the entire production process, and eliminates many manual tasks (par.1). In addition to this, “Videoric introduces a convenient and straightforward booking process: scheduling a time is as easy as creating a calendar event. The always-on filming studio and remote staff are always available and ready to go. Lastly, by taking advantage of Videoric’s subscription-based service model, one can avoid costs associated with purchasing and maintaining expensive AV equipment, eliminating capital expenditures” (Chernova par.1).

Flexibility and scalability is the third point advanced by Chernova as an advantage of virtual production. Here, he lays emphasis on the choice and freedom of setting up a virtual production office, from which all work-in-progress-reports are sent out or collected. “A remote production service can be customized to fit the exact needs of each organization. It can be as large or small as needed, installed in a home residence, an office space, or conference hall” (Chernova par. 4). This simply means that virtual production does not in any way restrict production houses in setting up a situational office, from where directives are sent out, and feedbacks are documented. It could be the residential home of the director, or any preferred place of convenience. In

addition to that, and based on the research so far, there is no compulsory law attached to virtual production processes, with regard to setting up a situational office, thereby increasing flexibility and easy access. For lower end productions, it could just be the director and his/her cell phone that serve as the headquarters or the operational office of the production.



*A situational virtual production office with a feed of an interview session*

*(<https://www.thesmallsbusinesssite.co.za/category/human-resources/>)*

The fourth advantage of virtual production according to Chernova, is its speedy and efficient nature (par.4). Accordingly, he testifies that physically coordinating the crew and assembling the video assets can be time consuming and less efficient. An option of running a production at a faster pace could be that of a virtual production or a remote collaboration technology, noting that “a remote video production is intended for frequent, daily use. Because the video creation process is streamlined, you can expect shortened production times and quick turnarounds” (par.4). By the same token, Kumar observes that the virtual productions are in vogue due to the pandemic ravaging the world, pointing towards some clear examples such as an advertisement done for Interpol. During the production, Ben Hume sits in front of a computer screen to give the green light word. The director not only sits and directs through the means of a digital apparatus but is sited over 10,841 km away from the actual set. He equally observes that an advert for Mercedes Benz was produced with the director, instructing from Ukraine, and the crew members acting accordingly in China (Kumar 3).

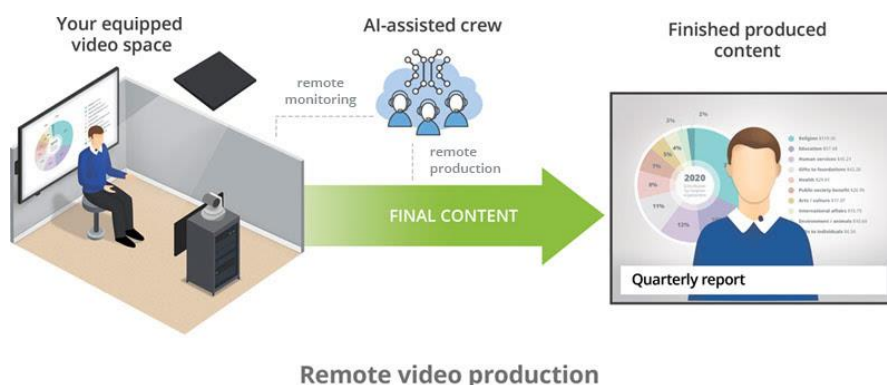


*Illustration of the communication channel in BT Sport's Remote Production. (<https://www.thebroadcastbridge.com/content/entry/15014/bt-sport-create-virtual-remote-gallery>)*

Kumar noted that some other digital platforms that facilitate virtual productions (Remote Collaborative Technology) are technologies such as QTake; “an onset tool to capture takes and provide playback, editing and compositing, over email, Zoom, Google Meet, and Amazon Chime.” Conclusively, Dowdall, affirms that virtual style of production, despite being workable, has factors to put into utmost consideration; as without such considerations, the production might be unsuccessful. This, he tagged – communicating remotely. This subject matter of “communicating remotely” is more on the basis of all that has been researched and discussed so far, and at this time, it is focused on the consideration of any accessibility issues such as internet connection, hardware and differences in time zones (Dowdall par. 4). The truth, based on the research so far is that most virtual productions or remote video productions are carried through the internet; and an unstable internet connection would definitely cause mental or psychological inconveniences when members of crew, and talent keep getting unexpected breaks in transmission; as a result, causing the slowing down of the entire production process. Therefore, selecting spots where there is sufficient availability of the local internet provider’s network is key. Depending on the geographical distance between crew members and talents, time zones can be a serious challenge. For instance, if the director of a virtual movie production is in Nigeria, and he/she gives an instruction to the cinematographer who is in the US, to capture sunrise at a scheduled time; the director and the rest of the crew should not forget to note that sun would not rise at the same time in Nigeria and the US. Therefore, the time schedule on paper would not match. If this is not considered, it could cause a disruption in the execution of the

production process, leading to the reduction in the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the virtual production technique. The challenge posed by the different time zones of the world is inevitable, especially when it comes to virtual production. The entire crew members and talents just need to put it down on paper so that everyone is conscious, and ready to observe it.

To add to this, Autar, a commercial film director, writes that the quality of feed and signal strength in the communication line matters to the core (par 6.). He matched down the challenge of network delays by using a "...4G modem that creates a strong internet signal by combining the signal from multiple carriers. It allows the feed to stay up even if one of the carriers has bad reception in the area. We used a third party modem but Teradek makes the Teradek Bond which does the same thing in an easier solution" (Autar par. 6). Autar tries to underscore that he used a 4G modem that can combine what is equivalent to multiple network providers; so that if one of the network provider is down, the remaining providers can keep the communication line uncut (par.6). Teradek nodes are "high powered 3G/4G/LTE modems that provide 2 to 3 times the performance of carrier-branded modems. Used by broadcasters to get cellular signal in locations where normal devices like phones or USB modems wouldn't" ("Everything You need to know About the Link Pro").



(<https://www.epiphan.com/blog/its-time-to-consider-a-remote-video-production-service/>)

As at the time of this research, it was noticed that a majority of the Nollywood filmmakers were not venturing into virtual productions as there was little or no publication to that effect. This could possibly be as a result of ignorance or fear of losing funds on first trial, with no guarantee of success. Nevertheless, one of the productions in Nigeria that utilised the remote collaboration technology (virtual production) is - *Marginalised Ears* ([https://youtu.be/JGDNPUpr\\_0](https://youtu.be/JGDNPUpr_0)); a documentary revolving around the

deadly corona virus as directed by Charles Okwuowulu, produced by Ameh Dennis Akoh and edited by Chinda Michael.

### **Pre-Production Phase**

First of all, the director created a WhatsApp group which served as a Virtual Production Office. Herein, instructions were dished out. Using Tfd techniques (audience participatory theatre style), scripting in the four communities emerged. Four communities were identified for this TFD programme: Ikwo (the host community of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike (AE-FUNAI) in Ebonyi State), Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 community of Enugu State, Umualumu old road Nekede community of Imo State and Ogbagu-Obukpa community in Nsukka of Enugu State. Being a project to be carried out in four different communities far apart from one another, during the lock-down period in Nigeria, the group met through virtual interaction using some new media handles such as Zoom and WhatsApp chats to dialogue on the production techniques of the project. The members of each group were basically made of students who are already resident in the community in focus. During the preproduction process, different roles such as coordinators, sub-divisional directors, cinematographers, and production managers were assigned to various individuals who were present on the social media platform. Chinda Michael who was at Abakaliki at the period of production and who would be the virtual non-linear editor assembled the necessary technical gadgets needed for the production. These gadgets were basically a laptop for the editing, a hard drive for download/import and back up of dailies, and a smart phone for social media communication. Nnenna Nwosu, the then Dean of Humanities in Alex Ekwueme Federal University supported the project financially.

### **Production Phase**

The concept of Chernova's virtual production office was adopted. Herein, So many interactions between the director, Charles Okwuowulu, and Crew members were realized through zoom video communication platform. The crew members who received first-hand directives from the Director were the Coordinators of the mapped out Tfd communities: Ameh Denis Akoh - Abakaliki, Charles Okwuowulu - Enugu, Casmir Onyemuchara - Ogbagu-Obukpa, Charles Emokpae - Abakaliki, Christopher Akpa - Nsukka and Chinda Michael - Abakaliki. The coordinators in turn, relayed and implemented the instructions from the director through the students/team members of the project who were on ground.

The production phase can be categorised into three. The interview session, the drama session, and the gift presentation session. Some students

such as Anthony Ugwu, Ebuka Chiwetalu, Chika Okafor, Ruth Akpaka, and Victory Udochukwu acted as interviewers who interrogated the dwellers in the rural communities. This interview session set up by the different groups allowed for the compilation of evidence reflecting the fact the rural dwellers have very low to no trust in the Nigerian Government, especially with prevailing poor economic and alleged corrupt status of the country. In other words, a majority of them don't believe that Covid-19 exists in the country. They see it as a means the government is using to drain off billions of naira into their personal bank accounts. Other possible misconceptions found from the rural dwellers are anchored on religion. In this case, they feel that God is punishing man for his evil deeds by striking the community with a deadly virus like the Covid19 pandemic.

After the interview session, a drama performance was organised by the members of each group, to help change the possible misconceptions of the rural dwellers towards the coronavirus pandemic. The drama had elements of satire which helped to sustain the viewing interest or full engagement of the audience.

Subsequently, all the groups presented palliatives to the rural dwellers of their respective communities. This was a move to appreciate the indigenes for welcoming the Tfd concept to their community, and also to support some families who were vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic. The audio-visual recording of the interviews, dramatization, and presentation of palliatives was completely executed through mobile phones, with a resolution, uniformly set to at least 720p, a standard lower end high-definition display resolution of 1280x720 pixels, alongside the 16x9 aspect ratio or the landscape orientation. Although most inexpensive android phone cameras are not great in quality, the 720p, 16 by 9 aspect ratio camera setting allowed for a presentable footage which could pass for watching/streaming on mobile devices such as phones/tablets, and should at least keep the viewers focused on the message that the documentary carries.

### **Post-Production Phase**

After the production, all the rushes gotten from the different groups were sent for post-production through social media applications (such as WhatsApp and Telegram); these rushes were then downloaded and put into different files created on the computer system. These files were named after the community the groups represented, so as to help the editor have easy access and navigation from one community's footage to another. The editor, who adhered to the guidelines on the editing script received from the director, edited the 29:39sec minutes documentary from his home with the aid of a laptop and the 2021 versions of the editing software - Adobe Premiere

Professional, for Audio-visual; and Adobe Audition, for Audio. While Adobe premiere pro was basically used to cut out unwanted footages, Adobe Audition was used to reduce or kill the ambient noise in the audio files, such as the noise gotten from the voice of the interviewee's children or neighbours. The postproduction process was simply the combination of the recorded and downloaded footages of the interview, drama, and gift presentation sessions that formed the documentary. The "English subtitle" editing technique was applied manually to all the interviews, in order to transcribe the indigenous Igbo language of the community dwellers, which in turn allowed for the comprehension of both the people of the Igbo and English backgrounds.

A major challenge that arose from the collection of the rushes of some groups was that of data transfer limit. WhatsApp, which is an application that majority of the group members often use for daily chatting and live calls has a data transfer limit of 16 megabytes for video files sent directly. Telegram, another mobile communication application was then recommended to the groups having video files that exceeded WhatsApp maximum limit.

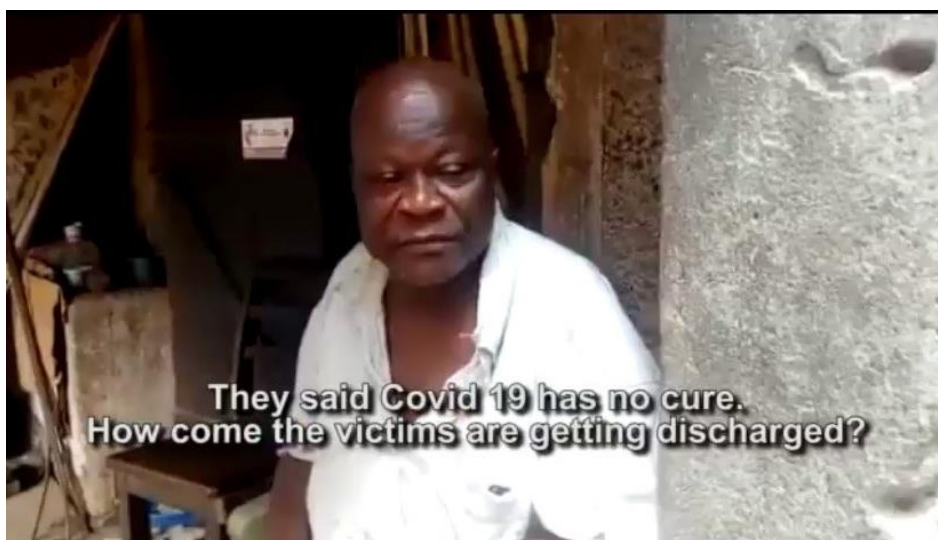


*Prof. Ameh Dennis Akoh (Project Supervisor), recording himself with his mobile phone during his interview.*





*An indigene of Ikwo community been interviewed by the Ikwo team*



*An indigene of Enugu community being interviewed by the Enugu Team*



*The Owerri Team, issuing hand sanitisers to indigenes*



*The Ikwo Team interacting with the indigenes of the Ikwo Community*



*The Nsukka Team giving palliatives to the Nsukka Community*



*The Director (Charles Okwuowulu PhD, DGN)  
giving directions from Enugu State*

### Editing Script for the Documentary:

The director prepared an editing script for the documentary and sent it across to the editor immediately recording process was completed. The editor followed the script religiously, adding his own creativity to enhance the Tfd documentary.

TDF COVID 19 Documentary Editing Script: 29:39sec			
sequence	Minutes	Audio	Video
1	1min	School Anthem or any good sound track from the ones we recorded (Do not use any sound track that will put us into trouble due to copy rights issues).	<b>Montage</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theatre Arts Department</li> <li>• Faculty of Humanities</li> <li>• Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike</li> <li>• Ebonyi State</li> <li>• Nigeria</li> <li>• Presents</li> <li>• The Marginalized Ears</li> <li>• A TFD/PV project</li> </ul>
2	30sec	Covid-19 pandemic, the unseen enemy that has ravaged the world, causing severe acute respiratory syndrome arrived Nigeria on 27 February 2020 through an Italian citizen who came to Lagos. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, this time, a Nigerian citizen who presumably had contact with the Italian citizen. Presently there are over a 1000 cases of the virus traversing various states and communities in Nigeria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Montage videos depicting the audio</li> </ul>

3	12sec	The Nigerian government has since then formed the presidential taskforce on Covid-19 for the management of various cases of corona virus in Nigeria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTF media briefing montage</li> </ul>
4	18sec	Chaired by the secretary to the government of the federation, Boss Mustapha, PTF has rolled out various activities towards controlling the spread of the virus and has equally engaged in daily media briefings to sensitize the Nigerian populace. In this media sensitization process which is done daily, various protocols which are required to fight and prevent this virus are often rolled out.	Boss Mustapha montage
5	4 sec	However, the question that bothers us is...	Visual text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Big Question?</li> </ul>
6	6 sec	How have these sensitizations on corona virus received in the rural communities who presumably have no electronic devices to access these messages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>montage of rural dwellers</li> </ul>
7	10sec	As we know, the rural population in Nigeria accounts for 49.66 percent of the total Nigerian population as at 2018, according to the National Population Commission, therefore, they constitute a good number in the population's numerical strength.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>montage of rural dwellers</li> </ul>
8	5 sec	As part of its community service, Theatre Arts Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drone shots AE-FUNAI</li> </ul>

9	5sec	Ndufu Alike with the strong support of the Dean Faculty of Humanities, Prof. Nnenna Nwosu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Montage of Prof Nnenna</li> </ul>
10	8sec	and the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Chinedum Nwajiuba embarked on a critical survey on the impact of the media reportage on Covid-19 on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picture of VC</li> </ul>
11	4sec	rural community dweller, particularly the aged and the most vulnerable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Montage of rural dwellers</li> </ul>
12	7sec	This was achieved through the concepts of Theatre-for-Development as well as Participatory Video.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some clips of TFD drama</li> </ul>
13	30sec	Prof Akoh's Voice: We mobilized our Theatre Arts students to various communities, of course supervised by four lecturers in the department, Dr. Charles Okwuowulu, Mr. Casmire Onyemuchara, Mr Charles Emokpae and Mr. Chris Akpa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prof Akoh's Video</li> </ul>
14	50sec	Lecturers in Theatre Arts Department- AE FUNAI, assisted by Theatre Arts students, went into various rural communities, interviewed the aged population on their notion of corona virus, thereafter engaged in dramatic-sensitization for them and subsequently re-interviewed them to assess whether their notions and misconstructions have changed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videos/Pictures of students on various locations</li> </ul>
15	50sec	Four communities were earmarked for this Tfd programme: Ikwo community where the university is domiciled. This community was supervised by Mr. Charles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring in lecturers montages as their names are mentioned</li> </ul>

		Emokpae and assisted by Mforlem Rose Bih and Nweke Jeremiah. Dr Charles Okwuowulu, supervised the Enugu community and he was assisted by Ebuka Chiwetalu, Nkechi Chukwuemeli and Vivian Ezenyilimba. Nekede community was supervised by Mr. Casmire Onyemuchara and assisted by Chika Okafor and Victory Ferdinand. Nsukka, community was supervised by Mr. Chris Akpa and assisted by Anthony Ugwu, Urama Kingsley and Ugwuja Mary. The entire process was coordinated by Prof. Ameh Dennis Akoh who ensured that in spite of numerous challenges, the process was achieved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complement with other relevant montages</li> </ul>
16	60sec	A critical survey of these rural dwellers in the aforementioned rural communities in Nigeria is to determine the level of (mis)information and (mis)construction on corona virus as influenced by unregulated media space. In Ikwo community the project was carried out at Ohankwu Ikwo, a community which shares a land boundary with Ezza south Local Government area both in Ebonyi State. In Enugu, a community known as Iva valley, Forestry hill was earmarked. Community was Umualumu, old road, Nekede and Nsukka was Ogbagu Obukpa community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant montages depicting/complementing every community</li> </ul>
17	60sec	The TFD programme tried to assess what they rural dwellers know about Corona Virus, their source of their information and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant montage depicting the voiceover</li> </ul>

		if there are misinformation, myths surrounding their beliefs on Corona Virus. Again, the programme enquired about their attitude towards the ethics as prescribed by NCDC, their experiences (if any) towards covid-19 Palliatives and how Covid 19 observances/ethics(like social distancing) have affected their communal and social lives, traditional institution like, burial, traditional wedding, new-yam and other rites/rituals/ceremonies?	
18	40sec	Charles Emokpae's interview audio	Play interview: Charles Emokpae, juxtapose it with Ikwo drama performances
19	4mins	Ikwo interviewee's audio	Play interviews of Ikwo villagers and various activities
20	40sec	Charles Okwuowulu's interview audio	Play interview: Charles Okwuowulu, juxtapose it with Enugu drama performances
21	4mins	Enugu interviewee's audio	Play Interviews Of Enugu Community and various activities
22	40sec	Casmire Onyemuchara's interview audio	Play interview: Casmire Onyemuchara, juxtapose it with drama performances
23	4mins	interviewee's audio	Play interviews of community and various activities
24	40sec	Chris Akpa's interview audio	Play interview: Chris Akpa, juxtapose it with Nsukka drama performances
25	4mins	Nsukka interviewee's audio	Play interviews of Nsukka community and various activities



26	30 sec	At the end of the process, it was discovered that the apparent exclusion of the high percentage of rural dwellers in PTF's information structure outwardly makes them susceptible to abject fallacies surrounding the pandemic which is the products of various unregulated internet media space.	
27	30 sec	Prof. Akoh: This TFD has actually opened up the lacuna in PTF's information programme as it is evident that the community dwellers are not fully carried along. As we call on the government to intensify action on media advocacy on Covid-19, we call on the Nigerian citizens to stay safe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prof. Akoh's video</li> </ul>
28	30 sec	Play Prof Nnenna's video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play Prof Nnenna's video</li> </ul>
29	30sec	There are still a whole lot of disbelief and misconceptions about the virus as evident in this research. Thus, there is great need for the government to use the Theatre for Development and Participatory VideoTechniques to reach the rural communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant montage videos</li> </ul>
30	1 min	Good music from our music bank	Appreciation, cast and crew list
<b>Total: 29:39sec</b>			

## Conclusion

There is a great similarity between the script and the produced documentary. This suggests that further research into the Remote Collaboration Technology (RCT) will greatly impact on Nigerian motion picture industry. Virtual Production Techniques (VPTs) are summarily more cost effective than the conventional/traditional production techniques, if planned and utilised properly. The technical report which focused on the

director's and editor's perspectives and contributions towards virtual documentary production in the pandemic era have believably achieved it by underpinning the virtual techniques adopted in co-creating a video script on corona virus in Igbo local dialects of the community dwellers spread across Abakaliki, Enugu, Nsukka and Owerri. Through RCT, though encumbered by distance, the researchers have been able to communicate the message of corona virus to some communities in south east geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The Tfd process demystified the burgeoning misinformation and misconceptions about Covid-19 that circulate among the rural dwellers. This paper, therefore, concluded that virtual production does not compulsorily require advanced and expensive equipment to be executed. It could be easily planned with tools that are available to a filmmaker. It is recommended that filmmakers who feel restricted by regional distances or laws set up by local governments to curtail the spread of a pandemic, should adopt the virtual production technique (VPT) to ensure hitch-free production.

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# AN ABSURDIST READING OF CORRUPTION IN A PANDEMIC ERA IN NIGERIA: A CONSIDERATION OF OLA ROTIMI'S *HOLDING TALKS*

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## **Abstract**

The entire world was ravaged and devastated by a pandemic that came to be medically known as Covid-19 (corona virus) in 2020. Because of its contagious and deadly nature, stringent rules were put in place by various governments to help manage the situation while medical personnel worked tirelessly in search of a cure. It affected every aspect of human life; be it governance, economy, social and educational institutions. Although undesirable, it helped to expose the deep-seated level of corruption and absurdity in the Nigerian government because some government officials charged with the responsibility of protecting the citizens from the pandemic were also the ones that hoarded palliatives and siphoned other materials and provisions meant to save the same citizens from hunger and death. And some government officials that were supposed to encourage citizens to comply with the preventive rules were the ones that trivialized the seriousness of the matter. It is against this backdrop that this paper adopts the literary method as to do an absurdist reading of corruption in a pandemic era in Nigeria, using Ola Rotimi's  *Holding Talks*  as a textual reference. It concludes that if properly engaged, the theatre of the absurd can help to reposition a nation such as Nigeria by its redirection of its priorities.

**Keywords:** Theatre of the absurd, Corruption, Covid-19 pandemic,  *Holding Talks* , Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

It can be said that 2020 shook the world in a significant and dreadful way that most people decided to term it one of the worst years in human history. This was because the world was severely ravaged and devastated by a pandemic that came to be medically known as corona virus (or Covid-19). Corona virus is a "communicable disease" (Pramana et al. 1) and a "viral pneumonia with symptoms such as dry cough, fever, sore throat, dyspnea, body pain and diarrhoea" (Anyanwu et al. 2). It is a highly infectious and deadly disease that practically shutdown the world. For that reason, stringent rules were promulgated by various governments to help manage the precarious situation while medical practitioners worked tirelessly in search of

a cure. The pandemic was so unprecedented that it threw even the world's best medical scientists into confusion as its fatality rate rose astronomically within a few months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global pandemic on the 30 January 2020 (Amzat et al. 218), and it killed people indiscriminately. Even medical practitioners were not spared from its deadly sting because the "disease...claimed the lives of...healthcare workers and frontline staff all over the world, even in equipped and developed nations" (Mbachu et al. 944), as they strove to get a cure and save lives.

Schools, markets, offices, religious centres, clubhouses, parks and every form of activity that involved bringing people together were shut down when it became known that the virus spreads faster in crowds. Probably for the very first time in human history, adults, not just children, were encouraged to stay at home. People's businesses took a nosedive and hunger set in. Although medical scientists seem to be winning the fight against the pandemic starting from 2021 when the vaccines were released and the panic it initially generated has begun to subside, a different variants of the disease such as Omicron, Alpha, Delta and Beta have emerged. One can, therefore, argue that it will take the world a long period to fully recover from the negative effects of the pandemic.

The effect of the pandemic in Nigeria was not less devastating. Regrettably, the Nigerian government failed to care for its citizens like some other countries did while shielding their citizens from the pandemic. Instead, corruption, which is "the use of public office for private gain..." (Myint 35) took the reins. For instance, some government officials charged with the responsibility of protecting citizens from the pandemic were also the ones that hoarded palliatives and drained off other materials and provisions meant to save the same citizens from hunger and death. Similarly, some of the officials that were supposed to encourage citizens to comply with the preventive rules were the ones that trivialized the seriousness of the matter. Salaries of public servants were not paid and prices of commodities skyrocketed in the market. That included even the facemasks citizens were supposed to wear and hand sanitisers they needed to sanitise their hands to protect them from contracting the virus. The situation was absurd, a term Martin Esslin used to sum up the situation where "suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical... [Where] all assurances of hope, all explanations of ultimate meaning have suddenly been unmasked illusions, empty chatter, whistling in the dark" (qtd. in Siuli 559).

Nevertheless, human beings will always strive to proffer solutions to societal problems to prevent their recurrence. One of the ways humans do this is through the theatre that reflects the society to correct its ills (Boal 9). Theatre, by its very social and utilitarian nature, has always responded to humans and

society's challenges. This it does by adopting a specific form that would be suitable for a particular situation. Hence, adopting the literary method as a tool of research, this article examines how the concept of 'theatre of the absurd' mirrors Nigeria and its government's corrupt practices in a pandemic era, using Ola Rotimi's *Holdings Talks* as a pivot of analysis and discussion. This play is chosen because the preoccupation of the characters where they engaged in a robust conversation that holds no relevance to saving the life of a dying man perfectly mirrors the actions of the Nigerian government during the pandemic.

### **Corruption: A Malignant Term**

Corruption is an rife malignant socioeconomic crime responsible for most calamities befalling humans on a global scale because its occurrence appears frequently in varying degrees and proportions in all the countries of the world. Corruption is as old as humanity. It is the dishonest, fraudulent, manipulative and deceitful conduct by anyone for personal gains or self-aggrandizements. Corruption is motivated by greed and selfishness that often make the corrupt individual blind and insensitive to the plight of others. Consequently, one can become corrupt if one allows oneself to be driven by hubristic or excessive interest for self and greed. Accordingly, corruption is a form of dishonesty or a criminal offence which is undertaken by a person or an organization which is entrusted with a position of authority, in order to acquire illicit benefits or abuse power for private gain ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org>wiki](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki)). Ekibor sees it as "the unlawful use of official power or influence by an official of the government either to enrich himself or further his course and/or any other person at the expense of the public, in contravention of his oath of office and/or contrary to the conventions or laws that are in force" (qtd. in David Iyanda 38). One common factor that resonates in the definitions is that the criminal act is perpetrated to profit oneself or someone close. It should be noted that while an individual can be corrupt, it is not uncommon for an organization to be guilty of corruption in its operations.

Corruption is not restricted to public offices alone. It permeates every aspect of human transaction and endeavours – be it the public execution of assignments or private engagements. Vito Tanzi defined it in a more encompassing way as "the intentional non-compliance with the arm's-length principle aimed at deriving some advantage for oneself or related individuals from this behaviour" (qtd. in Begovic 2). This view embraces every activity in which corruption is likely to manifest, such as business transactions, games and official duties. A critical examination of this definition reveals two more significant factors that qualify an act as corruption. The first is that the action is intentional. This means that it is well planned, properly calculated and

willfully executed. It does not happen as a result of incompetence or oversight. Second, the act violates the prized arm's-length principle which represents fairness in every type of human's business transaction and engagement.

Corruption may involve many harmful socioeconomic activities, which include bribery, 'lobbying,' grafting, inordinate patronage, nepotism, parochialism, 'kickback,' money laundering, defalcation, extortion, cronyism, influence peddling and embezzlement. Corruption is a huge bane to growth and development. It, therefore, becomes illogical and unreasonable for any government to think it can be successful in any of its engagements when its officials are deliberately engaging in corrupt practices. Whereas corruption transcends the illegalities and dishonest activities in public offices, this paper, however, focuses on the absurdism of the corrupt practices in government and public offices during the Covid-19 pandemic era, using Ola Rotimi's  *Holding Talks*. And as a way of clarification, political corruption occurs when an officeholder or other governmental employee acts in an official capacity for personal gain.

### **When Theatre is said to be Absurdist**

Meaninglessness, senselessness, hopelessness, foolishness and illogicality are terms associated with absurdism. Absurdism connotes the opposition between the human search for meaning in life and the inability to find any and/or the condition in which human beings exist in an irrational universe and their lives have no meaning outside their existence. According to Al-Gburi, "the absurd refers to something that doesn't make sense. [But] in literature, the absurd school of thought (also called absurdism) is a human tendency to seek meaning and purpose in life and the inability to do so" (9). To Holman and Harmon, absurd stands for "the kind of drama that presents a view of the absurdity of the human condition by the abandoning of usual or rational devices and by the use of nonrealistic form" (qtd. in Siuli 560). Theatre of the absurd or absurdist theatre was the term critics in the mid-20th century labelled the type of drama that presented the impossibility of making rational and meaningful choices in an irrational universe. The group of French playwrights that started this form of theatre around 1950 believed that "truth consisted of chaos and lack of order, logic, or certainty, and their plays embodied this vision in a structure that abandoned cause-and-effect relationships for associational patterns reflecting illogic and chance" (Brockett and Ball 191).

This means that it usually abandons the realistic and traditional approach and deploys other unique elements such as emphasis on minimalism, use of flat characters, incongruity and incoherency in speech, plot-less plot, use of symbols, and illogicality in action. Theatre of the absurd

was first coined by the Hungarian-born critic, Martin Esslin, in his 1962 book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. It refers to the type of play that first became popular in France after World War II, during the 1950s and 1960s, and that presented on stage the philosophy articulated by French philosopher, Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Siuli 560), in which he defines the humans' condition and struggle to make meaning in an irrational universe as basically meaningless (Brockett and Hildy 455). Camus "concluded that our situation is absurd because the human longing for clarity and certainty is met with, and forever thwarted by, the irrationality of the universe into which we have been thrown; [that] it is absurd also because we can neither rid ourselves of the desire for order nor overcome the irrationality that stands in the way of order" (Brockett and Ball 190-191).

The Nigerian government decided to shut down the country and adopted all the preventive measures developed countries like America, England, Australia, Canada, China, etc., deployed to protect their citizens from the Covid-19 pandemic so that Nigerians too will be protected from the virus. Sadly, when their corrupt practices are juxtaposed with their seemingly good speech about how to tackle the virus, the absurdity or illogicality between their speech and action is exposed. Similarly, in  *Holding Talks*, Man enthusiastically engages Apprentice in a robust conversation about his kindheartedness, willingness to help and advancement in life. Yet he does nothing to save the life of a dying man lying in front of him. It is against this background that this paper is using Ola Rotimi's  *Holding Talks* as a case study to do an absurdist reading of corruption in the Covid-19 pandemic era in Nigeria.

### **Ola Rotimi's *Holding Talks*: The Synopsis**

*Holding Talks* is an absurdist play that creatively captures the sad reality of how humans engage in futile and endless talks where action is needed. The urge and ability to talk and communicate are part of the factors that make life enjoyable. In  *Holding Talks*, however, talking is stretched to the extreme, so much so that it runs against action. While a man lies dying, gasping for breath, the other characters are engrossed in an absurd conversation that holds no relevance to saving the life of the dying man. Structured in just one scene, the play is an absurdist commentary on the tendency to talk, sermonize and debate associated with humans in general and Nigerians in particular, with the archetypal penchant to constitute committees and hold conferences without resolving an issue through a consensus action plan or taking the needed action. It resonates both institutionally and in private life, and punctures the insecurities of the poor when challenged by the grandeur of the rich as expressed by the Barber's and Apprentice's relations with Man. Written by one of Nigeria's most respected playwrights, the play is pregnant with symbols



and meanings, most of which are woven around the curse of inaction. Ola Rotimi states on the play's back cover that "in this play, nothing really gets done...because there is always some justifiable rationalization for that which really needs to be done not to be done."

### **Absurdist Aesthetics and Corruption in *Holding Talks* as Reflected in Nigeria in Covid-19 Pandemic Era**

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic birthed a very bleak era of corruption in Nigeria. Although there have always been issues of embezzlement and diversion of public resources by public officials in Nigeria, it has never been as heartless as the ones that happened at the heart of the pandemic where people's lives were at stake. Massive resources mobilized to respond to the economic and hunger crises caused by the pandemic created opportunities for insensitive and corrupt officials to carry out their corrupt practices such as converting the resources into their properties. Many corruption prevention and law enforcement agencies were rendered handicapped to fight against this because, in addition to being confounded by the unprecedented health emergencies and economic crisis, the perpetrators of the corrupt practices were mostly those in power. This was absurd because diverting the mobilized resources did not guarantee them immunity from the pandemic. Additionally, most of these officials were among the authorities that encouraged people to stay at home to be safe from the disease. Yet, they diverted what was mobilized to keep them safe from "hunger-virus." Below are some of the absurdist aesthetics and corruption in  *Holding Talks*  as reflected in Nigeria during Covid-19 pandemic era.

**Unnecessary Delay in the Execution of Needed Action:** This is the major absurdist aesthetic that characterizes  *Holding Talks* . As the play opens, we see a man walking into a Barber's shop to have a haircut. The Barber's handshakes as he is about to start doing the job but his refusal to admit this fact leads to an argument and betting between him and his customer, Man. The Barber slums in the process and lies unconscious. One would naturally expect Man to be worried about the Barber's condition and to take action that could resuscitate him. Instead, he feels triumphant as if vindicated by the Barber's predicament. The Apprentice is worried about his master and begs Man to help rush him (Barber) to the hospital because he believes that the doctor can still do something. Man engages him in a fruitless talk instead, providing justifiable rationalizations for that which is supposed to be done or not to be done. Even when the press and a policewoman are eventually invited, Man engages them in a debate that prevents them from doing their job. Barber is never attended

to. He probably would have been resuscitated but the unnecessary delay in taking the needed action contributes to the reason he dies in the play.

This unnecessary delay is reflected in the way the authority approached tackling the Covid-19 pandemic at the early stage. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the corona virus that arguably began in Wuhan, China, in December 2021, a public health emergency of international concern on the 30th of January 2020. As a reaction to this declaration, the covid-19 preparedness group was established in Nigeria on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 (Amzat et al. 219). Meanwhile, WHO warned Nigeria at that early stage as one of the high-risk African countries concerning the spread of covid-19 (Anyanwu et al. 2). What this projection meant was that “Africa could bear the final burden of the Covid-19 if the countries do not institute effective measures to combat the pandemic” (Amzat et al. 218). Despite this forewarning, adequate preparations were not put in place and actual actions were not taken to prevent the impending danger. For instance, “although the government had strengthened the surveillance at the airport since January 2020, Nigeria recorded its Covid-19 index case that was imported from Italy, on February 27. This raised concerns about the effectiveness of airport surveillance and, by extension, the country’s general preparedness...The pre-Covid-19 preparedness was grossly inadequate” (Amzat et al. 219).

Upon the detection of the index case, Presidential Task Force (PTF) for Covid-19 control was instituted on 9th of March 2020 and they announced that travellers from 13 covid-19 high-risk countries had been restricted from coming into the country, and Port Health Services (PHS) and Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) were to monitor the self-isolation of returnees from the affected countries from then onward (Anyanwu et al, 4; Amzat et al. 219). But it seemed it was merely a speech because “the concern from several quarters was that the ban on high-risk countries would have taken immediate effect. By the time the ban took effect, the nation had recorded more imported cases. Unfortunately, most of those who arrived in the country did not comply with the 14 days of self-isolation recommended by the NCDC” (Amzat et al. 219). As a result, it was not surprising when the NCDC disclosed that all confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country in the early stage were imported by returning travellers. The distribution of the virus during its first 30 days in Nigeria was elitist. This is in line with Amzat et al.’s submission that the majority of those that tested positive were returnees from abroad.

Air travel is predominantly elitist in Nigeria because of the high rate of poverty. The political elite also bore the early brunt of covid-19 with three state governors and some political appointees testing positive for covid-19. Due to the (initial) trend, the initial perception was that covid-

19 was a disease of the elite, who returned from international travels or had contact with the political bourgeoisie. (220)

The absurdity was that we knew how the pandemic would enter the country and measures were put in place to prevent it from coming. Yet, the measures were manipulated and suspended for the elites to come into the country. It was not as if there was any evidence that the virus would not follow them in because of their social status or was their presence in the country going to help fight the disease. It was obvious that opening the airport for them spelt doom for other citizens at that time. Yet, they were allowed to come in because of their affluence or influence. But the case would have been different if it were the poor that wanted to enter the country during that dangerous period. A time honoured dictum is that a stone that one sees coming does not blind one. But in this case, Nigeria saw Covid-19 coming but still decided to delay taking the needed action because that action was going to affect some influential citizens of the country. The consequences of this delay included economic degradation, social dislocation and breakdown and the death of hundreds of citizens.

**Self-Deceit, Denial of Reality and Misplaced Religiosity:** In this play, Barber's predicament is caused by self-deceit, denial of reality and foolishness. Man notices that his hand shakes. This could have been a result of severe hunger or sickness. Help could have come if he had told the truth and the situation would have been probably arrested before he slums. But he acts otherwise. He probably thinks that admitting it would make him lose his only customer for the day. Sadly, he loses his life while trying to keep a client. We see this also in the manner some authorities and organizations responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas the pandemic would have been managed to the least bearable level had every influential people responded to it with the urgency and seriousness that it deserved, they ruined that opportunity with self-deception and overzealous faith that was devoid of reasoning. For example, "many of the states underrated the pandemic potential of Covid-19, with some governors believing that God would not allow Covid-19 to be reported in their states" (Amzat et al. 222), and "many people and faith-based organizations...continued to defy the directives on social distancing and public gatherings by organizing social events, while some worship centres also conducted congregational services" (222).

This is because "Nigeria is a deeply religious country and politicians often use religion as a tool to govern" (Anyanwu et al. 9). Commenting on how the myopic view of some religious organisations and personalities contributed to the spread of the disease, Anyanwa et al. noted that "Akwa Ibom, Rivers

and Kastina states in Nigeria approved mass gatherings for religious activities on easter weekend and did not consider the transmissibility of Covid-19 when a large crowd gathered for one church service” (9). Sadly, the God these individuals hoped to protect them from contracting the virus, the reason why they were bold enough to blatantly refuse to recognize the current health challenges worldwide, and also failed to observe simple preventive measures that did not violate God’s commandments, which the government established to protect them from the pandemic, was the same God that first introduced quarantining as an effective means of preventing the spread of contagious diseases (Leviticus 13). This self-deception and baseless faith that lacked logical reasoning was partly responsible for the exponential spread of the virus.

Disappointedly, again, when the vaccines came out, Mr Yahaya Bello, the executive governor of Kogi State, made a discouraging and baseless statement that “they want to use the Covid-19 vaccines to introduce the disease that will kill you and us” (Onyeji “Nigerian Governor” par.2). The absurdity of all of this is saddening because the disease was not a spiritual attack that they needed a spiritual being to intervene on their behalf. It was arguably said that the virus came as a result of scientific experimentation in Wuhan, China (Omoera and Ogoke 147). They were supposed to reason that since it was caused by science, it would be solved with science too. And the governor that said the vaccine was not a disease did not have any alternative for us. He did not make the virus disappear either because people were dying from the pandemic. Assume we all embraced the fact and acted accordingly without blindly refusing to obey simple instructions, the virus would not have gained as much ground as it did in Nigeria. Simply put, their so-called faith in God and knowledge of him caused us many deaths.

**Stealing from the Poor:** This is another aspect of absurdist aesthetics and corruption that manifests in this play. Although it is subtly presented in the play, it, however, has a significant and powerful implication. The stage direction on page 14 reveals that a blind beggar and his boy-guide enter while Man and Apprentice are still having an animated discussion about the Barber’s condition. Man offers them a penny after preventing Apprentice from driving them away. Apprentice is impressed by Man’s kind gesture that he confesses that Man is a good man. However, the stage directions on page 16 offers us an insight to understand the kind of person Man truly is. As a result, readers/audiences are not fooled easily like the gullible Apprentice.

As Beggars begin to leave, passing in front of the swivel chair where Man is seated, Man extends an arm, and pulls Boy-Beggar back closer towards him...Casually Man dips his hand into Beggar’s bag,

rummaging in it in search of something...Man finds what he has been searching for. Pulls it out of the bag: a bunch of three bananas. He yanks two bananas off the stalk, tosses the remaining one back into the beggar's bag, and shoves Boy off – all done with the casualness of normal activity.

This provides a clear picture that Man's gesture towards the beggars is not free or genuine as it earlier appears. His heartlessness manifests in two more areas. The first is when the Barber slums and lies unconscious on the floor. He does not show concern for the Barber's condition of health. He tells the apprentice to do the job so that he will pay him the money. Secondly, the stage direction from 31–33 states that he collects the money and groundnut he finds in the Barber's pockets. Whereas he excuses himself by saying that Barber would no longer be needing them, it can be recollected vividly that Barber tells him on page 6 that he would not bet with all his money because he has a wife and children to care for. Because Barber lies unconscious and has no power to demand what rightfully belongs to him, Man stylishly steals from him without thinking about the welfare of the family he is leaving behind. Many of countries provided palliatives for their citizens during the first wave of Covid-19 to help them fight hunger during the lockdown. The experience was different in Nigeria. Anyanwu et al. claimed that hunger contributed to the factors that made the lockdown unbearable in Nigeria.

The lockdown...policy...impact[ed] negatively on the majority of people in Nigeria who feed and survive only by what they earn daily... [And the situation was worse] owing to little or no social welfare packages or palliative assistance provided by the government for the most vulnerable people in society. Moreover, lack of payment of salaries by state governments, increase in the price of commodities/foods and tariffs on inadequately supplied utilities like electricity [were] some factors that [made] the lockdown unbearable. (6)

And when palliatives were eventually provided they were secretly kept from the citizens until the information about their looting came out. Many videos on social media in late 2020 captured how warehouses were raided by hungry citizens. The videos also captured the horrible sight of the stampedes that led to the injury and death of some looting citizens. The raiding started in one state and other states followed. Shamelessly, some officials later came out to say that they were planning to distribute the palliatives during their birthday celebration. Disgustingly, some had printed their portrait pictures on the bags of some of the items before they were raided, while others have already sold the items to traders. The absurdism in this is immense because

the same government officials that locked their citizens indoors not to die by corona virus were the same people willing to kill them with “hunger-virus” by diverting and hoarding palliatives. It was sad to learn that our so-called political leaders were more concerned about money while the people they claimed to represent were facing imminent death from hunger. Closely related to this was the hike in commodities the poor needed to survive. For instance, the facemask that was sold for N50 before the pandemic when people were going about their daily businesses and having money to buy whatever they wanted, suddenly went up to N500 immediately after it became known that facemask was needed to fight against the virus. Yet, the government did nothing about regulating the price until the citizens saved themselves from that situation by resorting to self-made facemasks.

**Wasteful Invitation and Fruitless Dependence:** This is yet another absurdist aesthetic in the play. After so much debate, Man finally allows Apprentice to invite the police. It would have been better if he had supported him to carry Barber to the hospital or if he had told him to call a doctor. Even when the press and a policewoman came, no significant action is taken about Barber’s state of health. The press and the policewoman rather indulge Man in his talk and leave empty-handed afterwards. Time, energy and resources were wasted in the process. In a sense, this is reflected in the 15-man Chinese Covid-19 experts that were invited by the Nigerian government in the heat of the pandemic. It should be recalled that the disease arguably started in Wuhan, China. The battle against the pandemic was still fierce in China at the time the so-called 15-man experts were invited to Nigeria. The Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) rejected the federal government's decision about the plan and “the NMA president, Francis Faduyile, in a statement said the move is a misplaced priority. He described it as “a thing of embarrassment to the membership of the association and other health workers who are giving their best in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic under deplorable working conditions” (Onyeji “Corona virus: Nigerian Doctors” par. 3). Also, “the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC) advised the federal government against the plan, saying it was unnecessary to invite Chinese doctors as Nigeria was already handling the crisis effectively” (Onyeji “Corona virus: Nigerian Doctors” par. 4). But they did not listen. The Director-General of the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Garba Abari, said in defence of the federal government that “the Chinese medical team were only coming to share experiences with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and not to directly take charge of the fight against covid-19 pandemic in the country” (Onyeji “Corona virus: Nigerian Doctors” par. 4).

So on April 8 2020, the 15-man medical team from China arrived at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, Nigeria, in a chartered Air Peace aircraft, and the minister of health, Dr. Osagie Ehare, was at the airport to welcome them. We saw the medical team on the news and all over social media when they arrived in Nigeria. But it was rather saddening to later hear from the minister of health that they did not know the whereabouts of the Chinese experts that FG spent millions of naira to invite. This raised a lot of questions and suspicions. The invitation was both wasteful and absurd in the sense that the millions of naira that could have been used to equip and revamp our healthcare system and facilities, encourage medical research during that critical period and alleviate the citizens' economic and hunger crises were wrongly used. It was a execrable absurdity because the Chinese themselves were still suffering from the pandemic.

**Pursuit of Self-Interest over the Interest of Others:** This trait is noticed in the character of Man throughout the play. For instance, Man allows the press photographer to snap Barber as long as they were the parts he wants them to snap. But immediately they decide to snap the back while Man is offering them the anus, he stops them from continuing their job. A similar thing happens to the policewoman. Man wants her to ask him questions in the "internationally prescribed and recognized order." But when she could not ask the questions to follow the sequence he believes is the right process, he immediately stops cooperating with her. This implies that for things to work they must go in the direction of his interest irrespective of what is at stake. It was common knowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic was air borne and spread faster crowded environments. At least, that was what the government told us and we believed. As a result, schools, markets, clubhouses and worship centres were shut down without resistance. Celebrities that hosted people in celebration of their birthdays, like Funke Akindele, were greatly penalized for disobeying the law of social distance.

It was, therefore, disappointing to see that because of elections the same social distance parameter was disregarded and caution was thrown to the wind by the same authorities that told us the disease spread crowded situations. The country was supposed to be in a state of health emergency and a sane person would have expected that political campaigns and elections would be put on hold until the threat of the pandemic was completely obviated. But this was not the case. Those in the 'corridors of power' were more interested in the elections than protecting the citizens from the pandemic because they wanted to be sure of their second tenure. Their oppositions did not behave any different because they were also more interested in pursuing their self-interest than the concern about Covid-19. Consequently, the citizens

were exposed to the disease just because their so-called political leaders were blinded by their selfish interests. This action later became part of the reasons many citizens started disbelieving the existence of the disease and claiming that the government was lying to them.

### **Conclusion**

Corruption is a cancerous socioeconomic crime that can ruin a nation faster than a deadly pandemic, if not checked. Although it is as old as man on the surface of the earth, people must not allow it to become their culture because it is impossible to enjoy peace, growth and development in a place where dishonest, fraudulent, manipulative and deceitful conducts are given room to flourish. Sadly, this is gradually becoming a way of life among Nigerian politicians or political class as reflected during the Covid-19 pandemic in the country. But as a tool for correcting social ills, theatre could be employed for this purpose. Interestingly, the theatre has learned to adapt to new challenges to rise to societal defence whenever the need arises. Consequently, its absurdist form is best suited for the situation where elected leaders may greedily decide to exploit an unfavourable socioeconomic condition such as a pandemic outbreak as an opportunity to steal and embezzle public funds while the death of their citizens is imminent. This is because the absurdist theatre can make a mockery of corrupt practices and hold perpetrators in derision to bring about positive change in society. Theatre professionals should make it their duty to perform absurdist theatre to always mock corruption and its perpetrators. Such an engagement could serve as a check of corrupt practices that can lead to a gradual positive change and development. And since absurdist theatre emphasizes minimalism in every aspect of its performance, it is the best theatre practice to embrace in a pandemic era where a large gathering is discouraged.

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# COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST MINORS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Sexual violation of minors has become a global endemic problem. Whether in the families, social centres, schools, market places, churches or mosques, sexual violence against minors continues unabated. Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying lockdown seemed to have escalated the problem. The manner in which Nigerian media (especially the newspapers) reported sexual violence against minors during Covid-19 lockdown necessitated public outcry among well-meaning Nigerians. Using Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), this paper argues that media reportage of such crime is poor and was done merely to increase tension and suspicion in the society; for beyond this cosmetic approach to the issue, nothing has been heard afterwards. The paper relies on review of relevant literature, some captions on sexual exploitation of minors in selected Nigerian newspapers and internet sources. Quantitative research methodology and content analysis of three newspapers; *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* was adopted in the study. It concludes that the press has abandoned its social responsibility to the public by its inability to pursue such cases to a logical conclusion; a disservice to the nation and humanity at large.

**Keywords:** Media, Covid-19, Lockdown, Sexual violence, Minors, SRT.

## **Introduction**

The year 2020 was remarkable in world history for three obvious reasons. First, it was a year that recorded rapid spread of a pandemic. Second, it was a year that recorded the highest number of simultaneous deaths by a pandemic all over the globe and third, a year that witnessed the greatest fear, uncertainty and despair among the inhabitants of the earth. Beginning from December, 2019 when Covid-19 was first traced to Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China, both mass media and social media were awash with the news of the new pandemic. Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) as it was called (before the nomenclature, changed to Covid-19), spread like a wildfire all over the globe and killed millions of people regardless of race or creed within a few months (Omoera and Ogoke 149-150). In the absence of vaccine and any known medication, coupled with increasing death toll nations began to impose lockdowns as a primary measure to checkmate the spread. Consequently, fear of sudden death gripped humanity. Covid-19 spread rapidly within the first

two months of its discovery. With increasing number of infections, Nigeria also joined the rest of the world in lockdowns in March, 2020. This first phase of lockdown affected residents in Nigerian mega cities like Federal Capital territory, Lagos and Port Harcourt. This was between March and April. Other states in Nigeria later announced lockdowns that restricted movements all over the country. The restriction imposed by lockdown increased both domestic and gender-based violence. Some states like Edo, Benue, Ogun, Oyo, Kaduna, Taraba, Niger, were worse hit with gender based violence. Social media spread such news fast. There has never been a time in the world history that impact of social networks like face book, twitter, become more effective in dissemination of information like in 2020. As lockdowns became the norms all over the globe, so also did rise in crime; as well as insecurity of life and property.

The most worrisome form of insecurity during Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 in Nigerian was the spike of violence against children. Though violence against minors in the contemporary period manifests itself in form of physical abuse such as pouring hot water or piercing a child with sharp objects, the most common features; sexual violation of minors, is on the on the increase. According to UNICEF report, “every year, millions of girls and boys around the world face sexual exploitation. Another report further states that “some 15 million girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex in their life time” (“Violence against Children” unicef.org). Covid-19 lockdowns increase the spike of sexual violation of minors because ‘the perpetrators’ live with ‘the victims.’ The United Nations’ report on gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria claims that in March 2020, a total of 346 GBV incidents were reported in 24 states while in the first part of April, the number increased to 796, showing an increase of 56 percent in just two weeks. Lagos recorded the highest number among the states reported during that period. UNICEF Global Annual Results Report 2020 also states that “around 17.8 million women, girls and boys were provided with GBV interventions across 84 countries. That is five times the number reached in 2019. Covid-19 has accelerated the scale-up of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse...” (10). Tade Oludayo’s article, “A Routine Activity: Analysis of Select Rape Cases during Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria”, also gives us an insight into cases of sexual violence in Nigeria at that period. He claims that “between January and May 2020, Nigeria’s Inspector-General of Police stated that the force arrested 77 suspects associated with 717 rape cases. Out of this figure, six hundred and thirty-one have been charged to court while 55 were still being investigated” (1).

Awosola and Omoera contend that child sexual abuse “is largely underreported and usually goes unpunished in our society (125). One of the reasons for this, according to Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji is the fear of

stigmatisation (2). In fact, violation of minors seems to have become a norm in the contemporary period. It is worrisome to note that despite the existence of many laws meant to protect children such as “The Child Act 2003”, “The Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP)”, and “Criminal Code and the Penal Code”, more children are being defiled on daily basis in Nigeria. In 2018, there was a case of serial rape of a 13-year old girl, Elizabeth Ochanya, by two members of her extended family that eventually led to her death. Though this case was reported and one of the rapists apprehended, the second culprit is still at large. Recently, a 14-year-old Keren Happuch lost her life as a result of rape at Premiere Academy Lugbe, Abuja. Though the school authority is denying the fact, a medical examination report conducted by her family before her death, indicates that condom was found inside her vagina. This has led to a strident outcry for justice especially from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One of such organisations is “Men against Rape Foundation, Abuja”. The Executive Director of the NGO, Lemmy Ughegbe, has called on the government and other stakeholders to do the needful in order to see that the pedophiles molesting children were brought to book. Regrettably, only mention of the case in the Federal House of the Assembly was achieved.

Though many reasons have been adduced for the increase in rape and sexual exploitation of minors, little is done to checkmate this ugly trend. More worrisome is the fact that such act constitutes a heavy burden on children in Nigeria and has many health implications. The reasons why some minors died after sexual abuse is because “the victims also do not present (sic) to the health facility for medical evaluation unless there is an obvious health challenge; they, therefore, do not get medical help to overcome the trauma associated with the crime” (Oseni, Lawani, and Oyediji 2). It is in this context that this article explores newspaper reportage of violation of minors during Covid-19 lockdown with a view to exposing the nonchalant attitude of the Nigerian press towards checkmating such social malaise. In doing this, we shall adopt the United Nations Convention definition of a minor/ a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years” (2016 Report to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). In this connection, some of the gender-based violence or sexual violence incidents reported during Covid-19 pandemic are closely looked out.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This discourse is anchored in the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) of the media as propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory was an outcome of Robert Hutchins Commission Report of 1947. SRT can be said to be an intellectual effort aimed at establishing press freedom that opened a window for one to express one’s opinion irrespective of one’s status

in the society. The theory was borne out of the necessity to correct the anomalies of the past when the press engaged “in sensationalism, invasion of privacy, defamation of character and other negative activities” (Baran, and Davis 114). Consequently, emphasis is laid on “the need for an independent press that scrutinises other social institutions and provides objective, accurate news reports. The theory calls on the media to be responsible for fostering productive, and creative “great communities”. Accordingly, “the social responsibility theory, rests on the notion of free press” (Asemah, Nwammuo, and Nwam-Uwaoma 49). Some of the basic principles of the theory as enumerated by McQuail include; the media should accept and fulfill certain obligation to the society; the obligations are mainly to be met by setting high professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance; and in accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating with the framework of law and established institutions (73).

### **Literature Review**

A rich body of literature exists on gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and its causes. This includes Tade and Udechukwu (5); Ekweonu, (10); Utoh- Ezeajugh and Anijah (2); Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji (3); Adebayo and Kolawole (3); Mulroney and Chan (25); and Berns (2). Tade and Udechukwu’s shows that the age range of victims from 1-10 represent 33 percent, of the entire victims of sexual abuse under study (5). This simply means the case of pedophilia is high. Though both male and female are victims, female gender is more vulnerable. The common factor among the victims of such violence is either physical burden such as injury in the private part or other parts of the body or psychological burden, such as emotional trauma. In the opinion of Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji, “victims of sexual abuse often sustain genital and bodily injuries and can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. These health challenges often are not referred to health experts thereby causing death of the victims” (3). The sad story is that victims of sexual abuse are dependents who often are not even aware of the health implication of their condition. Adults, who often are the perpetrators of this act pay little or no attention to traumatic experiences of these minors. This why the press is very important and can act as a watchdog of the society. The press can achieve this by taken up its social responsibility.

Social Responsibility Theory of the press is a clamour for press freedom. This press freedom in Nigeria is lopsided in the sense that the freedom as it is practised, is a prerogative of certain categories of people such as the elite, political office holders and the media owners. Though the press ought to be the watchdog of the society, the capitalist nature of the media seems to have deprived the masses of this privilege. Ejiga and Omirigwe allude to this point

when they observe that the “media enterprise make huge profits by filling their time and space with commercial contents, while less attention is given to people-centred content including content of specialized audience” (137). Media commercialisation is tied to profitmaking. Till date, it remains the heart and soul of its operation. By generating huge revenues through this means, private owners of the media pay little attention to its social responsibility. To say the least, some media ethics have been thrown to the wind, and the public is worse off. With commercialization of the media, what is considered as ‘news’ represents the opinions of the ‘highest bidder’ who could be a politician, a captain of an industry, or government that paid for the news. Ironically, filling air time and space with commercials, implies that other news items have lost ‘news values.’ Ejiga and Omirigwe articulate this fear thus, “the emergence of commercialisation altered the effectiveness of the media to serve public interest” (140). Regrettably, what is circulated on the pages of Nigerian newspapers in some cases are ‘fabricated lies’ meant to serve as propaganda. “Rather than working for the interest of the public for the development of the masses, they represent the ruling class, thereby making the voices of the poor unheard” (Ekharefor and Akintaro 208). Here lies the problem this paper seeks to address. ‘Irresponsibility of the press’ has caused more harm to the society at large prompting concerned citizens to ask; ‘is Nigerian press really free? Is violence against minors under reported? And when reported, does the press follow up such report to logical conclusion? Sexual abuse is an offence under sections 216 and 218 of Chapter 21 of the Nigerian Criminal Law. The law stipulates that the age of sexual consent is 18 for both sexes and offender is sentenced to a minimum of 12 years. Meanwhile Section 358 of the Criminal Code Act applicable in Southern Nigeria states that the punishment for rape is imprisonment for life. Despite the penalties attached to rape, enforcement of this law receives little or no attention and the Nigerian press remain passive in most cases.

The masses are faced with dire consequences as a result of this failure of the press to fulfill its social obligations. A seemingly dysfunctional society such as Nigeria, no doubt, will experience high crime rate. The media, especially the press can help to reduce crime if the interest of the masses is made a priority. A state of anomie, can only guarantee total break-down of law and order. In the contemporary Nigerian reality, crime wave is alarming. Sola attributes this to government failure to provide good leadership to the people such as basic education, social security for the aged among others. For him, “Nigerian media’s romance with foreign films-laced with violence and sex” is to be blamed” (131). While apportioning blame to the media, (especially the digital media) lack of proper parental guidance still bears the greater blame. Parenting in Nigeria has suffered a terrible setback as a result of multiple

challenges. When a child is raised by irresponsible parents, nobody should expect miracle from such a child. The level of crime differs from one society to another and there is hardly a crime free society. However, it is the responsibility of the government and other state actors, such as the security operatives, to tame down the wave of crime. It has often been argued that “crime, violence, make news reports juicy---”because they “sell newspapers and programmes” (Soola 132). Economic condition is not static, as such, with changing economic and social conditions, newspaper editors are gradually dropping crime news in favour of more profitable political oriented news as such news do not adequately reward reporters, or media owners. Unfortunately, in the contemporary period, fewer people patronise the press and this affect the quality of the news.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods in collection of data. Direct observation and content analysis were used to examine newspapers’ portrayal of sexual violence and exploitation of minors in Nigeria. Most of the reports examined, covered early lockdown (from March to May 2020) and other months of the year. The study population was restricted to three dailies, *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*. The newspapers were selected through online sampling based on their wide readership and the fact that they usually publish news on gender-based violence. A total of 32 cases involving children were examined out of 85 cases reported.

### **Newspapers Reportage of Violence and Rape**

The year, 2020, will ever go down in history of mankind as a year of great misgiving, terror and shock, precipitated by Covid-19 pandemic that ravaged the world. The wave of devastation, orchestrated by the pandemic, had different implications for people of different races, gender, and professions. Restriction of movement opened a floodgate for crime, especially sexual abuse and exploitation. Nigerian newspapers such as *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*, were filled with such reports. A few examples will suffice. According to *Punch* report, the police was frustrating the case of an 18-year-old who was raped on April, 27, 2020, at Narayi Kaduna in Kaduna State by a gang of five friends. Report by Bala Yahaya in *Punch* of June 2, 2020, indicated that Justice Adedayo Akintoye of Lagos High Court sitting at Igbosere, sentenced an ex-Exxon Mobile engineer, James Onuoha to 15 years’ imprisonment on June 1. 2020, for raping his tenant’s 14-year-old niece. Still in Lagos, Tobi Ijalana, a reporter with *Punch* on June 6, 2020 captured the ordeal of one Blessing, a 12-year-old girl, who was defiled while playing alone in their compound. Four masked men gang jumped into the compound and raped her,

repeatedly, leaving her with multiple injuries. A story from the *Vanguard* of May 31 2020, also indicated that 11 men were arrested for raping a 12-year-old girl in Dutse Local Government Area of Jigawa State. On June 5 2020, Esther Onyegbula reported that Adeyeye Oluwatosi, a Botany student of Lagos State University, was arrested for molesting a minor, his 3-year-old step-sister.

A frightening report appeared on *ThisDay* June 30, 2020 entitled, "The Rape Scourge in Nigeria". According to the report, on 26 June, the Katsina Police Command reported the arrest of 40 suspected rapists between April and June, 2020. More frightening was a report from *ThisDay* of Thursday November 22, 2020 with the caption, "78 Arrested for Rape of Minors in Jigawa State". Another report on *ThisDay* had it that Ibrahim Haruna, 25-year-old shopkeeper was arrested for allegedly raping a 6-year old girl in Hadejia Local Government Area of Jigawa State. Despite the staggering number, the residents of the area in Jigawa State claimed that the incidents of sexual molestation of minors were under reported. On the other hand, Commissioner of Police, Imohimi Edgal at Police Headquarters Ikot-Akpan-Abia, Uyo Akwa-Ibom, in a press briefing, informed the public about the arrest of a pastor and eleven others for rape and defilement of minors, aged between 13 and 16. Report by Chioma Onuegbu of *Vanguard* of June 25, 2022 alleged that the pastor, Inimfon Inyang, who runs a 'Deliverance Ministry' has been having canal knowledge of the girls, aged 15 years. There were countless reports on gender-violence and sexual exploitation. What appeared to be a common factor in all the cases is that the victims of rape were often silent about their condition. Oludayo states that "rapists were mainly people that the victims knew, such as father, neighbours, clergymen and relatives, very few were strangers."

Official reports from Amnesty International, United Nations (UN), and American Department of State on Sexual and Gender Violence during Covid-19 lockdown were terrifying. According to Amnesty International, "over 3,600 cases of rapes were recorded during the lockdown. UN report also claimed that gender-based violence (GBV), have significantly increased since the lockdown. Three most affected areas were Lagos State, Federal Capital territory (FCT), and Ogun State. It further states that "preliminary information from 24 states shows that in March, alone, the total number of gender-based violence (GBV) incidents reported were 346. There is no gainsaying that violation of minors places psychological and physical burden on our children. Apart from premarital pregnancy and spread of venereal diseases, there are also chances of causing other damages to the child such as vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) and recto vaginal fistula (RVF).

Press freedom requires that the press should be the mouth-piece of the downtrodden. Until that is done, many of our children will continue to be



victims of this dastardly act. Sadly, despite the gravity of the crime, some newspaper organizations tried to cover up news on victims of sexual violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Abandonment of such reports immediately after pandemic did not put Nigerian press in a good light. It is not only mockery of journalism and the nation, it is also a disservice to humanity.

**A Table 1. Illustrating Frequency of News Reports on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during Covid-19 Lockdown from March - May 2020**

S/N	Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Punch</i>	35	41.2
2	<i>Vanguard</i>	30	35.3
3	<i>ThisDay</i>	20	23.5
	Total	85	100

**Table 2. A Table Illustrating Frequency of News Reports on Violation of Minors during Covid-19 Lockdown from March - May 2020**

S/N	Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Punch</i>	14	43.7
2	<i>Vanguard</i>	10	31.3
3	<i>ThisDay</i>	8	25
	Total	32	100

## Results

Table I shows that a total of 85 cases of GBV were reported. The *Punch* has the highest number of reports (35), representing 41.2 %; followed by *Vanguard* (30), representing 35.3 %; while the least was *ThisDay* (20), representing 23.5 % of the population. Table 2, which shows the frequency reports on the violation of minors, indicates that *Punch* has (14), representing 43.7%; *Vanguard* has (10), representing 31.3 %; while *ThisDay* has (8), representing 25% of the total victims. This result suggests that the frequency of reports on violation of children (minors) is low. The reasons for this maybe a lack of interest in the subject matter, owing largely because the victims

suffered psychological trauma and the perpetrators of the immoral acts are sometimes close relatives of the victims.

This major concern of this study is not only poor reportage of the issue but also absolute neglect of the cases of sexual violence against minors. Sexual violence of minor is a socio-cultural issue that can lead to traumatic stress disorder but can be reduced to a barest minimum if only the media can take up its social responsibility. During the lockdowns there were cases of defilement of children reported to the police and even the media that were ignored. There are Laws meant to protect children from violence/abuse such as Criminal Code, The Penal Code, The Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, and The Child Rights Act 2003. Nigeria is also a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child. What stops the press from at least sensitising the public on the legal implications? Who will enforce these laws without the press playing an important role? The position of this article is that if the Nigerian press continues to play to the gallery, the nation will be sorrier for it. Irresponsibility on the part of Nigerian media can only spell doom for the country. With this kind of attitude, the perpetrators of the noxious crimes may go scot-free. Though the law criminalizes incest and provides up to 12 years for the culprit, enforcement has not been taken seriously, and so, the crime continues unabated.

## **Conclusion**

There is a gross negligence of this upsurge in the country, either because it affects mainly the girl-child or because the perpetrators are family members and friends. This researcher notes with utmost concern that, while the press looks the other way despite public outcry on the matter, some non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are pushing for justice for children who were sexually molested. It is concluded, therefore, that the print media (newspapers) live up to their social responsibility by framing the spike of sexual violation of minors in Nigerian society. Since framing draws the audience attention to a particular topic, the only way to get justice and curtail the spike in sexual abuse of minors, is for the press to synergise with relevant NGOs to blow it up. There is no gainsaying that healthy children will make a healthy nation and a progressive one. Until there is prompt intervention, investigation and prosecution of rape, sexual violation cases, Nigerian children are not safe.

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# EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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## **Abstract**

Before the emergence of social media platforms (SMPs) like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Zoom and many others, theatrical performances were carried out in dedicated theatre buildings or open air theatres in different parts of the world, since the classical Greek era down to the contemporary times. These performances have continued to be an art. Within the last few decades, however, the emergence of social media as a dynamic space in the electronic media super highway has provided a new 'stage' for contemporary entertainment and social trends worldwide. Social media audiences (SMAs) are now provided with a new form of entertainment that does not require their presence in theatre buildings or production outlets to watch performances. The exigency of this paradigm shift from theatre buildings or stage performances to social media platform is rife and thus, has posed a huge challenge to stage performances as they are gradually going extinct in many parts of the world. Social media platforms have dismantled issues of insecurity and have encouraged the switch from analogue to digital ways of doing productions. With the outbreak of Covid-19 in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China and its spread across the world, SMPs have continued to provide an alternative stage for theatrical performance as thousands of performances are streamed live through them to the end users/SMAs. Adopting the social responsibility theory and media dependency theory, the study examined selected production companies and individual practitioners, using interviews and content analysis methods to evaluate the impact of the 'communication revolution', since theatre itself is a form of communication. The conclusion reached is that the world is now technologically-driven and virtually everything has gone digital. Theatrical performances cannot be left out. Therefore, theatre scholars and practitioners are encouraged to take advantage of social media platforms (SMPs) to reinvent their trade.

**Keywords:** Theatrical performances, SMP, Entertainment, SMA, Communication revolution.

## **Introduction**

Since the Greek era, when theatre began as a form of worship/supplication to Dionysus, the performances were well structured

and performed before an audience and at specific periods of the year. This performativity moved to Rome with little modification and extended to different parts of the world. Till date, the practice of theatre remains mainly an interactive activity where, from its structure, even as Peter Brook's theory of the *Empty Space* holds, the audience is placed at the forefront of theatrical productions. Theatre as a discipline has multiple meanings and has been viewed by different scholars from different perspectives. Owuamalam conceives theatre to mean an art form that captures human experiences in an audio-visual manner and present same for the appreciation of an audience (53-54). This means that theatre as an art transcends the act of entertainment as it subsumes the capacity to present the experiences of the society in various ways.

Another point is that theatre can be engaged in so many areas such as film, stage and radio. This implies that theatre professionals can use any of the aforementioned media to present societal happenings. For instance, Anyanwu contends that "there is no argument as to whether film is a product of arts, especially of theatre arts, from which it took its primordial form" (62). It is within this context that this article busies itself with emerging social media as the new platforms for theatrical productions. It is interesting to note that within the last decade, the theatre has found new platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, and WhatsApp, among others, through which its productions are aired to the audiences via streaming. The reality that confronted humanity in the last two years, as a result of the advent of the corona virus disease popularly called Covid-19 pandemic, necessitates full usage of the new areas stated above.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Social Responsibility Theory and Media Dependency Theory are apt and relevant to this study. The latter propounded in 1976 by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur proposes the explanation of the correlation between media dependency and media effects (Littlejohn et al. 302). This theory holds that citizens depend on media information to meet their particular needs. The former is aimed at providing a model in which the mass media has certain obligations to the society (Hasan 20), with the goal that ....the media as a whole is pluralized, indicating a reflection of the diversity of society as well as access to various points of view (Siebert cited in Anaeto et al. 12). Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria around March 28 2020, the country has experienced partial to full lockdowns of all kinds, leading to interruptions in the major sectors of the economy. Theatre productions were also affected, particularly the film industry popularly called Nollywood.

The government during the pandemic placed a restriction on all forms of social gatherings; people were not allowed to attend public functions and this affected theatre practice as the practitioners could not present their productions as a social responsibility since the audience were also not available to attend live theatrical productions in public theatres or university-based theatres. The exigency of this paradigm shift from theatre buildings or stage performances to the social media platform (SMP) is rife and thus, has posed a huge challenge to stage performances as they are gradually going extinct in many parts of the world. Social media platforms (SMPs) have dismantled issues of insecurity and have encouraged the switch from analogue to digital ways of doing productions. The recent spate of the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced this, since the outbreak in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China and its spread across continents of the world, social media platforms have continued to provide an alternative stage for theatrical performance as thousands of performances from all over the world are streamed live through SMPs to end users/SMAs. Terkula Adaa, founder of Heritage Theatre Troupe Makurdi said in an interview with the researchers that:

The year 2020 was a blank year just like in the history of theatre we are told of the Dark Age. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic took away everything from us. As a theatre owner, I do performances round the year, we hardly stretch a month without performances, but since the outbreak of the pandemic and the restrictions imposed on social gatherings by the government, our theatre has gone dry as we continue to witness low patronage. We are challenged to looking into an alternative means of doing our productions. Our desire is to build the trust of our audience and migrate from just physical performances to online and virtual performances. This we have started doing in our little way by streaming our recorded videos on our YouTube channel and the viewership we are getting there is gradually giving us the feeling that by the time we migrate totally to the new media platforms, we could still have audiences to watch our performances.

The concern of this article that sees the emerging platforms like YouTube, Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp and, among others, as handy and viable platforms that the theatre and its practitioners can rely upon to continue to thrive, irrespective of whatever challenges that might surface.

### **Nature and Development of Digital Platforms**

The society has continued to grow beyond the dependence on human beings for most activities. Civilization, particularly digital breakthrough with different kinds of new media platforms have replaced much of the work for



which the physical presence of human beings is required. The advent of new media platforms around the world and Nigeria in particular has become a gateway to the socio-economic development of society. Recently, the clamour by many countries to migrate fully to digital platforms has further strengthened the yearnings for a more inclusive use of new media platforms. The point is noted in a report by the Presidential Advisory Committee on digitization that:

The concept of convergence refers to separate such as voice (and telephone features), data (and productivity applications) and video that now share resources and interact with each other, to create new efficiencies. In practice, it is the interlinking of computing and other information technologies, media content and communication networks that have arisen as a result of the evolution and of the internet as well as the activities, products and services that have emerged in the digital media space. (50)

The rationale for this was built on the 2006 recommendations by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a world body that is vested with the power of managing and regulating information and communication technology. This body had resolved as cited in Onabajo that “all countries in ITU region 1 (Europe, the former Soviet Republics, Africa, Middle East as well as Islamic Republic of Iran) should move from analogue to digital broadcasting services by 17th June, 2015...”(11). This shows that the globe is growing rapidly in different sectors, the most prominent area being information and communication technologies (ICTs), in which significant growth has been recorded. This new wave of life has provided the society with the avenues of doing new and remarkable things with ease on digital wavelengths. These changes and developmental strides in human existence are masterminded by globalization. Globalization as a concept has multi-faceted meanings and definitions. Sacks conceptualizes it as “the interconnectedness of the world through new systems of communications” (26). Keohane sees globalization as “a state of the world involving networks of interdependence at multi-continental distances, linked through flows of capital and goods, information and ideas, people and forces, as well as environmentally and biologically relevant substances” (par.1).

Brittan views globalization as a whirlwind of relentless and disrupted change that leaves governments helpless and leaves a trail of economic, social, cultural and environmental problems in its wake (par.2). Many other scholars have examined globalization as it affects the world in a new imperial age. From John S. Saul to Charles Derber and Joseph Stiglitz. We are, however, concerned with the discourse about how theatre has responded to globalization, not in

the sense as “globalizing of vulnerability” post-September 11, and post Covid-19, but how “globalization demands a world of open borders, whose goods and services, people, and money are easily and safely exchanged” (Derber 6). Furthermore, Yiakoumetti posits that:

We are now, in late post-modernity, experiencing the effects of globalization and transnationalism on societies in general... As we continue to travel and/or migrate, there is a heightened inter connectivity between people which breaks the traditional boundaries associated with national states. For many, the congruence of social and geographic spaces has become blurred because of their transnational ties to multiple spaces. These ties are no doubt, facilitated by increased global transportation and telecommunication technologies. (13)

From the foregoing, it is clear that the concept and its operationalization around the world has helped in the advancement of the course of human development. Today, with the help of ICT and its variety of platforms the world is connected to itself and the barriers of communication and information sharing is bridged. Throughout the world and particularly, since the beginning of the 19th century through the 20th and 21st centuries, digital platforms have developed beyond human imagination. These digital platforms continue to evolve in stages as the need arises and as society continues to grow. The fact remains that the entire process of digital development began in the West and as we have mentioned previously, globalization played and has continued to play a huge role in ensuring that these digital entertainment platforms are within the reach of every individual on earth.

The emerging trends and development of these platforms have brought new ways of doing things globally. A recent one is a digital platform called Zoom that became popular in the wake of the corona virus pandemic and took the centre stage towards the end of 2020. Ever since, the global community has become more inclined to deploying digital platforms for doing businesses of all kinds. Governments around the world have equally urged their citizens to leverage on the opportunities provided by the variety of digital platforms to doing things differently so as to avoid overcrowding in places to curtail the continued spread of Covid-19 and other related diseases around the world and within Nigeria in particular. Many organisations and institutions around the globe have continued to deploy different digital media platforms to initiate conversations. Conferences and workshops are now held online without necessarily having people present at the venue of the conference.

This development has provided the theatre with viable options as practitioners within this space of time have seen new media platforms as alternatives through which theatrical productions can get to their audiences

and clients alike, towards harvesting the corresponding rewards. On a whole, the nature and development of digital platforms are gradual but at the same time a radical one since the internet space is taking over the spaces of interpersonal communication around the world. In virtually all countries of the world, there is the presence of one form of digital platform or the other that people use in sharing information or other products and services.

### **Online Platforms for Theatre Productions: Concepts and Kinds**

Today, online platforms like Zoom, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and many others have become a new form of stage for theatre productions across the world. For a very long time, in the history of theatre practice, there has been two traditionally most used media platforms of entertainment and showcasing theatre productions. The first included live performances in theatre houses, be they educational theatres, civic theatres, commercial theatres or community theatres. The other is the film medium that screens recorded images with storylines in cinemas and digitized in DVDs that are sold to a variety of audience across the globe for rewarding viewership. The story is different in the present day because there are several platforms through which theatrical productions can be sold to the audience across the globe. Let's consider some of the online platforms and how they can be leveraged on by theatre practitioners in showcasing and marketing theatrical productions.

**Facebook** as an online platform was founded on February 4th 2004 by Mike Zuckerberg and his fellow college students/roommates. The process was started by a group of young boys who wanted to bridge the gap of long distance and at the same time enhance free flow of communication among themselves. This initiative has become a global entity. "As of 2020, Facebook claimed 2.8 billion monthly active users and it is ranked seventh in global internet usage" (Facebook par.1). With internet connectivity, no one is restricted from using Facebook, provided such a person is above eighteen years of age as the required age for opening an account. Since the introduction of Facebook as an online platform in 2004, most countries of the globe have taken advantage of this platform as a means of communication and information sharing. Through it, information and other services are provided online, businesses of all kinds are traded online without necessarily having to meet with the business owners. People place online orders for goods needed even from far away countries via Facebook and the products are supplied to them in whatever location.

This digital platform has given the theatre and its practitioners a viable template to trade their act. As well, Facebook platform has helped filmmakers,

comedians, and many other content developers in the entertainment industry to showcase and promote their art. In an interview in July 2021, Lawrence Agbo, filmmaker/comedian, informed the researchers that:

I graduated as a theatre artiste some nine years ago in one of Nigeria's famous universities with a good honours degree and my passion for the profession is a burning one. Right from my undergraduate days, I had wished to become a great actor, director and filmmaker. After graduation, I moved to Lagos thinking it was a bed of roses for theatre graduates, the story is sour and you wouldn't want to hear it. I returned to my town in Apa Local Government Area of Benue State and began to develop little comedy kits using my phone and streaming them on my Facebook platform. The number of likes began to increase and each kit I dropped attracted considerable viewership. This platform called Facebook brought me to limelight and I became a household name in the comedy world with the user name #McBornAgain#. Today, people call me for different kinds of jobs within the country and I am making a living out of the benevolence and opportunity provided me by Facebook. Don't forget I have opened a YouTube channel where I drop my works and make some cash to survive as well.

This is just one out of many success stories of practitioners of the theatre who have used the medium to showcase and of course sell their products. One of the major highlights of Facebook as an online platform is that it is highly interconnected and its interconnectedness is what has arguably made it the most-accessed online platform. The point we are trying to establish here is that one does not necessarily need to be a direct friend of the content owner but once any content is shared on the platform by one's friend, such a content can be viewed from anywhere around the globe by subscribers or operators of the platform. It is in this context that this paper posits that this online platform since its emergence has continued and will continue to provide the theatre and its practitioners with an avenue through which their contents can be aired. The platform became better or more relevant in the wake of the corona virus pandemic. It was through this platform that several of the videos of the deadly virus and ways of preventing it were presented and shared amongst nations of the world. This viability transcends mere going to the theatre house to watch a performance or to the cinema to watch a movie.

**YouTube** is another online platform that allows its users to upload and share their videos across the globe. YouTube has given theatre and its practitioners the opportunity to leverage on its services to promote and market their entertainment content(s)/productions. Through this platform, different

contents in video clips, TV show clips, music videos, documentary films, movie trailers, live streams, educational videos and blogging videos are all uploaded for easy access throughout the globe provided one is in an area with internet services and free range rights to the usage of YouTube in such a country. YouTube was introduced or invented by three Americans, namely, Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim in February 2005. Following its viability and profile yielding benefits, Google bought the site in November 2006 for US\$ 1.65 billion and the platform now operate as a subsidiary of Google, as the second most popular website in the world, behind Google (Alexa Internet par. 3). Also, Loke reported that as of 2019, “more than 500 hours of video content are uploaded to YouTube every minute. And it is estimated that YouTube generates a whopping sum of US \$15 billion as revenue annually” (par. 1).

Recently, the movie and music industry in Nigeria and elsewhere had taken advantage of YouTube in promoting and marketing their contents. This is evident in the number of movies and musical contents on the YouTube online platform. One is only required to have internet connectivity to access any kind of information that one needs. The situation has even improved and is oscillating higher because, once one has a YouTube channel and hits a particular subscription mark, one begins to enjoy a certain dividend as reward. This has spurred many content developers to put their contents on the YouTube channel so as to begin to not only promote their products but earn money as well. Many Departments of Theatre Arts in several Nigerian universities have opened YouTube channels. Productions in those departments are uploaded to the channels and streamed for viewership. For instance, the Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos has a YouTube channel. Since its creation, departmental productions are uploaded on [www.youtube.com/TFAUnijosTV](http://www.youtube.com/TFAUnijosTV), and through the link, all production in the Department of Theatre and Film Arts can be viewed anywhere in the world. This is a positive development because it prepares the department for the eventual migration from the analogue (live) stage performances to the virtual space.

Daniel Musa Yaki, a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos also operates a YouTube channel named “Yaki’s Art” where he streams all his dance productions. He told us that “the only way I can sell myself to the public is by streaming my works to my YouTube channel. There, I am fully convinced that lovers of dance will view my craft. But don’t forget also that, I will begin to make some cash once I hit the mark of one thousand viewership” (Daniel M. Yaki in an interview with the researchers in 2021). Another lecturer, Justin Tijime Awauwer of the Department of Dramatic

Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University equally has a YouTube channel through which all his dance productions are streamed.

**Zoom** is another online platform invented by Eric Yuan. Yuan is someone with vast knowledge of telecommunications, having worked with telecommunications companies like CISCO Systems and WebEx for many years. His passion to bridge the gap of long distances birthed the world acclaimed telecommunication online media called Zoom which today, has become one of the most used online media in the world. It was popularized by the Covid-19 pandemic. The journey started a very long time ago for Yuan but his media platform received little or no recognition. In the wake of the corona virus outbreak that ravaged the world, the platform became handy. It has the capacity to admit as many people as possible to participate in a conversation provided the intended participants have internet connectivity. Since the beginning of 2020, Zoom has become both a popular online platform. Governments of the world, universities, business firms and families have adopted it for holding conversations to avoid or reduce interpersonal contacts. The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have leveraged on this platform to continue to make the arts industry viable.

### **Characteristics and Management of Online Platforms**

With the advancement in digital technology, information sharing has changed to a large extent. The extent to which this has changed is in the nature and manner to which information is transmitted globally. Fundamentally, information is transmitted using codes across regions. In another sense, the media platforms or online platforms as we refer to them in this article has brought about convergence of different kinds in information sharing. Information is passed via text, audio, visual gadgets, among others. This could be the radio, television, computer sets or phones. With the above mentioned gadgets, information gets across to the target audience without delay and a response is got.

Another major characteristic of the online platform is that it allows both the consumers and the users to access every information shared. The point here is that within the parameter of the online platform, a person is at liberty to engage another person in a far location and still get instantaneous response without break in transmission. Online platforms have provided a more engaging environment where the producer and the user are on the same page engaging simultaneously. In this new age of online platforms, the world has become a more conglomerate entity. Therefore, global network is just but a thing at the tip of every individual who wants to be informed of the

happenings across the globe. Global businesses, intelligence, music, arts and many other services are made bare through online platforms.

### **Desirability and Relevance of New Media**

The new media has come to stay and it has taken over virtually every aspect of human existence. The platform has continued to make wave in different areas. The desirability and relevance of new media platforms is on the increase and it will continue because researchers are researching into possible ways of making living more pleasurable and flexible for humanity. Lippe et al. in their attempt to advance reasons with regard to the values and opportunities provided by the new media platforms, they were emphatic when they said that “It is very true that digital platforms and other very important technologies might have driven near-term inequality as innovations have increased the level of out puts while at the same time simultaneously cutting the cost of low skilled work” (par.1). The point is that media platforms have created more space for interaction among people. A considerable percent of the activities done across the globe are chaperoned via digital platforms. Schools and businesses of all kinds make use of media platforms to share information and at the same time have their activities done through media platforms. This strengthens the argument that Lippe et al. have advanced that the new media and other technologies have helped to improve innovations and outputs in different sectors of the economy (par.2).

In the Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos, the use of media platforms has become rife. Recently, an adaptation of Iyorwuese Hagher’s play, *We Protest* was done by the diploma students via radio drama medium. It had the playwright and other guests from across the country in attendance via Zoom. The course lecturer remarked to the researchers: “my intention is to bridge that gap between audiences, either physically or virtually. The new normal caused by corona virus that stares theatre practice in the face must be dismantled through the utilization where audiences can partake in a production from anywhere without necessarily being present in the theatre hall” (Longgul Dakwom in an interview with the researchers 2021). The playwright in his response to the production, applauded the course lecturer, Longgul Dakwom and the department for taking bold steps towards embracing the new media platforms. The department has taken into account inter-mediality as a sure way of teaching and doing productions and in the recent past, most of the productions in the department use different approaches to telling their stories through this inter-mediality medium. This has continued to open up discourses on the relevance and desirability of the new media platforms as people continue to engage with the production and its models.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) submitted that “digital media, over the years have opened up and eliminated many barriers of information exchange and go beyond national boundaries” (par.1). With the advent of new media platforms, there is no barrier whatsoever to information sharing. There is a free flow of information since people have handy platforms of different kinds to utilize in the exchange of information and other services. Media platforms have helped the theatre and its practitioners a great deal since many of them have resorted to deploying these media platforms to showcase and sell their productions. This has advanced its desirability and relevance because the viewership of the media platforms is large.

Peak and Lee hold the view that digital media is a very good avenue to the sharing of information but can also be a good tool for the dissemination of maleficent content and propaganda (83-92). The point here is that in so far as media platforms provide the society and its users with great desirable values, it can also be used as an avenue through which maleficent contents could be thrown up. Given the fear expressed by Peak and Lee, Cambron noted that many social media platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter occasionally review their terms of conditions to forbid activities such as “terrorist activities”, “gory content”, “threat of violence” (par.2). This is to say that media platforms ought to be properly managed so as to avoid unwanted streaming of hate speeches or obscene images.

### **Possibilities/Sustainability of Theatrical Performances in the Face of the New Normal**

Media platforms have brought countless possibilities to the world and the theatre profession in particular. In the past, theatrical performances were carried out in theatre houses with the actors performing live to the viewership of the audience. But since the 1990s, particularly within the last decade, the proliferation of media platforms have brought new possibilities in doing theatre. Patrick Jude-Otteh, the Artistic Director of Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT) affirmed in an interview with the researchers that:

The discussion about the online performances started on December 25 2020. The trial performances started in January 2021 and the commercial online performances started in March 2021. We simply got tired of waiting for the ideal situation after Covid-19 lockdown. When we finished the Jos International Festival on March 14, 2020, the lockdown commenced on March 21. We erroneously thought that Covid-19 will end when the lockdown ends. We were thus very confused and shocked when no work was forthcoming and we were bored, hungry and very pessimistic. It was in this mood that we



decided to look for a way out of the situation, hence, online performances. Prior to the December 25 meeting, we actually got a challenge gift from one of our ardent supporters, Prof. Akogun who gave us a monetary challenge to be creative as artistes and find a way to earn a living outside the confines of Covid-19. The funding helped to motivate the push to perform.

Extrapolating from the above, it is pertinent state that the possibilities of new media platforms are enormous and yet to be properly harnessed by theatre practitioners in Nigeria. The question of its sustainability must be answered if truly we have any reason to clamour for migration to new media platform as new means through which theatrical performances can be transmitted, showcased and sold to the general public. Advancing the potential of online platforms and their sustainability, Otteh recounted in an interview that the beginning at Jos Repertory Theatre thus: we had six online trials. First, was within ourselves on Zoom platform. Then we widened the circle to about ten, and then widened the circle again and we now involved the audiences in three countries, then five. After this, we decided to go commercial. We have had four online commercial performances. The fifth is happened in August 29 and another in September 5 all in 2021.

Okigbo observes that “globalization does not simply refer to the objectiveness of increasing interconnectedness; it also refers to cultural and subjective matters, namely, the scope and depth of consciousness of the world as a single entity” (3). This statement has given credence to the governing argument of this study. It makes it clear that the desirability, opportunities and benefits of media platforms remain sacrosanct to theatrical productions. Hamelink cited in Okigbo claims that “globalization refers to the worldwide expansion of media production and distribution companies that trade on the emerging global media markets” (33). This expansion is evidently facilitated not only by technological development, but also largely through the pressures on countries to open their domestic markets to foreign supplies and the concomitant neo-liberal claim that cultural products should not be exempted from trade rules. The delivery of cultural content has, therefore, become a crucial issue. Nonetheless, as social networking becomes more popular among older and younger generations, it is hoped that sites like Facebook and YouTube would gradually become leading platforms that many businesses of the world including theatre would be conducted on.

It is expedient to note that with every sense of humour that every medium of engagement that cannot be sustained is not worth diving into. This is to say that for media platforms to remain active, policymakers must ensure that the platforms are subjected to integrity test and found worthy of operation

in any country. The reason is not farfetched. Recently, the Federal Government of Nigeria through its Ministry of Information and Culture suspended the use of Twitter in Nigeria by Nigerians, giving reasons why its operation was suspended. To avoid this kind of situation theatre practitioners should migrate a significant percentage of their productions to new media platforms. To do this, it behooves on the practitioners to note all kinds of platforms, their characteristics and the cost of installation and usage to enable them to sustain such platforms. Theatre practitioners have to process the acceptability and readiness of the audience should there be a total switch from the well-known convention of theatre productions to the emerging platforms. This is a gradual process because a majority of the audience might not have the gadgets required to follow up on theatrical performances. But the truth remains that the sampling of audience must be taken to ascertain the readiness of the audience to migration and sustainability of new media platforms. Issues surrounding data and other related network problems must be addressed if truly the new media platforms must be sustained by theatre practitioners.

### **Future of Live Theatre versus Digital Platforms**

The future of live theatre is at the tailboard of a moving vehicle. The justification for the above statement is not farfetched given the realities surrounding live theatre performances in Nigeria and elsewhere. Following the high level of insecurity in Nigeria, many theatre lovers are not prepared to go to any theatre house to watch a live performance. For instance, for over a decade the Department of Theatre and Film Arts of the University of Jos had resorted to doing matinee productions that have contributed to keeping many theatre lovers away from theatrical productions. Many of its productions are done during the day and office hours. This scenario plays out in many other theatres be they commercial, civic, community or educational theatre. With this, one would not be wrong to say that the future of live theatre is threatened.

Another issue that is responsible for the decline in live theatre is the influx of digital platforms. Today, no single production is made sacred like it used to be. In the past, productions were held sacrosanct but today, even before the rehearsal session is concluded for a production, excerpts from such a production saturates new media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. With this pre-knowledge of the production, many of the audiences with high sensibilities develops cold feet for such a production and are not willing to waste either their money or time to go experience it. This unfortunate circumstance takes place even in the movie industry where the production crew members are well versed professionals, but parade scenes from a movie in progress and during its premiere, most audience lose interest in such movies having had a peep into their storyline through media platforms.

The future of digital platforms is really at a high pace in this age and time; the internet has made live so easy such that information sharing across the globe is a click away. With these new platforms, the exchange of theatrical performances is a click away. Since the advent of digital platforms, the security threats to the lives of the audience has reduced to a large extent because all an audience needs is to have internet connectivity via his gadget and such an audience can be part of a production anywhere around the world. This has given the audience the opportunities to be part of theatrical productions even abroad without necessary being present and also participating live with the people in the venue.

### **Challenges of Using New Media Platforms to Stream Theatre Performances**

There are several challenges that bedevil online or virtual theatre performances. Patrick Jude-Otteh recounted in an interview with the researchers the experiences of Jos Repertory Theatre:

Jos Repertory Theatre is currently involved in both online and virtual theatre. However, virtual theatre is more expensive and technology-driven but our network and bandwidth is problematic and does not permit a free flow of performances without static breaks while online theatre is cheaper and easier to control. But this involves the streaming of pre-recorded materials with online presences. We had a very recent experience with both at the on-going “All the World’s a Stage” New Swan Shakespeare Festival at the University of California, Irvine. Involving actors from about 23 countries, it is a beautiful mix of both formats, the performances are pre-recorded online while the post-performance discussions are virtual and these two are then uploaded to YouTube Channels and views are tracked.

From the little experience recounted by Otteh, it becomes expedient to note that doing virtual or transmitting online performances is very expensive. For anyone to successfully carry out a virtual performance, such a person is required to have a bandwidth that has the capacity to enable a free flow without static breaks in the course of the performance. In Jude-Otteh’s explanation, we discovered a very salient issue which also serves as a great challenge to virtual or online performances. The fact that productions are pre-recorded before they are streamed through any of the channels is another huge challenge for theatre owners. This is because logistics required for a production must be put in place to ensure that the production is up to standard. The feedback mechanism is not fully present as many who watch these performances virtually or through online platforms are not present to give feedback to the actors or theatre owner(s). This to a large extent has the

capacity of whittling down the quality of productions that are streamed online. In instances of physical performances, the feedback is got immediately without recourse to who is affected or not and the theatre owner(s) with their team make amends to perfect the production for another audience.

Another serious challenge is the issue of content(s) that are streamed online. The audiences are not there to appraise or condemn what is streamed. The theatre owners stream whatever is readily available without recourse to viewership discretion. This is even more common now that a majority of people (both theatre owners and the audience alike) have access to online platforms. In all, streaming online performance could be very taxing and requires a lot of creativity, resources and technology to carry out. Anyone meaning to engage in online performance must ensure that all the equipment needed are available for ease of transmission.

## **Conclusion**

It has been established in this paper that the emergence of social media platforms has largely helped in information sharing across the globe. It is clear from the arguments advanced that some of the media platforms examined served as veritable platforms through which theatrical productions were presented to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. Theatre practitioners throughout the globe and Nigeria in particular have taken advantage of the new media platforms to continue to promote and market their artistic works. It is projected that with the rising profile of new media platforms and the development in technology, the world is likely to migrate to a digital environment where every single transaction will be done via the internet. Opportunely, theatre practitioners have taken appropriate steps to optimally use the new media platforms to advance their profession.

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# SUSTAINING NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN THE COVID-19 ERA: A FOCUS ON SOCIAL MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic to the development of children's theatre in Nigeria and the possibilities of sustaining and promoting it via social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc. Using insights from Sandra Ball Rokeach and Melvin Defleur's Media System Dependency Theory and Dolf Zillmann's Entertainment Theory and adopting both the interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methods, the study argues that the social media entertainment model is an effective means of promoting Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era because of its capacity to reach out to most children irrespective of distance and time. The study, therefore, recommends that for this aim to be achieved, parents and governments should collaborate with experts in children's theatre studies in the provision of necessary materials and proper guiding of children in order not to expose them to corruptive programmes.

**Keywords:** Children's theatre, Social media entertainment, Covid-19 pandemic, 'The Crab.'

## **Introduction**

It is common knowledge that an eruption of any pandemic often leads to huge socio-economic losses and colossal health hazards, most times culminating in a large number of deaths. Therefore, in swift response, health experts usually prescribe a number of control measures to check its spread, among which are: i. constant washing of hands; ii. controlled ways of coughing and sneezing; iii. wearing of face masks; iv. ban on large scale gathering; v. adoption of social distancing measures; vi. restriction of/total ban on movements; and vii. temporary closure of public places, such as markets, schools, churches/mosques, stadiums, clubs and theatres, etc. (Ataguba and Ataguba 12; Omoera, Onyemuchara and Okwuowulu 285).

Corona virus, whose latest phase or variant is disturbing nations, is one of the most recent pandemics to invade the globe. Scientists traced its origin to Wuhan, China, at the tail-end of 2019, hence, the name: 'Covid-19.' It then spread with terrifying speed to various parts of the world leaving in its trail many deaths. Poised to checkmate the spread, the World Health Organisation

(WHO) in collaboration with other international and national health agencies and stakeholders introduced some control measures, prominent among which are: maintenance of social distancing, ban on large gathering, restriction/total ban on human movement and temporary closure of schools, places of worship, stadiums, clubs and other entertainment centres, including theatres. The social distancing measure and the total clampdown on public places have, however, impacted negatively on the operation and growth of the performing arts in Nigeria and elsewhere.

It is observed, for instance, that the closure of schools during the lockdown made it impossible for the few existing experts in the field of children's theatre in Nigeria to interact physically and regularly with their students, let alone engaging in practical performances. At the University of Port Harcourt, for example, the hitherto ever-busy University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre ('The Crab') was under lock and key for several months. The effect is that when academic activities eventually resumed, some of the few facilities in the theatre became rusty, and others even became unusable. Similarly, it was observed that some of the students had lost their acting skills as a result of lack of regular rehearsals. Most of the children that patronised the regular performances at 'The Crab' were equally negatively affected by the closure of the theatre. Three of those interviewed by this researcher expressed displeasure over the closure of the theatre which provided them entertainment. They, however, felt slightly relieved by the few available theatrical/dramatic productions they found on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube, etc., even though they also acknowledged that most of the performances they got online were either exotic or not primarily designed for Nigerian children's consumption. All these triggered the interest of this researcher to embark on this study.

The crucial question, then is: how can Nigerian children's theatre be sustained in the Covid-19 era - characterised by social distancing rules and outright closure of theatres? This article is prompted by that problem and goes on to examine how social media entertainment can serve as a panacea because of its capacity to capture sounds and pictures simultaneously as well as successfully transmit them to millions of children irrespective of distance and time. The study will be anchored in Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur's Media System Dependency Theory and Dolf Zillmann's Entertainment Theory using a combination of interview and analytical approaches. It will be done in three parts with the first focusing on conceptual issues, a definition of 'the child,' 'children's theatre' and 'social entertainment'; the second on the theoretical framework; and the third on methodology and presentation of data and analysis of responses from interview/focus group discussion on how

social entertainment can be gainfully used to promote children's theatre in the Covid-19 era.

The objectives of the study are to: 1. identify different social media platforms that can be used to entertain children in Covid-19 era; 2. examine the impact of social media on Nigerian children's theatre during Covid-19 era and the role of the parents; 3. assess the possible ways through which social media can promote Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era; and 4. evaluate children's views on the use of social media as alternative platform to children's entertainment. Consequently, the research questions are as follow: 1. What are the different social media platforms that can be used to entertain children in the Covid-19 era? 2. What are the impact of social media platform on Nigerian children's theatre during the Covid-19 era and the role of the parents? 3. What are the possible ways through which social media can promote Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era? 4. How do Nigerian children view the social media as alternative platforms to children's theatre in the Covid-19 era?

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Towards Defining a Child**

"The child" constitutes the focal point in the discussion of children's theatre. It is pertinent to first clarify its meaning before proceeding to other issues. For some inexplicable reasons, it is not easy to define a child; and at present, there seems to be no single generally acceptable definition of a child. Sadeeq captures this point in his remarks that the various existing statutes seem to have varying definitions of the word 'child,' "so that a child is a child in one statute but not a child in another" (81). He specifically states that in Nigeria, for instance, "there is a legislative hesitation as to whether a child is properly to be termed a child, a minor or an infant; nor is this the only terminology to be considered" as "there are also juveniles and young persons to be woven into the legal fabric" (81). He further claims that in *The Children and Young Person's Law of Nigeria*, "a child is defined as any person less than fourteen years while a juvenile or young person is any person who has attained the age of 14 years but has not reached the age of 18 years," but that, the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria comparatively defines an adult as any person that has reached the age of 18 years (81).

Based on this, Sadeeq, concludes that people that are below the age of 18 years can rightly be classified as children (81). For the purpose of this paper, we align with Sadeeq's position that a child is any person that is below 18 years. It is, however, necessary to note, as Omoera has observed, that there are various stages of childhood, namely: early childhood (birth to about 5 years),



mid childhood (6 to about 11 years) and late childhood (12 to about 18 years) (206). Ideally, each stage has a form of theatre appropriate for it.

### **Children's Theatre: An Overview**

Many scholars in theatre and media studies have attempted to define children's theatre from different perspectives. Dennis Eluyefa quotes Rosenberg and Prendergast, for instance, as having defined children's theatre as an art form which "consists of a performance of largely predetermined theatrical artwork by actors in the presence of an audience of young people" (82). The emphasis here clearly lies in the dominantly children audience and the predetermined form of the child-centred performance presented for them. Goldberg similarly defines children's theatre as a "formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children (5). He adds that the goal of children's theatre is "to provide the best possible theatrical experiences for the audience (5). However, in defining children's theatre, some other scholars have stressed the need for children to prominently feature in the performances. Eluyefa, for instance, defines children's theatre as "a piece of performance that involves children as actors/or as audience" (82). He maintains that children's theatre is "specifically created and performed for children audience either by children actors or professional adults or a combination of both" (82). Omoera, children's theatre is "an educational instructional approach which focuses on development through drama; it is a relaxed kind of theatre that is geared towards developing the participants" (210).

The major issue worth noting from all these varying meanings is that apart from being child-centred, children's theatre combines teaching and learning with entertainment, what some theatre scholars have variously dubbed "Entertainment Education" (Moyer-Guse 407), "pleasurable activity" (Omoera 206) and "edutainment" (Chidi-Ukagu 21), among others. The common theory emphasised by the above-mentioned scholars - that children's theatre combines education with fun re-echoes the famous Horatian dictum that the basic function of arts in general is *dulce et util* (to teach and entertain). Aristotle maintains the same view when he asserts that drama is a means through which children learn their first lessons (*Poetics BK IV*). In this study, children's theatre is viewed from a holistic perspective as "theatre that involves children in one way or the other - theatre for children, theatre with children and theatre by children" (Eluyefa 79). As already hinted, a veritable feature of children's theatre is its use of entertainment to teach the children audience various issues of life.

## Social Entertainment

Generally, social entertainment refers to the skilful use of the various platforms of the social media to provide entertainment and educational programmes to people. *Merriam Webster* defines the social media as all “forms of electronic communication through which users can create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content” (par.3). However, as earlier stated, the focus in this study is on how to use the social media to provide entertainment for children. In relation to children’s theatre, the social media play the dual role of teaching the kids through entertaining programmes, what some scholars now popularly call “Entertainment Education.” Moyer-Guse quotes the Kaiser Family Foundation as having defined entertainment education as “a popular strategy for incorporating health and other educational messages into popular entertainment media with the goal of positively influencing awareness, knowledge, attitudes and/or other behaviours” (407). As Luk has rightly observed that:

The Media and Entertainment (M&E) sector has seemingly moved swiftly in response to Covid-19 by providing online concerts virtually, ramping up e-gaming, offering free entertainment subscription (i.e. communication companies have offered free access to a rotating selection of channels), releasing big blockbuster movies directly online, and animation studios adopting a fully remote working environment.... (“Foreword”)

In the same vein, Harson expresses a strong belief that the social media can be fruitfully used to propagate and sustain children’s theatre in the post Covid-19 era. As he puts it: While I can’t predict the future, I do know that when audiences return, the pandemic’s legacy will likely be that it accelerated the arts ability to connect with audiences through technology” (par.6). Though the social media may not offer exactly the face-to-face form of interaction we experienced in the pre-Covid-19 era, it nevertheless provides an alternative and effective avenue for sustaining children’s theatre in the post Covid-19 era. Chidi-Ukagu, in a recent study on the challenges and strategies for sustaining Nigerian children’s theatre in the Covid-19 era, claimed that the major strategy for sustaining Nigerian children’s theatre in the Covid-19 era is for Nigerian children to join the rest of the world and embrace social entertainment which takes care of the problem of lockdowns and the challenges of observing social distancing (26). That same optimism is still being strongly maintained here because:

1. The social media has the capacity to reach out to many children audience in various parts of the globe.

2. The common gadgets (phones) are widely used by parents/guardians of most children.
3. The gadgets can easily be used by most parents and even their children.
4. The gadgets can be conveniently carried along at all times (and to any place).
5. The internet is accessible at any time of the day in most parts of the globe.
6. The various platforms (Facebooks, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) have audio-visual qualities which greatly appeal to children.
7. The children can access the performances over and over again.
8. Social media entertainment does not expose the children to large gatherings which can expose them to the much-dreaded Covid-19 virus, etc. This means that social entertainment media is only the way out to children's entertainment in Covid-19 era.

At this juncture, it will be necessary to note that Covid-19 is not the first pandemic the world has ever experienced. Mankind has experienced a number of pandemics at various times, each attributed to one cause or the other. In her illuminating study on pandemics, for instance, Lilly Golden has brilliantly recorded some of the pandemics that have so far ravaged the world thus:

- i. **Black Death (aka Bubonic Plague):** This, according to her, erupted in China in 1339, and was later discovered to be caused by bacteria and spread by rats and flea (lice). Golden further asserted that this pandemic led to the death of over 20 million people across the globe.
- ii. **Small Pox (aka Variola):** This was caused by Variola Virus and has, according to Golden, existed for over 3,000 years. It was eventually controlled through variolation and finally defeated through vaccination which was invented by Edward Jenner in 1796.
- iii. **Cholera:** This is a bacteria disease which erupted in England in 1830s, and later spread to other parts of the world leading to millions of deaths.
- iv. **The Spanish Flu of 1918:** The eruption of this pandemic coincided with the World War I and killed over 21 million people across the globe (46-63).

Golden went on to list Ebola virus, which first erupted in Sudan in 1976, HIV/AIDS and SARS as the other major pandemics that have attacked mankind (63).

## Theoretical Framework

### Media System Dependency Theory

Media System Dependency Theory was first proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976. The theory states how society, individuals, corporate bodies, industries, children, etc., depend on the media and how the media depend on people for information to give to the general public. According to Pablo Halpern, Ball-Rokeach and Defleur “proposed that a key variable in understanding how, when, and why media messages influence an audience’s beliefs, feelings, or behaviour is the degree of audience dependence on media sources of information (4). However, Ball-Rokeach defines media system dependency theory as: a relationship in which the capacity of individuals to attain their goals is contingent upon the information resources of the media system – those resources being the capacities to (a) create and gather, (b) processes, and (c) disseminate information (487).

Baran, citing Ball-Rokeach and Defleur, states that “people become increasingly dependent on media and media content to understand what is going on around them, to learn how to behave meaningfully, and for escape” (424). This is true, for both adults and children depend on the media for their information, education, entertainment and general development. Folkerts and Lacy have described six ways of media influence on individuals as follows:

1. **Self-understanding:** People depend on the media to learn about themselves and to grow as individuals.
2. **Social Understanding:** People depend on the media to learn about the world and their community.
3. **Action Orientation:** People depend on the media to decide what to buy and how to act.
4. **Intervention Orientation:** People depend on the media to decide how to behave toward other people.
5. **Solitary Play:** People depend on the media to divert and entertain when they are alone.
6. **Social Play:** People depend on the media to entertain them when they are with friends and family (420).

Media System Dependency Theory shares some similarities with Uses and Gratification Theory. While Uses and Gratification Theory examines the audience’s need for the media and media content and the gratification of those needs, the Media System Dependency Theory explains why we depend on the media content. Because there is so much dependency on the media and their contents, the media now gain power to influence the audience’s belief and behaviours. This theory is highly relevant to this study because parents,

caregivers, teachers and children depend on the media, especially the social media for their children's education, entertainment and general development, more especially now that the entire world is being tormented by the outbreak of corona virus disease which its third waves already destroying many lives. In order to avoid being infected by this deadly disease, the World Health Organisation (WHO) brought out some preventive measures which have already been discussed earlier. Unfortunately, all these preventive measures affected businesses and even children's entertainment life. Therefore, children now seek for alternative entertainment in the social media, hence there is clampdowns and lockdowns because of Covid-19 Pandemic. Concerning the media owners, on the other hand, they also depend on parents, educators and children to watch or download their programmes before they will be able to make profit out of it.

### **Entertainment Theory**

Entertainment Theory was propounded in 1980s by Dolf Zillmann, and his collaborators. It seeks to understand not how we affect the media but more importantly what entertaining media content does to us unconsciously. According to Peter Vorderer and Annabell Halfmann, the reason why Zillmann and his collaborators embarked on their research was to "investigate why and when humour, emotional displays on the screen, retributions executed by characters in film or displayed emotions in movies are enjoyed by the audience" (5). As the investigation was still going on, Zillmann discovered some other theories, such as excitation transfer, mood management theory or affective disposition theory, social identity theory, parasocial interaction and selective exposure. He did not only want to determine the causes of the media usage but also the psychological processes and the effects of such media use. Zillmann's main interest on media users as they consume media entertainment was for them to use it solely for the purpose of managing mood, hence, he proposed the theory mood management theory. But Vorderer in his article entitled "Entertainment Theory" (2003) expressed that Zillmann's entertainment theory has remained weak in the academia in spite of its popularity in the recent times. According to him:

Discusses whether or not there is an entertainment theory. This author contends that despite the increasing relevance of entertainment, the academic effort to deal with this phenomenon has remained weak. There is, mostly from a critical point of view, research aimed at analyzing and interpreting what entertaining texts, movies, programmes, and so forth, may stand for. But as an established academic field of study, entertainment research does not yet exist. (par.2)

In order to provide a stronger and viable entertainment theory, Vorderer introduced a new model of entertainment theory in one of his articles entitled "What's Next? Remarks on the current vitalization of entertainment theory." In this study, Vorderer developed new context of entertainment; but still based his background from already existing theory propounded by Zillmann and his collaborators in the 80s. In his study, Vorderer introduced a new two-faced model of entertainment. This model encompasses "enjoyment" and "appreciation" as two independent factors. Concerning the media entertainment, however, one of the things every media entertainer looks out for is to ensure that his audience enjoy and appreciate every bit of the media content they consume.

Lewis, in trying to find out the effects of entertainment media on the users, discovered that entertainment media is beneficial to audience's health through laughter. He stresses further that stress is reduced through laughter, that audience mood is also improved, likewise, one's creativity is enhanced and his pain and blood pressure reduced (par.6). He also adds that "educational television does have a major impact on kids" (par.6). This theory is relevant to the present study because entertainment media, especially the social media have served as dependable tools to children's education, entertainment and general development, more importantly in this Covid-19 era when children are being encouraged to seek for alternative sources of pleasure from the social media to avoid being infected by covid-19 disease. The social media, on the other hand, unconsciously exposes these children to the digital world whereby their creativity is being improved, their reading and communication skills as well as their Intelligence Quotient (IQ) are also developed.

## **Methodology**

This researcher adopted both interview and focus group discussion research methods. Ten (10) questions were used to interact with ten (10) selected children (aged 13-16), thus:

1. Do you know what Covid-19 is?
2. Do you like watching stage drama?.
3. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, have you been opportune to watch any stage drama?
4. Would you like children's theatre activities to remain closed during Covid-19 era until the ban on social activities is lifted up?
5. Do you know what social media means?
6. Can you mention some of the social media platforms you know?
7. Do you believe that social media can serve as alternative platform to Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?

8. What are the impacts of the social media to Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?
9. Would you suggest social media platform as a way out to Covid-19 pandemic or electronic media?
10. How can social media promote Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?

The researcher asked them their views on the use of the social media platforms for the transmission of theatrical performances to Nigerian children in the post-Covid-19 era, given the fact that there may still be the need for people to observe social distancing rules and the like after the ban on theatre might have been lifted. Virtually all the children expressed satisfactory knowledge of the eruption of Covid-19 pandemic and its concomitant ban on social gathering. They also expressed profound knowledge of the social media and its various platforms. Eight out of the ten children gladly recommended the use of the social media because of its accessibility, wide reach and availability at all times. Two others specifically mentioned that one of the main advantages of social entertainment is that it brings audio-visual entertainment right there in the comfort of their rooms, thereby helping them to skirt around the problem of going out at night amidst the curfews imposed by the government. When the researcher asked further whether they could not get similar entertainment from the electronic media (radio/TV/film), they quipped that comparatively, those mediums have several limitations, such as being expensive, having limited outreach and being very bulky, etc. Most of the children also revealed that social media platforms afford them the opportunity to watch the programmes together with their parents and siblings whenever they want thereby cementing the bond among them.

### **Presentation of Data and Analysis of Responses from Interview/Focus Group Discussion**

From the researcher's interactions with the few students on the possible use of social entertainment to promote Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era, coupled with her personal experiences with her two children, Ihuomachi Chidi-Ukagu (female aged 7) and Chidiebere Chidi-Ukagu (Junior) (male aged 4), she became convinced that the social media entertainment model is, indeed, a useful alternative to physical interaction among children for the purpose of promoting children's theatre in Nigeria in the Covid-19 era. From her interactions/experimentations with those children, the researcher further learned that individual parents can download very entertaining, educative and morally-edifying programmes, especially those with local content to entertain their children at their own convenience.

In larger groups, such as schools and churches, large screens could be used to present pre-recorded performances for children that wear their nose masks and are spaced out according to social distancing rules. However, this researcher is convinced that in order to get optimal results, parents and teachers should continually be available to guide their children and monitor the type of programmes they watch online. In this regard, UNICEF's article entitled *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World* has warned that online entertainment, in spite of its many advantages, poses "significant risks to children's safety, privacy and well-being, magnifying threats and harms that many children already face off line and making already vulnerable children even more vulnerable" (8).

### **Conclusion**

This study was animated by the need to explore the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the sustenance and development of children's theatre in Nigeria. The central thesis espoused in the study is that in light of the occasional closure of theatres, the dearth of large theatres conducive for Nigerian children to converge and engage in theatrical activities, and the need to observe social distancing in order not to contact the Covid-19 virus, the most viable alternative to entertain and educate a vast majority of Nigerian children is to encourage them to join their counterparts from other parts of the world and embrace social entertainment which has to do with using the various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to transmit and enjoy dramatic and theatrical materials mainly via phones and computers. Using available data, the study went on to argue that, indeed, social entertainment can be profitably used to sustain and promote children's theatre in the Covid-19 era because of its capacity to deploy audio-visual means to reach out to millions of children at the same time irrespective of their different locations. It noted that social entertainment eliminates the risks associated with large gathering and the possibility of contacting the dreaded Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Recommendations**

Nigerian theatre experts and parents should sensitise the populace on the effective use of the various platforms of the social media to entertain and educate Nigerian children in the Covid-19 era. Nigerian theatre experts should research and produce programmes with rich cultural and moral content suitable for the Nigerian child. Parents are advised to supervise and monitor the type of programmes their children watch because bad contents can corrupt children because of their impressionable and vulnerable nature. Programmes selected for children should be as entertaining as they are educative because



children learn through fun. Producers of children's programmes should work assiduously to produce many in order to give the children varieties.

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# THEATRE, RESTRUCTURING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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## **Abstract**

Given the prevailing mood of the country, the aptness of this topic for SONTA 2019 cannot be overemphasized. Recently, the concept of restructuring has dominated national discourse in the country's geo-political space. Most politicians across the political divide believe that the concept of restructuring is the most viable political option (even when they have conflicting understanding of the term) opens to Nigeria to attain peace, fairness, social justice and equity. The other alternative choice in the prevailing mood of political mistrust and misrepresentations among the ethnic nationalities, suspicions, ethno-religious conflicts, myriad of social and economic problems, is the disintegration of the country along ethnic lines. The outcome of the latter possibility to everyone is chaos, bloodshed and war. Conversely, the Nigerian theatre, one of the oldest artistic and cultural institutions, and a veritable cultural arbiter in the ongoing national conversation on restructuring, seems to be in comatose plagued by years of neglect by government and failure of practitioners to refresh and sustain the cultural past and make them relevant for today. The Nigeria theatre, because of its dialogical features and ability to facilitate resolutions and build consensus amongst people has the potential to stir Nigeria's drifting ship to safe waters. Therefore, it is imperative that as stakeholders, we rebuild our dying cultural house, and make it stronger and potent enough to contribute positively and culturally in the ongoing quest for a united and indivisible country called Nigeria. The choice of topic is also a recognition and affirmation of the fact that theatre, both as literature and performative arts, can contribute to the process of national reform, renewal, reorganization, reinvigoration and the building of national identity. To be able to do this, historicocritical and analytic methods were deployed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Nigerian theatre, Restructuring, National identity, Performative arts, Politics.

## **Introduction: Historicity, Politics and the Concept of Restructuring**

"We cry theatre everywhere. But there is no theatre." Austin Asagba

"There is a federation because federating units agree to federate." Igbo Natufe

Using the above quotes as an introductory background, it will suffice to describe the social and political climate that has given impetus to the present national conversation on the concept of restructuring in Nigeria. By extension it provides a theoretical justification for the argument for the rejigging of Nigerian theatre. The concept of restructuring is derived from the word 'restructure,' and it means 'to arrange or reorganize or reshuffle or to redistribute the properties of components of a phenomenon' (Natufe 5). In theatrical and cultural terms; restructuring', denotes a process or act of renewal,' reformation and rebuilding of an existing artistic phenomenon in response to a national call for the establishment of an environment that can accommodate the multiplicity of theatrical expressions across the country, restructure our minds to accommodate other Nigerians from other linguistic and ethnic nationalities as we build one nation with a common identity. It also denotes refreshing our theatre both as literary art and theatre practice and makes it relevant to socio-political climate of the country.

After 105 years of amalgamation of the Southern protectorate and the colony of Lagos with the Northern Protectorate by the British government to form Nigeria on January 1, 1914, the country is still in a shuffling and wobbling state. It is beset by a catalogue of problems that threaten its existence politically, culturally and economically. The pre-1914 ethnic fears, suspicions and hostilities that preceded the amalgamation by Lord Lugard remain as embers that threaten its existence as one nation with a common destiny and a uniform identity. Otite has distinguished for us 389 ethnic groups in Nigeria (cited in Akpotor 3). Omoera claims that there are over 500 languages spoken by Nigeria's multiethnic and multireligious peoples (10-11). Nonetheless, there is no evidence that the country has consciously harmonized these groups, harnessed and explored the varied and multi-faceted rich cultures for national growth and development. Rather these various ethnic units are constantly engaged in a tussle for political and economic power. It is the opinion of many that the lack of a visionary leadership constitutes the bane of the country (Wali 1; Oyedepo 3; Omoera and Aiwuyo 423-424).

Despite the huge human and economic possibilities, the reality on ground is the reverse. The country has not lived up to the expectations of its founding fathers or that of the majority of its people. The economy remains in comatose, while the political leadership class struggles for credibility and relevance. The teeming population of youths and the elderly are plagued by poverty, unemployment, lack of good healthcare facilities and a stable education system. The decay in the polity and failure of the political class to arrest the drifting ship is also reflected in the on-going turbulent, horrific, catastrophic erosion of humanity and the senseless killings across the country. Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka has rightly described the

prevailing social and cultural situation as “material and intellectual wastage, the impoverishment of discourse, and a retreat from true enlightenment” (10).

First, in the guise of religious dogma spearheaded by Boko Haram and their parent sponsors, al-Shabbah, Answar Dine, Da’esh or ISIS and al Queda, the Northeastern part of the country has become an amphi-theatre of war in the last few years. Second, the itinerant Fulani herdsmen kill, rape and destroy human and natural resources, across the country with impunity. Third, in the Southeastern and Niger Delta regions, echoes of the Biafran insurgency represented by IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra), youth militancy, kidnappings, destruction of oil pipelines, heritage sites and monuments under the pretext of the struggle for resource control have become the order of the day. In the west, the OPC (Odua People’s Congress) representing the voice of the Yoruba, are clamouring for an Oduduwa country in the event of the disintegration of Nigeria.

The genesis of the prevailing political unease and national conversation, especially the clamour for restructuring of the country by politicians and ethnic nationalities into manageable and cohesive proportions, is traced to the political and cultural miscalculations and miss-steps of Nigeria’s past leadership. Specifically, the pre-independence political gladiators and negotiators failed to act decisively and fairly, especially in the consideration of the fate of the ethnic minorities. Their implementation of the Richards Constitution (named after Governor Arthur Richards) of 1946 and the post-Richards national constitutional conference of January 1950, mainly favoured the three dominant ethnicities of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani. The two famous questions posed to the delegates by H. M. Foot, the Chief Secretary of the national conference are instructive:

- (1) Do we wish to see a fully centralised system with all legislative and executive power mainly concentrated at the centre or do we wish to develop a federal system under which each different region of the country would exercise a measure of internal autonomy?
- (2) If we favour a federal system, should we retain, the existing regions, with some modifications of existing regional boundaries or should we form regions on some new basis such as the many linguistic groups which exist in Nigeria? (cited in Ezera 110)

Natufe argues that while the delegates who were mostly from the Hausa-Yoruba-Igbo tripod hegemony adequately addressed the first item leading to the 1954 Federal Constitution (and the subsequent 1960 Independence Constitution and the 1963 Republican Constitution), they abysmally failed to address the second item vis a vis the minority groups (3).

The current agitation for restructuring and autonomy by the minority groups, especially from the middle belt and the Niger Delta regions on the basis of political marginalization and economic exploitation constitute the main threat to the nation. While the three major ethnic groups continue to benefit immensely from the 'favourable terms of federalism entrenched in the Federal Constitution', especially the revenue allocation formula employed between 1953 and 1970 "which underlined the independence of the Federating units" the alteration of this formula when crude oil emerged as the main stay of Nigeria's economy" has been the main source of anger and agitation by the people of the Niger Delta Region. This in combination with the other social and political problems identified earlier on in the paper has put the country on edge (Natufe 2), aptly summarises the problems threatening the country as follows: the contradictory views on the amalgamation of 1914; the mismanagement of ethnic and religious relations; the theft of public wealth by the political class; the impoverishment of the population; the increasing perception of discrimination and marginalization by various ethnic nationalities; the distortion of federalism; the creeping influence of disintegrative forces; the gradual Islamisation of Nigeria; and the shadow of Biafra.

It is instructive to note that Nigeria has been restructured on seven occasions in the quest for a better political order. Accordingly, "The British amalgamation in 1914 structured Nigeria into three components: the Colony of Lagos, the Southern Protectorate, and the Northern Protectorate. Following this, Nigeria has been restructured as follows:" 3 Regions (East; North; and West) from the Richards Constitution to 1963 employed between 1953 and 1970 "which underlined the independence of the Federating units". However, this formula was severely altered when crude oil emerged as the main story of Nigeria's economy" (Natufe 6).

### **The Present Reality**

This blatant and glaring injustice has remained unaddressed by subsequent military and civilian governments. Failure by government and stakeholders to address the minority question and the political injustices inherent in the polity are the bane of the country. The country's political leadership appears to have failed to evolve a political and cultural strategy to address the myriad of problems that threaten the nation. Therefore, the processes that took place before and after the amalgamation were characterized by lack of oneness, disunity, lack of patriotism, sincerity of purpose and tribal bigotry. These negative features hang on the country like an Albatross. The present situation of mistrust is counterproductive to national integration and development, especially for a country in search of unity and

National Identity. How do we get out of this quagmire? Can a reformed, reinvigorated Nigerian Theatre serve as an arbiter, through its art, to resolve them? The Answer is 'Yes'. This paper interrogates the narrative that theatre has the inherent qualities to help Nigeria get out of the woods.

Globally, the arts, culture and tourism sectors play vital roles in building and enriching the economic, political and cultural life of nations. Great nations in classical Greek society, modern Russia, Great Britain, America, the Irish Republic etcetera are known in history to have explored the great potentials of their arts, literature and cultural heritage – including theatre to educate, entertain and galvanise their people to attain national integration, identity and development. In Latin America, theatre has been variously deployed as instrument of education, conscientization, development and the establishment of National Identity.

In Nigeria, in spite of the abundance of cultural life, arts and literature, by implication, theatre, it seems these human based sectors and resources have often been taken for granted, neglected and not explored maximally for the growth and development of the nation. In the context of the on-going national mood and the clamour for restructuring as panacea for peace and development of the country, this paper sets out to address the following: That first, the need to reposition and re-align the Nigerian Theatre through the process of renewal and rebuilding for it to be relevant in the 21st century. Second, the role of theatre in a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nation like Nigeria. Third, how do we use theatre to forge a National Identity from the complexity of identities in Nigeria? Fourth, how we can harness the richness and positive aspects and attributes inherent in the different identities to forge oneness.

### **Conceptual Framework / Definition of Terms**

In order to gain a better understanding and clarification of the arguments canvassed in the paper, it is important to define the key terms and concepts of national identity and theatre:

#### **National Identity**

National Identity is construed to mean the integration of the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in Nigeria into one indivisible entity called Nigeria. According to Wikipedia, "National identity is the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics". From Nigeria's experience so far, the country's quest for a cohesive National Identity the symbol of unity that can bind the multiplicity of ethnic nationalities, with diverse tongues together in one unified whole cannot be said with all sincerity, to fully exist. The struggle or journey towards proper uniformity, where peace and stability, trust and consensus, justice and



fair play, rule of law and security are the order of the day, appears a mirage. To sustain this struggle and realize the dreams of our nationalists, the country's political leadership must exhibit exemplary national commitment and patriotism, create the atmosphere, for national dialogue and consensus building at all times. Learning from our historical past, the country's leadership must be role models in matters of state, and morality. When good governance is engrained in the polity, then we are on the path of proper unification and oneness. Theatre, by virtue of its dialogical features and as a strong instrument of communication can provide the medium or platform for continual national engagement and in the end can facilitate unification and National Identity.

### **Definition of Theatre**

Defining theatre can be herculean, complex and complicated. Over the ages theatre has been subjected to various definitions and associated with different meanings depending on who is applying the terminology and in what context of usage. While it is a popular concept in the medical and military circles, to the ordinary man on the street theatre is also an "auditorium or any space where human beings gather to watch an act". The terminology of theatre has strong ties with classico-Greek society where religious rites and dramatic arts reflective of the gods, the lives, belief systems and cultural world-views of the people were re-enacted and performed on stage. These festival celebrations were characterized by dramatic, music and dance performances. To them, just as in other traditional cultures of the world, Nigeria inclusive, the theatrical performances were explorations of the human experience on stage. Also, because the acts are human based, they carry a universal message which has no geographical boundaries. It is this quality and ability to convey a universal message on humanity in a practical manner that makes theatre unique and differentiates it from the other genres of literature. Therefore, theatre from a universal understanding of the concept is an artistic expression of the life of man in a given community. Another important aspect of theatre is that, it can be seen as an embodiment of the history, literature, lores and the metaphysical and spiritual life of a given people at a particular point in time. In performance it aggregates the history, belief-systems, morality and culture of the people.

To the professional artist the term theatre which can also mean drama (derived from the Greek word 'dran' meaning 'action' or "to do"), "is an art form which utilizes various elements of production such as play scripts, costume and make up, scene design and many other elements to communicate with an audience" (Ojemudia 33). As an art form in the platonic and Aristotelian definition of the term, theatre is hinged on the art of imitation and

representation of nature in its attempt to educate and communicate the lessons of life. Equally, according to (Nwamuo 3) "theatre refers to collaborative form of arts concerned with life performances by actors to represent the experience of a real or imagined event to a specific audience at a specific place. As drama, its characteristics are that it is temporal, it is mimetic, it is interpretative and it is a synthesis".

The mimetic, interpretative and synthesis feature of theatre are realized in the creative dynamics that unfolds in a performance situation. At such moments the dialogical sequences and the human emotions released by characters as they seek to resolve conflicts combine vigorously to create new perceptions for man. For man, theatre is one of the means he uses to represent reality or express his perception of life. In performance, theatre provides the platform for man to see himself, interrogate his actions and make decisions favourable to his existence. The end goal is self-purgation, renewal and restoration. As Sofola opines that:

Theatre is the medium of artistic expression where societal happenings are mirrored in a dynamic living form. A metaphysical image of reality, it reflects the total cosmic moral and metaphysical order of the life of the people. It is an arena where human beings are presented in a cosmic totality, acting and reacting to forces around them and within them, perceiving and being perceived by those integrating with them, and those in the audience who experience with them the enigma that is common of humanity. (124)

The functional and utilitarian nature of theatre is underscored in the ability to communicate, educate and affirm the spiritual essence of man as he strives to build a better country. Theatre, like all art forms, is intrinsically tied to society. Like Siamese twins, both are bonded. In this eternal marriage, a symbiotic relationship exists, in which the theatre serves the society diligently as the eye of society, while the latter provides the raw material for the former. As Leon Trotsky writes that, Art is always a social servant and historically utilitarian. It finds the necessary rhythm of words for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feeling closer or contrasts them with one another, it enriches the spiritual experience of the individual and of the community, if refines (32). Following the above definitions and perspectives, on the meaning of the concept of theatre, it is evidently clear that Nigeria is naturally endowed and well blessed with various and varied forms of theatre, which exist in our multi-faceted and diverse cultures and are reflected in the abundance of articulate, visionary and creative writers and artists in the country. However, how have we deployed theatre for national reconstruction, revivalism and development?

## **Classification of Nigerian Theatre and Restructuring**

The classification of Nigerian theatre is not cast in stone. The types of theatres in Nigeria from the traditional to the modern forms, are as numerous and varied in relation to the diverse and multi-faceted ethno-linguistic and cultural groups in the country. Because of the multiplicity of traditional forms of festival performances found in different communities, and performed for varied functions and purposes, there are evidences of similarities and thin line divide amongst them and therefore difficult to differentiate easily. With modern forms of theatre, apart from the known formal types, new entrants are becoming well established in the corpus of theatre studies and practice in the country. For instance, Theatre for Development (TfD) or Applied Theatre, as an academic theatre programme and community theatre practice has become popular and well entrenched in most universities' Theatre Arts Departments across the country. For these reasons one should be cautious in drawing up hard delineations on Nigerian theatre types.

Therefore, the classification of Nigerian theatre into a nationally acceptable format using a template relevant for such delineation is imperative. The appropriate classification and standardization of the Nigerian theatre types will not only improve research in Nigerian drama and theatre, but could also serve as a tool for government policy formulation and cultural advocacy. We strongly recommend that scholars and researchers in the discipline should evolve new template for the classification of Nigerian drama and theatre as we build and re-brand the theatre discipline. For the purpose of this discourse Nigerian theatre has been classified into two broad categories - Festival or Indigenous Theatres and Contemporary Theatres.

In the Nigerian experience, Indigenous festival performances and contemporary theatre in combination with other forms of Arts, like Fine and Applied Arts, constitute the cultural life of the Nigerian. The contribution of the Nigerian performative and culture industry from the time preceding Amalgamation to the present in the building of the nation, cannot be underestimated. Significantly, cultural nationalism that paved way for the country's independence gained impetus from the dramatic and cultural activities of people like the late Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and the late Duro Ladipo, and the crop of Nigeria's first generation of literary dramatists - Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Bekederemo Clark, among others.

## **Festival or Indigenous Theatre, Restructuring and National Identity**

It is the position of this paper that the process of the restructuring of Nigerian theatre should start from a proper re-evaluation, rebuilding and repositioning of the Festival theatre tradition in the country. The reason for this is not farfetched. The festival theatre tradition is the nexus of Nigerian theatre,

and it is a cultural resource that has been literally taken for granted. We revert to it only when it is convenient for us to do so especially for political and commercial reasons. In the past the festival tradition constituted the basis of society, culturally and politically. The proponents for the argument for the political restructuring of the country can give credence and credibility to their case and win more support for their cause if they explore the festival environment or platform for purposes of community outreach, education, national awareness and consensus building.

Festival or Indigenous dramas describe all traditional or indigenous performances that preceded colonialism. As most studies by Nigerian and African scholars like Oyin Ogunba, Joel Adedeji, Yemi Ogunbiyi, Olu Obafemi and the present writer have shown, traditional festival celebrations and performances literally dominate the geographical space of Nigeria, and are mainly rooted in the peoples' culture, predominantly domiciled in the villages. Nigerian festival performances are varied, with diverse content and different intriguing performative styles. In general terms, the pattern and context of performance can be similar in all the communities and villages where they are found. Also, the motive(s) for their performances or celebration differ from one locality (community) to another but are basically associated with religious rites and socio-cultural activities. The motives can range from rites of passage, worship of ancestors and gods, celebration of harvest, re-enactment of history and origin of the community.

There is no community in Nigeria, whether it is the Okpe, Urhobo, Benin, Ijaw, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Igbo, Efik and the Tiv of the middle belt that do not have in their rich folktales, myths, history and legends accounts of heroes and heroines who brought the community into being, or saved the community in times of peril or threat to their existence. On festival occasion, amidst pomp and pageantry, music, dance and merriment the people re-enact stories, or incident to commemorate the lives and times of these heroes. Although, these festival performances were localized or ethnically based, the motivating need to use the atmosphere of festival celebration to create or promote village and community awareness, moral education for both young and old, political consciousness and economic well-being are instructive and still valid to today's society.

The corpus of the different traditional festival performances of the various ethnic groups that make up the country represents the cultural reservoir of the nation. They also represent the image and symbol of our oneness and national identity, if properly harnessed. Contemporary writers, artists and Theatre practitioners draw from this reservoir for their creative and literary works. Nigerian indigenous festival theatre as oral literature and performative art embodies the norms, lores, history, myths, and folktales of

the people. On festival occasions, through performative rites of passage, children, youths and adults are inducted into the secrets and world of the community. Also, these ceremonies are occasions for instilling community awareness, consciousness, and solidarity. The end goal is for community stability, peace and well-being. The healthy competitive spirit among celebrants, dancers, and performers in an attempt to showcase their best in a convivial manner are strong features of the festival tradition that the country should encourage and explore for national integration and Identity formation.

There is no doubt that these festivals are gradually dying or going into extinction because of factors of modernity, religion, the dwindling economy, lackadaisical attitude of the younger generation and poor government response to the culture industry. Through cultural synergy and partnership between government (at the local government level and the community), these festival celebrations can be rebranded, documented and digitalized exploring modern and innovative technological advancement. This vital cultural resource can be resuscitated and developed for national development. One shudders to think at what will happen to the nation's cultural heritage fifty years from now if these festivals, traditions are allowed to fizzle out and go into extinction. A radical approach is required to stem this possibility. It is imperative that government, through appropriate cultural legislations should set the tone for the rehabilitation, revival and sustenance of these festival performances in the various villages and communities, where they are found.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the popular Annual Festival of the Arts and Culture under the aegis of the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, provided the national atmosphere for all the states to show case and celebrate the diverse artistic and cultural richness of the country. It also provided the platform for participants, and the audience from different ethnic and linguistic background to know and understand one another. At such occasions, personal and collective trust, friendship and oneness are formed that endure over time. These are moments for re-awakening national consciousness and forging national integration and Identity. These festival celebrations bring people of different linguistic and cultural background together across the country, and have the capacity to unite people, state and country.

It is interesting to note that while these arts and cultural festivals are still being organized annually on rotational basis amongst the states of the federation, they seem to have lost the drive, verve, camaraderie and spirit of national togetherness and patriotism that hitherto characterized past celebrations and meetings. In recent times the organization and hosting of carnival celebrations have become popular in the country, especially in Abuja, Lagos and Calabar. These artistic and cultural fiestas should be encouraged and properly funded. They largely represent the face of the nation and could

provide employment for youths and adults alike in the cultural sector. However, the carnivals should transcend fanfares and economic gains, and be refocused for national rebranding and regeneration of our dying cultures and ethical values. They should serve as occasions for the gathering of Nigerian diverse and multi-ethnic nationalities. They should serve as platforms for Nigerians to understand themselves, believe in themselves and act together in one voice. That is the import and impact culture and theatre can make on the polity. The custodians of our national cultural heritage and monuments under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Information, Art and Culture have not done well over the years. Factors of poor funding, bureaucracy, untrained manpower and corruption have combined to turn the cultural institutions and parastatals that are statutorily meant to facilitate and deploy culture and theatre as instruments for national consciousness and development, into ineffective organs and institutions.

Virtually, all the arts councils, (including the establishments in Abuja) lack functional buildings and theatres to function appropriately and maximally. Such a situation has created disconnect between government and the people. The National theatre building in the 1970s primarily built to host the first World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (popularly tagged FESTAC '77) was once the pride of the nation. It was famously described as the beauty and symbol of the best our architecture could provide. For many years, the National theatre continued to serve as the face of culture and theatre in the country, and indeed, the world. Today, the cultural edifice has been turned into a den for animals, petty traders and the dredge of society. While rumours of privatization persist, artists, performers, culture enthusiasts, etcetera, have no space to function and carry out their professional callings. Globally, national theatres especially in developed countries of the world do not only represent great and magnificent cultural buildings where plays and performances of national colourations are performed, but they are also symbols of national artistic and creative movements built and sustained for the preservation and promotion of the nation's cultural heritage and as symbols of unity and national identity. Good examples are the classic cases of the Russian, British and Irish National Theatres. The classic case of the role of the Irish theatre in reviving Irish culture and establishing a dependent Irish Identity is noteworthy. In this case dramatists, like W.B. Yeats deployed his art in creating "nationalism-oriented plays that aroused the sense of national feelings of audiences and created a National Identity as well" (Kitishat 83). Therefore, it is imperative that the Federal Government should do a re-think on its policy on the National theatre, rehabilitate and restructure the activities of the National theatre, and hand it back to its rightful owners the artists and creative

performers to manage and carry out the business of theatre and culture on behalf of the nation.

Furthermore, the country needs a vibrant, dynamic and radical approach to the management, utilization and deployment of the artistic and cultural resources of the country. The diverse cultural and artistic resources reflected in the indigenous festival repertoires are avenues for economic gains, especially as cultural tourism. Also, the varied and diverse festival celebrations found in the multi-faceted ethnic cultural setting of the country if effectively reformed and managed can form the face and pride of the nation. The promotion, preservation and sustenance of our cultural past should form the mainstream of government actions and business. This could be done through the formulation of dynamic, well thought out and pragmatic cultural policy. The present cultural policy suffers from inadequate publicity and implementation strategies. Mere legislations and policies on paper are not adequate enough. Since 1988, the cultural policy document has remained in the archives. What the country needs, is the practical implementation of the content of the cultural document, and make them impact on the teaching, management and celebration of extant indigenous festival performances and traditions across the country. Also, the implementation of the policy document as it affects Actor welfare, endowment for the arts and promotion of the arts through the establishment of a National Academy of the Arts are critical to the survival of the artists. Paying mere lip service and occasional financial gestures to artists will not resuscitate and refocus our dying cultural house.

Equally, government should provide a secured environment in the communities, and proper funding of the culture sector so that the various local governments in the country could encourage and partner with their citizens in the reinvigoration and rebranding of their cultural past and make them centre piece for the nation's development. These policies and measures if properly implemented can ignite and provide positive images and platform for the country's development and promotion of National Identity.

### **Contemporary Theatre, Restructuring and National Identity**

Nigerian Contemporary Theatre describes modern Nigerian Theatre. Primarily, it exists, and is represented in the teaching and practice of drama and Theatre in Higher and Tertiary institutions across the country, the efforts of private theatre companies, radio and television dramas, film and Nollywood productions. In all, one could find the face of modern Nigerian Theatre. A feature common to all of them is that, they were all inspired and nurtured either before or after colonialism. Since 1960, postcolonial drama and theatre have contributed to nation building especially in the context of

correcting and checkmating the excesses of both military and civilian administrations and identity formation. Also, through the years, various trends of drama and theatre have emerged portraying different socio-political and ideological strands. These are reflected more in the area of dramaturgy, language and stagecraft experimentations. In this context, one could say that Nigerian Drama and Theatre has gone through various stages of restructuring, either in form, content and practice.

From a critical standpoint and with all sense of professionalism and commitment to the theatre discipline, one can say that, contemporary Nigerian theatre from the perspectives of pedagogy, theorization and practice, seems to have nose-dived from the era of sheer excellence, creativity, commitment to national cause to a new era where productions of plays are scarce and far between; where theatre exists but are not seen; where books on theatre are conceived but not published. Where drama and theatre are taught and practiced under the trees, and in abandoned buildings, our new age of theatre is typified by 'copycatism'. Copycatism is a new wave of a creative disorder or bug that has crept brazenly into our creative milieu. It sets out to distort and mimic an original creative work, in an attempt to make it look new and authentic. In spite of all efforts to make the creative work original, the fakeness or falsity of the work is not hard to detect. The implication for the present creative efforts is that most of our voices are not refreshing, incisive and poignant, especially in confronting the establishment that appears to be derailing and ineffective. Also, from one's teaching, association and participation in theatre activities across the country, one could glean cases of cronyism, godfatherism, corruption in the management, distribution and utilization of creative opportunities in the discipline and business of Nigerian theatre establishments. In our desire to restructure and make our arts relevant to National discourse, we should discountenance negative values and drive for excellence so that we can be relevant and taken seriously as a discipline. That is not to say that we have not made progress since 1960. It is just the case that theatre has achieved so much but too little. New voices, new directors and playwrights, actors, technicians, have been discovered and are flourishing but our mark on the nation and the polity is infinitesimal. As a discipline, we must evolve innovative theatre method and techniques that can best represent our age and time, especially in the area of national renewal and development. Therefore, Nigeria is challenged to deploy theatre to resolve the controversies surrounding the clamor for the restructuring of the country.

What is germane and imperative at the moment is how, Nigerian theatre can be refocused and repositioned for appropriate and effective contribution to the process of nation building and identity formation. Building a nation through theatre means, using theatre to raise awareness, forge



national consciousness, conscientize the people to see themselves, that in spite of the differences in language, religion and culture, we are one, brought together by facts of history and geography. Building a nation through theatre also means the rejection of obsolete values, creation of moral codes and role models in line with the present socio-political needs of the country. It also means writing plays and presenting theatre productions in the language the old and the young can comprehend. It means using our dramaturgy and theatre as medium to educate our people on the need to imbibe the spirit of patriotism and seek peace and stability, rather than chaos and war. It means deploying dramas and theatres as instrument of dialogue, consensus building and the resolution of conflict in society. Indeed, what kind of theatre do we need to encourage and deploy for our 21<sup>st</sup> century social and political needs?

### **University Theatres and National Identity**

The university theatre is the prime artistic, cultural and intellectual platform that gave birth to, and nurtured modern Nigerian Theatre. As a colonial formulation, it gained inspiration and impetus from the theatrical and dramatic activities organized in schools and colleges across the country and the university college Ibadan in the 1950's and early 1960s. These activities were organized to ginger national awareness and promote the educational policy of the period. The efforts of notable colonial expatriate teachers and scholars like Geofrey Axworthy, Ken Post and Martin Banham are noteworthy. Their dramatic and theatrical activities largely inspired and encouraged the emergence of Nigeria's first crop of Nigerian dramatists and theatre practitioners like the late Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Ogunmola. As referenced earlier, these dramatists deployed their plays and theatrical activities to the cause of national unification and independence from the British colonial rule. Though their plays were rooted and motivated by Yoruba folk theatre, history, myths and the need for the survival of the race, they had national appeal that cut across tribe and language. For example, Hubert Ogunde's popular plays like, *Strike and Hunger*, and *Yoruba Ronu* are memorable for their incisive treatment of political, and nationalistic themes and subjects.

Equally, the plays and theatrical activities of Nigeria's pioneer literary dramatists like Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka and Bekederemo Clark - (all products of the Nigerian University theatre tradition), set the stage for the growth and development of post-colonial drama and theatre. Though, their dramaturgy and theatre activism reflected individual social and ideological differences, nevertheless, they were committed in their own rights to promoting national consciousness and the need to build a better society. Ene Henshaw, a medical doctor by professional calling, is reputed to tour the

eastern part of Nigeria and environ with his amateur travelling theatre troupe based in Calabar at this period. The influence of Ene Henshaw's light-hearted plays like, *This Is Our Chance* on budding Nigerian dramatists was infectious. His plays which were widely read in schools and colleges popularized the performing arts, and were the precursor of literary drama and theatre practice in the country.

Furthermore, the post-war years of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1970s and 1980s) produced new crop of Nigerian dramatists who are often described as the second generation of literary dramatists. Again, they all emerged and blossomed from the University theatre tradition and belonged to creative associations and companies where they honed their skills before becoming global celebrities. They include the late Ola Rotimi, the late Wale Ogunyemi and the late Zulu Sofola, the first female Nigerian dramatist of great repute. A more radical segment of the group was pioneered by playwrights like Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan and Kole Omotosho and others. A common feature of their plays was commitment to the recreation and adaptation of the traditional cultural repertoire as basis for exploring present social vision of society. Their choice of dramatic subjects and deployment of theatre craft revealed the need to use theatre as communication and interrogation of a political system that needed reformation. It was the age of experimentation with ideas and language. For instance, Ola Rotimi in his plays like, *The Gods Are Not To Blame* and *Kurunmi* experimented with simplicity of language as a mode of reaching a wider audience. The more radical ones like Bode Sowande and Femi Osofisan, engaged in the re-creation and 'vandalization' of traditional myths, history and elements of music, dance, poetry and theatre to question the status quo and the political leadership of the time. The periods from 1960 to the late 1980s could arguably be described as the golden age of Nigerian theatre. Even though the practice of theatre and the watching of good plays was more visible and felt in the university community, the impact of theatre practice on the populace was palpable and infectious. The flip side of these developments is that Nigerian theatre since independence has continued to remain in the hands of the elites, intelligentsia and the academia. They appear to dictate the trend of theatre and how it should be practiced. Now, I ask, is it not time we allow the people to own the theatre process and practice?

Apart from the above developments and trends in the world of Nigerian theatre, the late 1970s and early eighties also witnessed the emergence of a new type of theatre now variously described as community theatre or popular theatre for integrated development. Under the banner of applied theatre, the community theatre practice movement has grown from its early beginnings in Samaru, at the Ahmadu Bello University to become an integral and compulsory theatre course entrenched in the theatre arts

curriculum, approved by the Nigeria University Commission – the prime regulator of academic programmes on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria. It is gladdening to note that the community theatre course is taught and practiced in various forms in all the departments of theatre arts in the country. Also, the activities of the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA), the national umbrella organization that was formed in the early 1990s, to propagate the ideas and popularize the community theatre practice and other related community theatre formations across the country has boosted and entrenched theatre for development techniques and practice as a viable theatre method in the creation of national consciousness and development.

In practice, the community through proper facilitations and research techniques by amateurs is actively involved in the process of problem identification. Through dialogical processes involving series of discussions and consensus building the finished play and production activities are basically dictated by community feelings and choices. Equally, the post-performance activities involving the analysis of issues and evaluation of decisions on development strategies, roles and responsibilities of different parties are activities and actions that bind the community together. They pursue their goals and objectives collectively, not allowing personal needs, or cultural differences to stand in the way of evolving a better society. Going by the present state of the nation, especially faced with myriad of developmental challenges, where bigotry, suspicion and ethnic sentiment prevail, the country can benefit from the formal adoption of the community theatre method as a strategic government cultural instrument for initiating national dialogue and the resolution of conflicts. The success of the community theatre method, globally, is that it draws from, and it's hinged on the traditional culture of the people. This includes their way of life, problems, language, music, dance, songs and festival celebrations.

### **Challenges**

Further to some of the challenges already raised in the course of this paper, other factors identified as militating against the proper growth and functioning of the Nigerian theatre, especially our desire to deploy and refocus theatre for purposes of national development and identity formation in the 21st century include:

Death of literature, documentation and data on the indigenous forms of theatre and major cultural celebrations in the country. SONTA (Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists) can complement government efforts by starting a radical assemblage of data on Nigerian theatre for purposes of information gathering, planning and projections.

Failure of government to fully implement the country's cultural policy document since 1988 through the proper legislations is a major challenge to the culture sector as a whole. Key issues of Actor Welfare, Endowment for the Arts and promotion of the Arts are left unaddressed. It is the view of many stakeholders in the culture sector that the present cultural policy is obsolete and out of touch with the dynamic cultural changes in the country, especially against the backdrop of globalization and, current technological and scientific development.

Lack of adequate funding and resources, provision of proper facilities, infrastructure and fit-for-purpose programme formulation and content for the training of theatre artists and other relevant manpower for the theatre industry.

Presently, the National Theatre Associations in Nigeria operate more at cross purposes. Because of the lack of unity and oneness amongst them, especially in their mode of operation and vision for the industry, they are unable to pursue the cause of the Artists holistically and effectively. There is also the tendency for them to be pawns in the hands of the establishment. Individual groups pursue their self-interest thereby jeopardizing the fortunes and prospects of the others, in matters of actor welfare, code of conduct for practitioners, government funding and patronage of the industry.

A major glaring challenge facing the theatre industry is inadequate participation and investment by the private sector, especially the banking and business sectors.

The climate of insecurity, kidnapping and youth militancy prevent people from attending plays, especially in the evenings.

Theatre in Nigeria operates more on the amateurish level, and the higher and tertiary institutions produce the playwrights, the creative artists and other workers for the industry. Ultimately, the general problems affecting these institutions are made to bear on the proper training and production of quality actors and creative experts for the theatre industry. These problems include; lack of proper funding, weak programme formulation, government control through Nigeria University Commission (NUC), lack of infrastructures or absence of them etcetera, affect the growth of theatre in the country. Even though these institutions produce theatre graduates every year, they end up working in unrelated theatre environment. The implication is that the nation

cannot benefit from their theatre training, especially the skills and abilities that can engender national development and integration.

Professional theatre exists more in the Non organizational groups like the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), Radio, Television and Theatre Arts Workers Union (RATTAWU) and Film (Nollywood), their impact on society are enormous. However, the problems of poor scripting and technical efficiency persist. The films, plays and other productions have helped the employment industry, and brought youths together from different part of the country to work as Nigerians. Also, the successes of Nollywood films have put Nigeria on the world map. The films have become attractions to diverse audiences, both at home and abroad. If they tailor their scripts to patriotic subjects, they could serve as unifying platforms for Nigerians to think Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

For the theatre industry to thrive, flourish and effectively contribute to National Development and Identity Formation, the following are recommended: The country must have the political will to implement the strategic plan for culture and by implication the theatre industry, which has constitutional backing. The main driver or focal point for the sensitization and realization of this should be the relevant cultural parastatals or unit specifically created for the rebirth of the culture and theatre industry. This unit will have the mandate to vigorously promote Nigerian theatre industry as an embodiment of our culture. The government of the day should provide adequate funding via constitutional means for the proper development and sustenance of the Nigerian theatre industry. The federal government, through its security outfits, should guarantee security and create the enabling environment for the cultural sector to thrive. The newly created parastatal of the cultural sector, working in concert with its network of sub units, with branches in all the states, should have the mandate to implement the highpoints of the cultural policy that affects the growth of the Nigerian theatre especially, the endowment for the arts and welfare of the artists.

It's in this vein that the paper also recommends that the federal government deploys culture as instrument for national development, image laundering, business, entertainment and cultural tourism. The federal government in its mandate to the new cultural organization earlier suggested should eradicate bureaucracy in arts promotion, administration and business, integrate cultural industries, by implication theatre into national planning and budgeting process. Ordinarily, the growth of cyber technology is expected to be an advantage to theatre, however, there seems to be limited evidence that theatre has caught up with modern technology. This paper implores theatre practitioners to be at par with cyber technology by exploiting the cyber space

to showcase plays that depicts society in perspective. This responsibility and initiative should be driven by official theatre organizations such as SONTA, NANTAP, and others working collaboratively and with commitment, to achieve the goal of making theatre ICT and Cyber space compliant.

### **Conclusion**

Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural, human and cultural resources. Its pluralistic nature has been a blessing but has also posed political and cultural challenges to the country's past and present leadership. The present structural imbalance in the configuration and administration of the country especially in the management of the oil resource, has created room for fear, mistrust, suspicion, agitation, corruption and other social problems. Therefore, the call for restructuring is a legitimate demand, especially by the minority groups in the country. The end goal of the agitation for restructuring is national stability, equity, peace and justice. However, for this call to be meaningful, patriotic and achievable, there is need for proper education, awareness, information and consensus on the notion of restructuring. The Nigerian theatre because of its special features and capacity to enhance communication, dialogue and conflict resolution can provide the platform for raising awareness, building national consciousness and facilitating unity and oneness. Hence, we have argued in this paper that for theatre to effectively carry out its role as a cultural arbiter, and be part of the process of nation building, it must be repositioned, refocused and reinvigorated. For too long, this vital human based cultural resource, has been neglected and not explored maximally for nation building and development.

Specifically, the paper has recommended that the indigenous festival celebrations and performances be re-energized, preserved and deployed for proper communication and engagement between the various communities and the government. They could also be explored for entertainment, tourism and nation building. In line with the global reality and developments, the paper suggests that the technique and practice of Theatre for Development (TfD) should be adopted by government as a cultural policy instrument for purposes of conflict resolution and national development. Finally, we affirm that theatre has a role to play in national discourse and development. Therefore, as theatre artists, practitioners, stakeholders and government, we must all work in concert to restructure, refocus and rebuild our theatre for the twenty first century. As stakeholders and players in the theatre industry we have the opportunity for self-assessment, and in the process see what we have done in the past and what we ought to do now for the future to be better. In the end, we must all agree to this renewal process so that theatre can be an affirmative and active contributor to the political process of our country.

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# A CATHARTIC READING OF SODERBERGH'S *CONTAGION* AND PETERSEN'S *OUTBREAK* AS PANDEMIC FILMS

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## Abstract

The outbreak of the novel corona virus pandemic in 2019 in Wuhan, China signified a change in social relations that led to a new normal in the world. Man as a social animal was forced to adopt new strategies to cope in the face of the new enemy; the unseen microbes that had the potential to wipe out human existence if left unchecked. Social distancing, masking up, quarantine, lockdowns became the realities of people and nations of the world. The heightened fear, terror, information overload, rumors and speculations put pressure on the mental health of many around the world. Life became like a scene out of a horror film, with medics dressed in personal protective gear amidst soaring death rates. One of the other ways in which man in his enforced isolation coped and kept in touch with the social world was through film and social media. The early days of the pandemic saw an increased consumption of films, especially films that dwell on disease outbreak as central theme. This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology and is an investigation into human beings' recourse to film in times of uncertainties. Applying the Cathartic theory and the concept of Cinema-therapy to the reading of Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), it is seen that these films offer man an opportunity to confront and reconcile the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic, offering hope in a situation of despair.

**Keywords:** Corona virus, Pandemic films, Cinema therapy, Catharsis.

## Introduction

The emergence of the novel corona virus pandemic in 2019 in Wuhan, China started off without much significance and little did human beings know that it would bring about a drastic change in social relations as it was previously known and lived. The Federal Government of Nigeria declared the first case of the Covid-19 virus on February 27, 2020. By that time, the virus was spreading like wildfire around the world from the city of its initial discovery in Wuhan, China (Wuhan has vehemently denied this claim). Although, patients had started reporting at hospitals in Wuhan with flu like symptoms and breathing difficulties since mid- December 2019, the city of



Wuhan was not placed on a lockdown till January 23, 2020 and by that time, the virus through its most potent carrier (humans) had spread through persons travelling all over the world. By March 2020, the total global number of Covid-19 cases has surpassed 500,000 (WHO Situation Report (67) with 136 countries implementing additional health measures such as lock downs and border closure. The World Health Organization declared the novel corona virus a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that attacks the human respiratory system is zoonotic in nature, that is, animal to human transmission (Mackenzie and David (46). The outbreak was linked to the seafood and livestock market at Wuhan China in December of 2019. The reservoir host is believed to have been an infected bat virus that mutated in the human and became deadly. The global health crises are made worse through the human to human transmission which occurs through direct or indirect contact with an infected person's saliva, respiratory secretion/droplets which are expelled when the person talks, sneezes or coughs. The rapid surge in cases of Covid-19 around the world spread fear and panic. Government Health Agencies and Centres for Disease Control engaged in contact tracing, quarantine of identified suspected cases and the enforcement of lock downs to contain the pandemic. These activities and forced lockdown resulted in stress, fear and a global financial crisis.

One of the coping mechanisms employed by people against the heightened panic and fear in the world was the streaming of films and television series. Although some of these movies were old (considering the years of production and when the actual pandemic occurred), Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* which was produced in 1995 and Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), suddenly received a new found popularity and viewership. Netflix in March 2020 reports that, "Outbreak" was one of its top ten most popular titles and fourth most popular movies globally on its platform. Travis Clark of the *Business Insider* on March 13, 2020 also reports the growing popularity of Wolfgang Petersen "Contagion" on iTunes chart and other piracy streaming platforms. A review on the comment section of YouTube (a video social media and streaming site) of *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995) show renewed interest in the films especially in the year 2020 and 2021.

The reason for the increase in the consumption of pandemic themed films is the central focus of this paper. Film as an old genre of the art has often being relegated to the position of entertainment. However, film serves additional functions which include education, documentation of history and also the ability to be futuristic. This paper aims at discussing the roles films in a pandemic era through an overview of two films of the medical thriller genre- *Outbreak* (1995) and *Contagion* (2011).

## The Theory of Catharsis

The word catharsis originates from the Greek word 'katharsis'. It means "purgation", "purification" or "clarification." Aristotle used the word "catharsis" in his definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude through pity and fear affecting the proper 'catharsis' of these emotions." Various theories have emerged to explain Aristotle's conception of the tragic catharsis. These theories interpret catharsis in three ways - purgation, purification and clarification. The purgation theory offers a medical, ethical and psychological perspective:

1. **The Purgation theory** from the medical perspective holds that catharsis offers a purgation process to the soul in a similar fashion of medicine to the body. Catharsis implies relief and the arousing of the emotions of pity and fear is believed to lead to the purgation of similar emotions like pride and anger. The psychological interpretation rejects the medical stand stating that the theatre is not a hospital and holds that the harmonization of pity and fear leads to balance in tragedy thereby bringing relief. The ethical interpretation of the purgation theory posits that tragedy makes human beings realize that divine law operates in the universe shaping everything for the best.
2. **The Purification theory** by theorists such as Gotthold Lessing and Humphrey House posits that catharsis refers to a moral cleansing or 'purification'. Rejecting the medical interpretation of catharsis, they argue that catharsis is a kind of moral conditioning through which the excesses and defects in one's emotions are purified to reach and maintain equilibrium. For these theorists, a tragic depiction on stage purifies the emotions of pity and fear of its morbid content.
3. **The Clarification theory** holds that Aristotle's catharsis is not concerned with the psychology of the audience rather it is a treatise on the technique of writing an ideal tragedy. O. B. Hardings opines that catharsis refers to the tragic pleasure that arouses from tragic events being pitiable and fearful because these emotions can cause pleasure in the spectator.

Other theories of catharsis have also been developed and merged with media theory in modern psychoanalytic discourse. One of such theories is the aggression of catharsis theory that holds that the viewing of tragic events such as: violent movies, games or sports can lead to lesser aggression in the spectator. Major empirical studies in psychology are available on the cathartic and therapeutic role of media violence. These studies have led to the

development of several theories including the aggression catharsis theory and the therapeutic catharsis theory (Gentile 492). The therapeutic catharsis theory on the other hand holds that the expression/purgation of pent up feelings and emotions that deal with traumatic events allows one to achieve a good mental health. Catharsis therapy states that the summoning of painful memories in the consciousness with emotional discharge is a way of recovering from past traumatic events. Modern psychology holds that catharsis can be achieved from psychotherapy, creative arts/imaginative arts (drama), exercises and other activities that trigger an emotional state. For the purpose of this study however, we focus on catharsis achieved through cinema-therapy.

### **Cinema therapy and Catharsis**

Similar to the Uses and Gratification media theory that focuses on individual use of media to satisfy their social and psychological needs; Cinema-therapy harnesses the power of film watching for impactful therapeutic gains. It is a form of expressive therapy through the use of film for improved mental health. It goes beyond the entertainment value of movies to the release of pent-up emotions and more feel-good emotions. Gary Solomon (cited in Mann 1) defines cinema therapy as “the process of using movies made for the big screen or television for therapeutic purposes. It can have a positive effect on most people except these suffering from psychotic disorders”. The movies used for cinema therapy always have a therapeutic context such as addiction, death/dying or abuse and abandonment.

Bright Wolz, a cinema therapist and author of “The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self Help Guide to Using Movies for Growth and Healing” notes that cinema therapy can be cathartic and useful for the first stage of psychotherapy. It can help depressed persons open up and come to terms with repressed emotions. In cinema therapy, either the themes or plot or characters have profound effect on the spectator. Added to traditional therapy sessions, the cinema therapy can produce therapeutic catharsis. Cinema-therapy is in use at hospitals, prisons, rehabilitation homes, and for long term nursing homes. The Chicago Institute for the Moving Image founded by Joshua Flanders in 2000 is at the centre of creating movies for cinema-therapy through the process of film making, intentional art and medical humanities. Over the years, more practitioners have emerged and the cinema therapy field is expanding.

### ***Outbreak (1995) and Contagion (2011)***

Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* was produced by Punch Production Incorporated and released on March 10, 1995. The film was adapted from the novel *Robin Cook* and Richard Presto’s novel the *Hot Zone*. The film starred

Dustin Hoffman, Morgan Freeman, Cuba Golding Jr. and Rene Russon. The film focused on the Ebola Virus and the Motaba virus outbreak in Zaire (Africa) and a small town in California. *Outbreak* explores the roles military and civilians play in curtailing the outbreak of a contagious disease. The film traces the spread of a viral disease through a white headed capuchin monkey. It explores the interconnections between humans, animals and the ecosystem. Travel by infected persons to other locations is how the virus spread which is equally true of the Covid-19virus. The film equally explores the ability of a virus to mutate and become more dangerous; as well as the use of viral infection as a biological weapon. The people of Cedar Creek where the virus has spread are put on quarantine to stop the spread of the virus to global proportion and the town set on fire to halt the spread. However, army virologist Colonel Sam Daniels is able to come up with a serum to cure the original strain and with the help of Major Salt, they are able to capture the infected monkey, treat it and create an anti-serum for the residents of Cedar Creek.

The high point of *Outbreak* is the fear and panic which public health crisis can cause. It also fuels the belief that viral outbreak can be used as biological weapon of warfare. In the early days of the corona virus outbreaks, there were unfounded fears and conspiracy theories that the infection was a biological weapon intended to diminish global population especially that of Africa. In *Outbreak*, the military conceives Operation Clean Sweep, a plan to bomb and destroy Cedar Creek with its residents in a bid to stop the progression of the virus. The successful capture of the monkey, the subsequent discovery of a healing serum, and the survival of Cedar Creek town offers hopes that all viruses can be conquered and stopped. It also reassures the people of the government's ability to take charge during public health crisis.

The film *Contagion* of the thriller genre was directed by Steven Soderbergh and produced in 2011 by three production companies namely, Participant Media, Imagination and Double Feature Films. The screen play was written by Scott Burns and it featured stars such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet and Matt Damon. *Contagion* was birthed after the director, Soderbergh and the script writer Scott Burns collaborated after working on an initial project. The film is built on the concept of fear, uncertainty and trauma in man's life. The team set out to answer what the world would be like if it is faced by a viral outbreak transmitted through air droplets and fomites. To achieve this, medical specialists such as virologist and epidemiologists were consulted. The movie thus set out to depict a plausible disease outbreak of global proportion. To achieve this, scientific research and historical investigation into past epidemics such as the Black Death, the Spanish Flu and the Ebola Virus were undertaken.

*Contagion* sets out to recreate a real life situation hence, its realistic depiction and use of medical languages. The film employed standard disease tracking techniques and emergency response in its depiction of a global health crisis. The film basically highlighted major areas of concern in a pandemic such as fomites (touch points) that transmit infections such as doorknobs, elevator buttons, and others. The spread of infection by the touch of face, nose and mouth, the speed of virus mutation, the rate of infection, the panic and fear that comes from the unknown, panic buying, looting, mass burial, the overwhelmed medical sector, over-flowing hospitals, lock downs, quarantine, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. The film also highlighted the rapid production of vaccine, the promotion of various home remedies touted to cure the MCV-1 virus, shortage of masks and protective wears, food shortages and the role of government agencies in stemming the tide.

*Contagion's* strength lies in the similarity of the situational crises around the MCV-1 virus and the Covid-19 virus. Both infections affected the respiratory tract and originated from zoonotic source that involved bats and human cross-termination. In *Contagion*, a bat drops an infected piece of banana which is then consumed by a pig. The pig is later slaughtered and being prepared by a chef who, without washing his hands, transmits the virus to Beth (patient zero) who gets infected as the virus mutates. The Covid-19 virus is believed to have emerged from a livestock market in Wuhan, when an infected bat infects a pangolin which is then processed by the woman. The virus then mutates in the human body and rapidly spreads through respiratory drops and fomites. The end of the film shows the interconnectedness between the environment, animal and humans. It is the destruction of the rainforest in China that forces the bats to take refuge in a pig barn which sets off the circle of infection.

### **The Role of Film in a Pandemic**

Film is one art that is useful in managing reactions to a pandemic. In line with what is purported by experts of cinema-therapy, film can help its viewers handle grief, loneliness and learn lessons of life. Film can also help people be better prepared to cope with unfamiliar life situations such as the corona virus outbreak. The pandemic induced lockdown and daily media reports of deaths from the virus caused an increase in man's consciousness of his mortality and the futility of life. Amongst the various coping mechanisms adopted by persons all over the world, the recourse to cinema movies that dwelt with pandemic themes was a unique one. A survey of the comments section of *Contagion* and *Outbreak* YouTube pages showed an upsurge in visitors to the pages from March 2020. The comments from March 2020 received more likes and interactions than older comments. A review of articles

online and news reports also showed several areas of concern as regard pandemic films. For example, a qualitative research by Testoni et al, which analysed people's specific consumption of films during a pandemic, makes the following findings:

From the data analysis, four main areas of thematic prevalence emerged, which reflected the participants' condition during the pandemic that actually led them to watch epidemic-themed movies or TV series: the need to document themselves concerning the theme of epidemics, the need to exorcize contagion anxiety, the desire to find a character with which they could identify, and the casual condition of finding a peculiar movie related to the theme of pandemics and being interested in it because of the striking resemblance with real life. (1)

This is to say that, in the time of high distress and mental stress, film moved beyond its entertainment value to becoming a source of history, information, therapy and a coping mechanism. During the onset of the pandemic, man sought to find an understanding of what life ahead would be. Rather than recourse to history books, the interest in dramatic depiction of the past is borne out of the innate curiosity of man and the reliance on imagination. Dramatic recreation in the time of pestilence and tragedy is not new to man. Man recreates the role play in a bid to understand or avert danger as seen in the ritual origin of drama. The recourse to both films -*Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995) as a reconstruction of man's reality and as an answer to the distressing reality, the role of the films changed from thriller films to an historical document of the reality of life during a pandemic and how man reacts to a public health crisis.

In the time of high distress and mental stress, film moved beyond its entertainment value to becoming a source of history, information, documentary, therapy and a coping mechanism. At the onset of the pandemic, human beings faced increased stress and trauma as they grappled with the fear and threat of sudden death. The flashing images of the sick, overflowing hospitals, over-stretched medical officers and mass burials on news channels contributed to the heightened level of anxiety and mental stress during the lockdown. In such difficult situations, humans by nature take actions to buffer reality and protect themselves either by seeking knowledge of what is to come or by adopting protective mechanism. Some of these actions might appear irrational at first observation. One of such actions was the hoarding of consumables, such as tissue papers and the consumption of horror films and viral outbreak films. According to the proponents of Trauma Management Theory (TMT), the fear of death, logically, should spur one to avoid news of death and dying. That is to say that, the morbid fear of death and dying guide

people to make choices that represses the anxiety that death generates. Better put, when mortality is salient, people engage in activities that reduces the possibility of death. These activities are considered as anxiety buffers. However, contrary to Trauma Management Theory, the recourse to pandemic themed films such as *Contagion* and *Outbreak* depicts a much deeper need by man to find an understanding of his reality from art by watching are-enactment. This is where Aristotle's theory of catharsis and cinema-therapy comes in.

Cinema-therapy harnesses the power of film watching for impactful therapeutic gains which is achieved through the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. As a form of expressive therapy through the use of film, it goes beyond the entertainment value of movies to aid the release of pent-up emotions. As noted earlier, the films used in cinema-therapy often involves the themes of death, dying, recovery and rebirth which are all present in *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995). The two films are able to offer these therapeutic gains by encouraging the summoning of painful memories (fear) in the consciousness with emotional discharge (pity and fear) as a way of recovering from past traumatic events. The audience, as a passive spectator, observes the actions in the film and finds reassurance in the certainty and distancing effect which film offers.

Watching pandemic themed films like *Outbreak* and *Contagion* offered insights into the complex and befuddling problem of man's survival in a pandemic even when it was an imaginary recreation of the scriptwriter. To buttress this point, watching movies like *Outbreak* and *Contagion* offer the viewers an opportunity to live through the imagined last days of the world. These films offered a parallel reality (imagined world), as a disease outbreak threatens to wipe out mankind, and health officials struggled to trace it and keep it in check. The strength and essence of film lay in its ability to reproduce reality in a fascinating and captivating way. In *Contagion* for instance, the incidents and actions of the films were all witnessed during the early days of the pandemic outbreak. From the conspiracy theorists -such as Alan Krumwede, who blogged about curing himself with a homeopathic cure derived from Forsythia leading to the desperate search for Forsythia and massive sales of Krumwede's worthless mixture-to the hoarding of goods, looting of shops, and the frantic search for a vaccine. Both films at the end offer hope as the spread of the virus is checked and controlled.

The films go beyond coping mechanisms to being a rehearsal of the main event (true life situation) and become a kind of emergency preparation for the days ahead. The films also become prediction of actions to come. This is especially true of *Contagion* which was written after intensive research with scientists. Expert virologists and epidemiologists were consulted to create and

depict what could come from a real life pandemic if it were to occur. The result was a movie close to reality as it can ever be in the action of art as an imitation of life. The movies thus serve as a preparation for the fear fuelled days of the pandemic ahead. The more people watched, the more they felt able to grapple with the unknown reality ahead of them and the more hope they had.

Furthermore, an empirical study by Scrivner Coltan et al in 2020, found that fans of horror films exhibited more resilience during the pandemic; while fans of alien-invasion, apocalyptic and zombie films showed greater resilience and preparedness for the pandemic ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). This resilience was attributed to the fact that fictional experiences (such as films) can act as a simulation of actual experiences from which individuals can gather information and model possible future actions. The exposure to pandemic themed films generated effective coping strategies that could end up being beneficial in real world situations. This ability of film to create a safe space for a spectator to experience fear and terror without experiencing harm is one of its strongest points. This point is buttressed by Scrivner et al in a discourse of horror films:

Horror fiction allows people to safely and frequently experience fear, which is typically experienced in the presence of real danger. By eliciting fear in a safe setting, horror fiction presents an opportunity for audiences to hone their emotion regulation skills. Emotion regulation skills have, in turn, been shown to be associated with increased psychological resilience (2).

The role of a film in a pandemic also includes creating a buffer against stressors and delimiting fears. Emotionally charged films enable a cathartic purgation of emotion from the viewer. This purgation of the excess emotions of pity and fear leaves the viewer/spectator a better person and more capable of dealing with life challenges. The placebo effect is that film creates a safety net against psychological distress and pandemic stress which is made worse by enforced isolation, lock down and social distancing. As seen in the cinema therapy process, films with similar themes to the current situation of the pandemic can serve as a therapy and de-stressors. Empirical studies have shown the effect of comedy films on terminal ill patients, limiting the need for regimented medication.

*Contagion*- the movie was so realistic in its portrayal that it is reported to be a prediction of the coronavirus pandemic. In the film, the virus MEV-1, sends the Centre for Disease control into a race against time to control the spread of the virus. The virus also originates from China, and moves from a bat to a pig and finally to a human. The virus soon spread all over the world



through global travel and is contracted by air droplets. At the end of the movie over 26 million people are dead from the public health crisis.

Pandemic themed films such as *Outbreak* and *Contagion* also helped satisfy the morbid curiosity of people who were experiencing for the first time, a global outbreak of viral disease. The lack of adequate information on the new virus and the spread of rumours and speculations on social media led to a huge mass of misinformation. Although the world had at different times within the last few decades experienced several disease outbreaks like the Ebola virus, SARS virus (bird flu), and Lassa fever, none was as widespread as the corona virus that has affected almost all the nations of the earth. With the global death rate from the virus pegged at 4.3 million (4,323,139) and the total infected cases at 205 million (August 12, 2021 figures from WHO), the corona virus outbreak was like a zombie Apocalypse.

Curious movie fans on social media have reportedly sought advice on the corona virus from the scriptwriter of *Contagion* Scott Burns. In a report by Norris Michelle in the Washington Post, the scriptwriter is quoted to have said that he found it alarming that people would rather ask a screenwriter for advice on the pandemic rather than a doctor. This shows the versatility and believability of the film. More importantly, *Contagion* was written with the medical advice of a group of scientists including Dr Ian Lipkin who specialized in epidemics. The film was created to explore the situations that can happen at the outbreak of pandemic in the world. Efforts were made to capture accurate details as close to real life situation as possible with in-depth scientific research based on actual viral outbreak. *Contagion* became a prophetic film predicting quite accurately the pandemic situation. Mr. Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary of the United Kingdom, in an interview with the LBC Radio (BBC.com), states that the 2011 movie *Contagion* showed the importance of getting adequate doses of the vaccine. This inspired the United Kingdom to set out early its order of priority for the vaccine and get adequate doses as soon as vaccines were regarded safe for public use.

## **Conclusion**

By recourse to the cathartic impact of cinema-therapy, we find that a movie can evolve from its original intent as a source of entertainment to become a source of information, a coping mechanism and a documentation of an imagined alternative. Although *Outbreak* and *Contagion* were created as entertainment films in the genre of medical sci-fi, its use by audience in a time of extreme distress and fear as a coping mechanism, makes the movies go beyond this function to become sources of information, documentary, historical prediction, stress buffers and preparatory lessons for the global health challenge that emerged in the year 2020. In essence, the creativity of the

dramatic artist is functional as well as aesthetically relevant irrespective of the time it is created or the purpose for which it is made. As art comes from the society and is inspired by the society, it will continuously mirror man's actions, foibles, fears and victories.

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# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FILM PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

The corona virus, a pathogenic viral infectious disease otherwise known as Covid-19 is an appalling catastrophic pandemic. Since its emergence in 2019, the disease has spread like wildfire across the world. The pandemic has ravaged almost every sphere of human endeavour-socially, economically, culturally, religiously, politically and otherwise. There is no continent in the world that the disease has not touched. Covid-19 has become a cliché and buzzword of the decade that has transmuted man's way of thinking and reasoning. With its attendant health challenges, film production activities are at its lowest ebb. This paper sets out to examine the praxis of motion picture production, distribution and exhibition as practiced in Nigerian vis-à vis the coronavirus pandemic era. The paper also examines social distancing which negates the collaborative environment film enjoys as an art form. The Nigerian experience is no different from other film producing nations of the world. The Nigerian film industry popularly known as Nollywood has reduced its production capacity drastically causing unemployment and loss of millions of naira in earnings. Qualitative method of research was adopted, using published documents and interviews of stakeholders. The paper critically examines the numerous challenges film producers are facing worldwide and the search for creative means to surmount the problems of social distancing and how to curtail the spread of the disease on a shooting location. The paper concludes that coronavirus has negatively affected film industry in the area of production distribution and exhibition around the world including Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, Collaboration, Social Distancing, Lockdown, Production.

## **Introduction**

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, with its spread all over the world has had adverse effects on global economics (Omoera and Ogoke 145). Adgate, an independent media consultant, notes that, in 2020, the global pandemic impacted the theatrical and home/mobile entertainment as movies theatres and production studios temporarily closed, as millions quarantined viewers were forced to stay home for their video entertainment

(par. 1). The pandemic has affected the global motion picture industry bringing to a halt in film production activity around the world and the closure of cinema theatres. Hall reckons that the movies are a massive value creator which have generated global box office revenues totalled at \$42 billion in 2019, an all-time high contributing almost one - third of the estimated \$136 billion in the value of worldwide movie production and distribution (Adgate par.1).

The movie industries support millions of jobs across the continents. Unfortunately, Covid-19 pandemic has hit so hard on major film production industries across the world including Nigeria that the Federal Government had to impose a total lockdown of activities nationwide. As a result, film operations were shelved indefinitely while cinema complexes were locked down prompting job losses within the country. With the lockdown affecting every aspect of the Nigerian economy, its effects on the motion picture industry was equally devastating as movies shot must first be exhibited in cinemas after which they are sold in open markets. Besides, the shutdown has crippled work on all film locations and as a result, the industry has lost millions of naira. This has made life difficult for filmmakers, artists and artisans whose main source of livelihood depends largely on the film industry. Adeolu, a Yoruba actor of great repute cited by Aguoye in *Premium Times* lamented that, as a celebrity, people were always flocking to his house to ask for money and food. Because he knew these things affect them as actors, he did his best for them. People will see them on the road and expect them to drop something; whereas they (actors) too were not making any money at the moment (1). The Nigerian experience was not different from what was obtained in other parts of the world. All over the world, film production industries have suffered massive blows because of Covid-19. Many productions came to a halt, cinema houses became locked. The total production lockdown not only resulted to actors, technical and production crew being out of work but also disappointed fans who were unable to get entertainment. The virus dealt a deadly blow to the motion picture industry the world over. Writing on how corona virus has drastically altered the face of the film industry, Atkinson and Kennedy note that:

It was a tough time for the global film industry for which the pandemic represents a disruption of seismic proportions. All movie production spaces have officially “locked down” and all talent - whether in front or behind the camera - has been quarantined. Film festivals have all been cancelled or moved online, cinemas were closed, and the industry faced an uncertain economic future. (1)

Hollywood and Bollywood, which are major film production industries in the world, have their own share of crisis in the production, distribution and

exhibition of films because of the coronavirus pandemic. Whiting posits that the effects of the virus have taken a greater toll on America and India, turning many sectors of their economies upside down including their popular entertainment industries. In the United States of America, the major film production studios: Warner Bros, Walt Disney, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, Sony and Universal Studios have experienced a significant drop in the number of films produced during the pandemic period resulting to a low number of film releases most of which were on Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) service (1). Other entertainment services like Netflix, HBO, Amazon, etc., acquired movies from the major studios and released them directly to consumers at home. The spectacular Bollywood, Indian film industry like others is a tale of woes as film production activities have come to a standstill resulting to loss of jobs and income because production studios and cinema theatres were shut down. Bloomberg television on its programme Business Lines lamented that *Gulabo Sitabo*, a Bollywood film starring Indian Legend Amitabh Bachchan was to engage millions of viewers to cinema halls across India in the spring season, but it debuted on Amazon.com Inc.'s prime streaming service as a result of the impact of the virus (1).

### **The Collaborative Art of Filmmaking in the Pandemic Era.**

Filmmaking by its nature is a collaborative art that demands social interaction at each point of production from pre-production to distribution and exhibition in cinema theatres (Omoera 37). Motion picture also known as film or movie originates from the writer's imagination. It is the writer who creates the characters and these amazing plot twists delight the audiences. The witty dialogue spoken by the actors, the dramatic action and the performance that thrill the viewers are the inventions of a creative writer. The writer, therefore, builds the foundation upon which the entire film rests. It is only after he has finished this work that the director and other artisans begin theirs. The production of a successful is a major enterprise that requires artisans, construction of elaborate sets, state of the art technology and other expensive production values. The production crew is made up of both the above and below the line personnel; those involved in the creative development of the film and those responsible for the day-to-day filmmaking covering the pre-production, production and post-production stages. It is impossible to individuate the elements of a film because the director, cinematographer, art director, writer, actors, crew and others work in collaboration with each other to actualize the director's vision for a film.

Travis looks at collaboration as a journey where in the film production, team members share a common vision but are willing to challenge and be challenged with the keen awareness that the result can far exceed the efforts of

any one individual (134). This is in contrast with the auteur film theory, which submits that a director's over bearing influences coupled with his individual style makes him the author of a film. Pramaggorie and Willis in a question-and-answer session with independent filmmaker, Courneyer state that when you see credits like "a so and so film" or "a film by so and so", you are seeing an ego parade, nothing more (370). To be laboured, the obvious, filmmaking is a collaborative enterprise. The collaborative theory accounts for the contribution each artist or artisan makes to the film including above the line; directors, producers and leading extras (41). Wordland concurs that, everyone involved in the production of a film including the production designer who delegates set construction, costume and make-up designers to the necessary departments ensure that everything is done in line with the director's vision for the film (10).

From the foregoing, we can deduce that the success of any film is very much dependent on how much collaboration there is within the entire production team. Actors and technicians have an enormous amount to contribute as no single individual has the monopoly of knowledge. According to Grant, a motion picture's personality can be linked to its major creators, directors, producers, leading actors and all those who play a part in its nuances to affect the audience's reaction to what they see on the screen (80). Filmmaking is the most collaborative environment ever invented by humanity to create art. To make a certain kind of film, you need to know how to get others on the same page. The filmmaking process involves a number of complex and discrete stages requiring people from diverse professions working seamlessly together as a team to achieve a common goal. Gocsik and Barsam reckon that;

Film is a collaborative medium. It is important to understand that no one person can control the product. The Director of Photography (DOP), the screenwriters (often many), the wardrobe and make-up people, the head of the studio - all these and others have a hand in determining the final product. (11)

Collaborative art as it applies to filmmaking focuses on each person's contributions in significant ways to achieve the desired result. It demands the creative involvement of everyone working as a team and that is what filmmaking is all about. While collaboration is important in filmmaking is that no single individual has the monopoly of knowledge and with shared experiences, knowledge and craft, better results would be achieved. By working with a team, you are able to focus on a specific aspect of the production; when you collaborate, you are able to rely on others to perform tasks that you otherwise would have had to take care of. Therefore, an

exposition into the filmmaking process will enable us appreciate the power of collaboration towards the realization of the director's vision for a film which today has been rudely truncated by Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Working with the Cast and Crew**

Filmmaking is about collaboration. On every production set, it is normal to see people responsible to perform different functions. It is a thing never heard of in the film world and it is most unprofessional for anyone to be doing everything by himself. Even with smaller crews, it is in order to figure out and assign responsibilities to production personnel right at the pre-production stage. The director of photography (DOP) also known as the cinematographer is the lighting cameraman responsible for the technical aspects of images as well as the mise-en-scene. He professionally carries out the film director's instructions with a firm and creative commitment that the director's aesthetic and artistic vision of the film is indeed achieved. He is the film director's main visual collaborator

Giannetti contends that in the cause of making creative and interpretative decisions, the director of photography who is in charge of the camera, grips and lighting crews performs management and logistical organization. All these functions involve constant close interaction with crew members (people) for the success of the production (66). Seasoned, creative result-oriented film directors have realised overtime that the performances of actors during the shoot largely determine the success or failure of film. Directors, therefore, treat actors and actresses as creative partners. By creating an atmosphere that says "we are a team" is very conducive for creative physical interaction devoid of social distancing. Such an atmosphere gives room for personal and group social interactions, words of encouragement and motivation, which in most cases reduces tension and energizes those that are stressed and in need of support.

It is often said, "patience is a virtue", it is most apt in this circumstance as patience and extra attention to members of the cast and crew can exude that great confidence that will culminate to cathartic performance. On most shoots, film directors gain confidence, support, and team dynamic and attain that spirit of camaraderie by socializing a bit on location with actors outside the confines of a rehearsal and successful shooting session. Besides relaxation, such social activities assure every participant in the group the oneness in the creative spirit of production, as everyone is willing to discuss and exchange creative ideas. Effective communication between the director, cast and crew is one of the key factors to a successful collaboration during a shoot. Physical contacts like hugging, handshakes, smiles and other affectionate means express feelings, warmth and oneness that make one feel good with a willing

spirit to put up his or her best performance. The above tips on collaboration for effective filmmaking without any handicap is a negation to Covid-19 pandemic protocols, which the motion picture practitioners are making efforts to stay alive and at the same time provide movie entertainment to their audience.

Reluga posits that social distancing refers to the adoption of behaviours by individuals in a community that reduces those individuals' risk from becoming infected, by limiting their contacts with other individuals or reducing the transmission risks during each contacts (2). Social distancing is the hardest part during production, whether in the studio or on location because the entire nature of filmmaking is collaborative. How possible is it for a director to be talking to an artist or a crew member metres away? On some sets in Hollywood, production executives incurred additional expenses hiring extra persons to enforce the order of keeping people at a distance not more than an arm's length. Rubin, Jackson and Tangcay recount their experience on a Hollywood movie set lamenting that shooting movies has become more expensive and more time consuming and that is not likely to change (2).

### **Nollywood and the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The Nigerian film industry popularly known as Nollywood is a multibillion-dollar industry that produces movies and television programmes more than Hollywood of the United States of America and second place to Bollywood of India in terms of the quantity of movies produced in a year. The ingenuity and inventiveness of Nigerian filmmakers who from a shaky homemade movie on VHS cameras is now the second most prolific film industry in the world. It is estimated that Nollywood employs more than one million people, produces about 50 films weekly. The outbreak of Covid-19 has dealt a deadly blow to movie industries across the globe leading to a closure of businesses forcing the world population to stay at home and maintain social distancing. Mbamalu observes that when restrictions were introduced in Nigeria, Nollywood filmmakers bore the brunt. Filming stopped and Africa's biggest movie industry grounded to a painfully slow halt (1). An interview with Patrick Lee Chairman, Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria, he lamented the enormous financial loss suffered by the Nigerian Film Industry due to the continue suspension of cinema operations and the theatre in general as a result of the lockdown (Telephone interview, 7 May 2022).

In the same vein, the Operations Manager of Mees Palace Cinema in Jos, Plateau state Brian Oyemike recounted the huge loss they encountered during the pandemic. According to him Covid-19 really affected the business at MEES Palace cinema. You know very well that without viewers at the cinema there will be no revenue. The total lockdown affected our business in



many ways. Our equipment which are very sensitive were not used for quite a long time resulting to huge sum of money for repairs and maintenance. Besides, the closure of the cinema caused a lot of damage to the seats and walls as rodents caused massive destructions to our facilities due to none activity at the venue. You can imagine what happens to your furniture and electronics when your house is locked up for a period of one year! There was even no way to generate revenue, so all our staff were sent home in compliance with the government's lockdown directive. Today, we are faced with high maintenance cost of equipment and physical facilities to meet the entertainment needs of our numerous viewers (Interviewed 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2022.).

The Federal Ministry of Health recorded the first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria on Feb 27, 2020 with a subsequent lockdown by Lagos state in March a month later. The nation had to enforce strict protocols to curtail the spread of the disease. Restriction of movements was enforced, as there was lockdown of movement and social activities, which directly affected cinemas, cutting off income for filmmakers and marketers. Mbamalu of *This is Africa* reports that when restrictions were introduced, a Nigerian indie filmmaker Umoren was in the middle of shooting his TV series; Channel 77 in his studio with a crew of over 70 people which included main actors, extras, his crew and cleaners, had to stop filming and not shoot for another eight months (1).

Nollywood film budgets included corona virus related expenses as well as production insurance cover. Prior to the outbreak of the corona virus disease, getting supporting actors, background actors to create an atmosphere of cameo appearance tagged "waka pass" in Nigerian parlance took only a day's notice. At the hit of the pandemic, the situation was different. Actors were mandated to undergo three tests for which they were expected to test negative before allowing them to participate in production. If someone among the cast or crew tested positive, the person would be immediately excluded from the team. The overhead cost for production during the pandemic was alarming. You can just imagine how much a production budget goes into Covid-19 tests per person at three consecutive times for a cast and crew of approximately one hundred people. The economic loss by cinema theatres in Nigeria during the outbreak and lockdown are expressively captured by Ishola, Ityonzughur and Gbamwuan:

Cinema and pay television broadcast operators were the most hit in the content distribution chain. By observing the social distancing guidelines, cinemas were closed, families had no option but to stay at home and with limited content in circulation, while pay-television broadcast operators were forced to repeat programmes across their channels. Take for instance, sports contents like football is enjoyed mostly by Nigerians. However, due to the outbreak of the virus,

organizers were forced to cancel their games until the situation subsided. This in earnest was a great loss to even local cinema shows halls across the country arising from the fact that they were also forced to shut down their businesses. (70)

It is not an understatement to say that thousands of workers including entertainers, makeup artists, set designers, carpenters and backstage dancers have been seriously affected. The lockdown of movement and the prohibition of people gathering in open and enclosures have not only crippled film production activities but also brought untold hardship to many who were engaged to work and earn a livelihood from Nollywood productions. With the lockdown of cinema theatres in Nigeria, several film producers have gone in search of cinema alternatives by opting to release their films on streaming platforms.

### **Production Challenges of Nollywood Film Practitioners**

Many Nigerian filmmakers suffered different kind of hardships during the lockdown. Examples abound of those who could hardly conclude their production and distribution works before they were caught in the web of the lockdown. Mbamalu posted in a tweet that Umoren an independent filmmaker who had earlier directed a hugely successful film “Children of Mud” was confined at home using his laptop to edit a video project he directed. Similarly, Cinematographer Igbekele who had just finished a shoot and getting ready for another production could not proceed because Lagos State announced a lockdown. (Tweeted 18th March 2020)

There was no interstate movement, no further productions over a period of months, which forced his cast and crew to find other means of survival. Even when the lockdown was relaxed, Covid-19 posed challenges and restrictions on the film sets. Taylor, the pioneer producer of *Comedy in Nollywood*, shows how he created the position of a chief Covid-19 officer on the film sets whose responsibility was to enforce the World Health Organization (WHO) Covid-19 guidelines. He reduced the number of people on the set to the least possible. The tests were carried out on each crew member at a cost between \$110 and \$130 which inadvertently led to an increase in his production budget. (Mbamalu 3). In order to avoid conveying cast and crew in a crowded bus in keeping with social distancing, it became necessary to rent two buses. Due to the severe enforcement of curfew, not much exterior scenes were shot including night scenes. The people on location were made to wear gloves, nose masks, frequent use of sanitizers as many people complained that their hands were sweaty and with the face masks on, it was difficult to hear each other clearly when speaking. The restriction of the curfew made it

difficult to shoot into the night as night scenes were also shifted for daytime shooting (3).

Okhai, President *Directors Guild of Nigeria* in an interviewed posited that, a few productions were taking place underground, people could not really go out to express themselves in terms of big budget movies or going out to cinemas as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the entertainment industry. (Interviewed 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2022). Similarly, Gyang of *Cinema Kpatakpata* in an interviewed said that he experienced limited verbal communication on the set wearing mask all the time, the artists used to make up themselves and Covid -19 tests were carried out every 10 days which negatively affected their budgets and the entire production (Interview, 6 May 2022). Ogunshina, a Nollywood filmmaker wrote a movie script full of emotion and intimate love scenes. With the outbreak of the pandemic in Nigeria, Ogunshina in a chat with Timileyin Omilana narrated his ordeal on how he quickly rewrote his script to incorporate creative distancing into the love scenes. Ogunshina stressed the point that COVID-19 had delivered a kiss of death to his script. In his words, “we have to keep pushing because it is a love story but we cannot bring two lovers together at this time. I cannot bring people together on set for a movie where they have to kiss; it does not make any sense. So I have started reworking the script and thinking of another angle” (2). This narrative is very apt as this simple act of kissing by two lovers is totally out of sync with the pandemic era when social distancing is the norm in line with safety guidelines.

Idiagbonya the director of *TV Series Meadows* expressed his sadness to Abraham Achirga and Alexis Akwagyiram of *Reuters* at the resumption of his production in Abuja after a period of total lockdown for two months. He had to cut down the number of cast and crew to a manageable number of seven while he also doubled as a lighting cameraman. Regular temperature checks, wearing of face masks and maintenance of social distance was strictly enforced as the actors delivered their lines. A former president of the *Directors Guild of Nigeria* (DGN) Amata condemned social distancing which according to him would make scripts unworkable. His justification is based on the premise that Nollywood films are famed for tales of romance and witchcraft, which often depict lavish social gatherings that are the bedrock of Nigerian life (2).

### **Film Exhibition during Covid-19**

In Nigeria, commercial movie theatres like Silver Bird Cinemas, Octopus Cinema Hall, Ozone Cinemas, Film House Imax Lekki, Kada Cinemas and several others constitute theatrical exhibition sites. Films first make their debut in theatrical screening. This is a launching pad that determines how successful the film will be in other markets. Giwa submits that:

The distribution and screening of Nollywood films range from watching through DVDS, in theatres and on internet. The Nollywood audience has access to Nigerian movies through several platforms regardless of where they are in the world. The need for the expanding diaspora is due to the migration of over 400,000 Nigerians to other countries like the United States and the United Kingdom amongst others. With the widespread movement of Nigerians expanding, the need for access in multiple platforms is necessary and convenient. (3)

Most film releases in Nigeria are exhibited in cinema theatres. With the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, theatres were all closed across the nation. The ticket sales in theatres contribute greatly to the revenue a film generates. With the closure of cinemas theatre workers had to stay safe at home, so also the audience which has led to a loss of revenue and a lot of workers being laid off from their jobs. The business ventures of film marketers have also suffered a big loss due to the effects of the pandemic. Odiete, the CEO of Blue Pictures which distributes films across West Africa for the past fifteen years disclosed to Mbamalu that she lost over 60 million naira during the COVID-19 pandemic. Odiete has now pivoted her business towards Video on Demand (VOD) as she does not need a lot of money for marketing, unlike cinemas where the filmmaker has to consider huge marketing budget (3).

### **Exploring New Alternatives**

For every problem, there has always been a creative need and effort to solve the problem hence the popular well-known proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” which is very apt in this circumstance of the coronavirus impediments. Atkinson and Kennedy note that: since digital technologies were introduced into film production, one of their primary benefits has been to make economic savings such as reducing the need for expensive international travel. So, for example, ‘automatic dialogue replacement’ is one of the final post production processes where actors can record replacement dialogue remotely in one studio which can be dubbed over the live action footage in another. So, films can now be made in virtualised environments devoid of corona virus protocols (2). In continuation, Atkinson and Kennedy confirm the use of virtual production by citing the recent remake of *Lion King* thus:

*Lion King* remake was made using an entirely virtual set. A virtual set enables a range of creative production personnel, including directors and performers to see the composition of photorealistic computer animated imagery on the screens around them. Actors are able to perform live within the digital environment... Similarly, in the Oscar

winning film *Gravity*, the only real action were the faces of the principal actors, everything else was computer generated. Virtual production also means that the production team does not have to be in the same physical space. Creative team can continue to collaborate despite being in different places. (2)

The new initiative by Enderby Entertainment to team up with Draganfly's Safe Set Solutions is the latest development in technology that would enable film and television producers work comfortably without fear of contacting the deadly coronavirus. The Safe Set Solution is a ground-based technology that uses symptom pre-screening, elevated body temperature measurement, and social distancing digital display to help ensure that crew and casts are safe on set. Alessandro explains that: Safe Set Solution is a healthy and respiratory measurement platform used as a pre-screening tool to help identify possible infections and respiratory conditions for the safety of film crew and workforces; as well as areas where the people congregate such as airports, schools, shopping malls and other high traffic locations. The system is used to understand patterns and help global film production companies make better decisions and react quicker to mitigate potential health threats (1).

This technology as expected would surely enable crew to get back on production sets that have experienced total lockdown for several months due to the pandemic. It will also guarantee safety as the cast and crew will be more relaxed because the stipulated health guidelines have been complied with as they go about their business. Okhai further stressed that in the area of film distribution and exhibition, many YouTube channels were opened at the time to serve as alternative channels for self-distribution which opened avenues for film producers to do short movies and distribute them across social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook.

Today as Nigerian filmmakers are gradually turning to the digital technology, a lot of movie content is now available because people with smart phones and internet connectivity can produce content and stream online. This has indeed increased customer sophistication as they can now have a wide variety of content to choose from. It therefore implies that players must constantly innovate and be relevant so as to retain attention of customers. It is on record that film producer Charles Okpaleke in partnership with local cinema chains like Genesis and Silverbird Cinemas have launched open air Drive-in cinema exhibition facilities. The Drive-in cinema made a debut in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city in late May 2020. This successful outing was not just inspiring, but it saw all tickets sell out within the recorded time with viewers flocking in to watch the film *Living in Bondage Breaking Free* (2019) comfortably in their cars. Other film producers and directors are now

exploring ways and means of releasing their films on online streaming services like Netflix and VOD. The set back by the pandemic has created a financially viable platform as more drive-in cinema theatres are now established in the country in compliance with the social distancing order.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Covid-19 pandemic had a horrific impact on world economies and the motion picture industry was not an exception. Production of films have suffered indefinite postponement occasioned by total lockdown of movement and social distancing. While the pandemic lasts, the industry faced a future of uncertainty. The production cost for shooting movies has become prohibitive due to the numerous tests carried out on cast and crew to ascertain their wellness on location. The ferocious spread of the disease called for use of masks, social distancing and lockdown which not only affected production but also loss of revenue accrued to cinema theatres. From the foregoing, we can deduce that thousands of people have become jobless with no means of livelihood. The major losses the industry passed through due to the closure of theatres is easing up gradually as new exhibition platforms have been discovered to be financially beneficial. These include streaming media service platforms known as over-the-top (OTT) which have turned into the “new big screen”. Although some people still yearn for the cinematic experience in cinema theatres, people have turned this adversity into advantage as people also watch movies on their phones.

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# FACILITATING STUDENTS' THEATRE PRODUCTIONS DURING A PANDEMIC

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## **Abstract**

The surge of Covid-19 pandemic came unexpectedly that it caught most nations unaware. Not only did the health and wellbeing of the populace become a concern, preventing the spread of the deadly virus was paramount. Subsequently, restrictions were placed on physical contacts, human movements and interactions and in some cases there were total shut down for a period of time. This in no small measure affected several sectors of human existence, prominent among them is education, where the practice of educational theatre is not left out. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, teaching and learning of theatre, especially practical courses took a new dimension bringing to the fore, challenges, innovations, restructuring and reorganisation of students' theatre productions. It is on this premise, that this paper attempts a study of how students' productions survived the heat of the pandemic in a teacher training institution. It specifically beams light on an educational theatre domiciled in Lagos State University of Education with the intention of sharing experiences of coordinating students' productions in a pandemic era. The research is based on experiences gained during the experimentation of teaching practical courses online through a specific study of a group work that culminated in a stage production.

**Keywords:** Educational Theatre, Covid-19, On-Line, Technology, Students' Productions.

## **Introduction**

A pandemic is an epidemic that has travelled internationally, thereby giving it a larger wide spread. "A Pandemic is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic." (Robinson par. 2). Within the scope of religion, adherents are taught past [and impending] dangers of plagues that have affected the human world and this has shaped the beliefs and responses to pandemics over time. Huremovic gives a historical account of some plagues in the world, namely, the Athenian Plague (430-26 B.C) - Associated with the Greeks; the Antonine Plague (165-180 AD) - Associated with the Romans; the Justinian Plague (Mid 6th C) - Associated with Ethiopia; the Black Death (1347) - Associated with China; Spanish Flu (1920) - Associated with Spain; HIV Pandemic (1980s) -

Associated with USA; Smallpox Outbreak (1972) – Associated with former Yugoslavia; Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (21st C) – Associated with China; Swine Flu (2009) – Associated with Mexico; Ebola Outbreak (2014-2016) – Associated with Central and Western Africa; ZIKA (2015-2016) – Associated with Uganda, among others.

Outstanding features of these diseases range from, skin eruptions, cough, vomiting, hallucinations, acute respiratory symptoms causing impairments, disabilities for those that survived and death of a great number of people. These diseases are accredited for de-populating the world during their spread and a major way of controlling their spread was to reduce human contact, isolate and devise vaccines to prevent further disasters. The Covid-19 pandemic is one out of the many kinds of viruses that currently plagues human society. Though it is said to have originated in China, it has crept into all continents of the world with devastating effect on human lives as well as economy. Covid-19 came into the news for the first time in November 2019 and due to its nature as an airborne disease, it is contracted through human contacts. It may not be easily detected in people infected with the virus until two weeks, thereby making the spread fast and almost uncontrollable. Most often, “people infected with the covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without special treatment (Ibrahim 204). However, some others, especially older people or those with underlying medical conditions requiring special treatments may not be fortunate to survive the disease due to low immunity. While the treatments and cure, vaccines have been developed to curb its spread by boosting immunities.

Up to fifty-four (54) countries have confirmed cases and deaths. These led to closure of borders, international flights and international trades. There are, however, lots of speculations about the vaccine and many people are yet to come to terms with the need to be vaccinated against this deadly virus. It has created a major crisis and greatest challenge in the health sector since its emergence. Apart from this, Covid-19 is also devastating and has led to social, economic, political and educational crises and there appears to be no respite yet. While mankind was busy seeking ways to contain the virus, it mutated into a deadlier variant known as Delta. The Delta variant has minimal symptoms, which in the space of seven days may lead to death. Recently, the deadliest variant, Omicron was discovered in South Africa on November 24, 2021 (WHO, 2021). Educational Theatre Association confirms that internationally, institutional theatre programmes encountered grave threats and devastating consequences from the effects of the Covid-19.

Most school districts, faced with lost instructional time, limited capacity, and the added resources needed to address new modes of teaching and learning, are likely to retool their curricula to emphasize

core subject areas, such as math and reading. Theatre, along with the other arts, may be considered an expendable subject area as district leaders struggle to adapt their schools, teachers, and students to a new reality of education that is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. For theatre education to maintain its place in schools, advocates will need broad-based community support.... (6)

Apparently, educational theatres workshops as well as performances were cancelled in the wake of Covid-19 culminating in gross loss of revenue provided by ticket sales which is a major source of income for the management of these theatres apart from institutional support. In order to confront the situation and prevent theatre performances from total collapse, it became imperative for teachers and students to re-shaped teaching methods opportunities by embracing new tools and resources to deliver online instruction that will afford learning opportunities to students. While the varying degrees of success regarding students' engagement with virtual instruction for theatre programmes may not be fully ascertained in this paper, due to a series of other variables, it is worthy to note that this era is the beginning of innovative virtual lessons for theatre lecturers and students. Hopefully, it would lead to a review and retool of curricula in theatre education and may likely continue to be a desired part of the well-rounded education of all students.

### **Covid-19 and Education in Nigeria**

At the onset of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the government rose to the occasion by taking measures just like other nations. This was after the news of the first human contact with an infected person in Nigeria on 27th February, 2020. In a short time, it spread around the country like wildfire. Consequently, President Muhammadu Buhari announced a lockdown of two major states and the federal capital at the first instance. They are Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. As the virus extend to other states, many states government embarked on the similar measures to curb the spread of the deadly virus. This action was not a welcome development among Nigerian citizens because of the infringement on their fundamental human rights. These include freedom of association, movement, religion, education and so on. It further prevented citizens from accessing their daily livelihood especially as there was too much hunger, restlessness, hardship and insecurity. In order to ameliorate these conditions, several measures were introduced to affect men, women, boys and birds. The government came up with welfare and relief packages, programmes and activities to cushion the effect of the Sit-at-Home with support from companies, organizations and institutions. Unfortunately,

this good intention was hijacked and politicized by a few powerful and influential individuals.

Just like other sectors, education suffered a setback especially during the lockdown. On March 19, 2020 there was a directive by the Ministry of Education to close down all institutions of learning from pre-primary to tertiary. Students across the various institutions of learning from primary to tertiary, cut short their stay in schools and returned home without plans/policies on how academic activities would continue from home. This was a highly traumatic and turbulent period for students especially those in federal and state owned institutions. In response to criticism, some state governments took initiatives for teaching and learning from home by introducing online academic activities. Private universities which seemed to be better prepared went on with teaching and learning to complete the session and even conducted examinations. Given the lack of development of online learning tools in public schools, there were lots of difficulties and challenges in the use of technology to reach students. Students from poor homes that did not have access to smartphones or internet facilities were totally deprived of on-line learning. Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education in some states to adopt mass production of Radio and television, power supply rendered them almost useless.

As of 12th April 2020, approximately 1.723 billion learners have been affected with the sudden closure of schools in response to Covid-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO Monitoring as of the date above, 191 countries have implemented nationwide closures and 5 have implemented local closures impacting about 98.4 percent of the world's student population (Adelakun 88). The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted most industries in the world except for the education industry that was fully transferred online. The switch to online education came suddenly with little preparation or readiness for the swift move especially for developing countries like Nigeria. While online learning had already been activated in some institutions prior to the emergence of the pandemic, the same could not be said for most schools, colleges and universities who do not use this mode of teaching and learning. Online learning took the centre stage and there was increased awareness, involvement, utilisation and guidance of students to be motivated in virtual learning. It became the only option during this era and the experience varies from one coast to another despite the fact that it was riddled with so many challenges, confusion and in some cases total failure. Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education was able to launch online classes amidst the lockdown and this created the platform for the Department of Theatre Arts to explore virtual learning in theory and practice.

The Federal Ministry of Education did not come up with adequate policy or measures on how to ease learning during the school closure. The idea of home schooling is not fully practiced in Nigeria and mostly, shocking to children's social life and learning as there was no prior preparation, education and enlightenment. Apart from the adaptability of the children, teachers were ill prepared and ill equipped to adopt an untested and unprecedented process. Also, not every parent was knowledgeable enough to handle the technicalities involved in the pedagogy. However, lecturers in private universities responded to virtual teaching than those from public universities and that a negative relationship exists between the socio demographic/occupational variables (gender, current position, and years of experience) and virtual orientation of lecturers of Nigerian universities. (Iseolorunkanmi, Adebola, Adebola, Rotimi, Nweke-Love, Adebisi and Lawal 3)

Some identified cable television, radio stations and social media outlets came up with special programmes for primary and secondary school students at specific times of the day. Private schools rose gallantly to the occasion by moving further to engage their students in e-learning, involving the use of Apps and software like, Google classroom, Google meet, Whatsapp, Zoom, You-Tube etc.. Similarly, private universities proceeded to complete the session, conduct exams for their students and resume a new session. The same cannot be said for public/government owned institutions of learning across board. In a research carried out by Olasunkanmi (n.pag.), Nigerian students complain of higher data consumption, erratic power supply, internet network fluctuations and environmental distractions to establish their negative dispositions towards online schooling. The effort of the government in this aspect was less significant and unnoticeable.

### **Department of Theatre Arts LASUED as an Educational Theatre**

Before the emergence of the department, there already existed a theatre culture in the College community through the efforts of Dr Femi Adedina in the early eighties. He was a lecturer in the Department of English but was equally assigned a General Education course, Drama Minor. It was this platform that first gave opportunities for theatrical performances involving students cutting across all departments in the institution. As a follow up, he established a drama troupe known as Gazelle Players, and they thrilled the entire College to exciting moments of quality and standard stage productions. It was, therefore, not a surprise that a proposal establishing the Department of Theatre Arts was accepted and became fully operational in the 1999/2000 academic session. It kicked off with two foundation lecturers; one, a Senior Lecturer in the English Department (Femi Adedina) and the other, a lecturer III in General Studies (Gbenga Windapo). Initially, there were only two course

combinations namely Theatre Arts/English and Theatre Arts/Yoruba and the students' population was paltry, eight. In 2001/2002 academic session, there was a population explosion with the inclusion of five other combinations, such as, Theatre/Social Studies, Theatre/Christian Religious Studies, Theatre/Political Science and Theatre/Economics, although the last two were later removed and replaced with Theatre Arts/ Igbo, Theatre Arts /French and Theatre Arts ISS. This also necessitated the employment of five additional lecturers in the early days of the department. Students' population increased subsequently in preceding years as the department continues to churn out crops of well-trained theatre arts teachers and professionals.

The mission of the department is to provide qualitative teacher training education in the discipline of Theatre Arts to students both theoretically and practically so as to prepare them adequately for their chosen profession. In pursuit of this objective, the department's main duty is to equip students in theory and practice in all aspects of the Theatre in preparation for the world of Arts which is highly competitive. Students are exposed to and given opportunities to serve as students' Stage Managers, Directors Assistant Directors, Technical Directors, Costume Managers and other theatre personnel of their plays. Students are also trained to have a well-rounded and balanced theatre experience driven with a quest for professionalism, to compete favourably with their counterparts from other institutions and the larger society. Unfortunately, in the early hours of March 20, 2013, the department was reduced to rubble by fire as everything went up in flames. The fire incident practically wiped off all the thirteen years of hard work and labour of staff and students as student records, Gadgets, Studio, books and DVD's of students' practical works were razed. Undeterred, the department has risen above this challenge and has created new pathways in terms of exploits, relevance and achievements within and outside the College community. (Adedina 188)

### **Practical Productions during Covid-19**

The old NCE curriculum of 2012, was designed in such a way that most practical courses were in the second semester starting from 100 level to 300 level. The usual practice is to merge students across levels in groups especially when the course cuts across or is interrelated and a lecturer is allocated the course but it is jointly coordinated by all other lecturers. This tradition was the first casualty of Covid-19 as a new norm emerged to include restrictions on closeness, popularly known as 'social distancing', as a measure to stop and or drastically reduce the spread of the pandemic. Closely related is the use of a nose mask, when in a public space, to control its spread. These two major

conditions were the first hurdles crossed as conditions for students to participate in practical courses. Focus will be on two of such courses namely THA 124- Principles of Directing and THA 222- Nigerian Drama in English, students are expected to merge theory with practice by exhibiting their dexterity on stage to evaluate their knowledge of arts of the theatre. Before Covid-19, the normal practice was to fix and attend rehearsals in the evenings after lectures. The lecturers in charge of each group supervise students, conduct activities as well as ensure that discipline is upheld. It is after this period that groups go on stage to perform to a paying audience. However, this was not to be so in the second semester of the 2019/2020 session when a pandemic hit the face of the earth and distorted and disrupted lives and living. In ensuring compliance with Covid-19 protocols after resumption from lockdown in November, 2020, new approaches and methods were introduced into practical courses to ensure that objectives of such courses were achieved even within limited resources. To start with, the number of students in groups was reduced from above thirty to twenty. This was followed by selection of short plays that do not require large casts and where stage movements and bodily contact could be reduced to the barest minimum.

### **Audition**

Once students were grouped, Zoom meeting was arranged for the audition. Economic and technological challenges were easily overcome at this stage as staff and students had access to free WiFi in the college. Also, students that do not have android phones were permitted to pair up in twos. Since these students' abilities were already well known to lecturer and student directors in charge, the selection process for cast and crew was not cumbersome. Moreover, the play in question (*Birthdays are not for Dying* by Femi Osofisan) had few characters so the cast and crew arrived during the first meeting of forty minutes.

### **Reading**

The first and second readings followed the same trend, but the meeting time was extended from the normal forty minutes to eighty minutes to allow for the play text to be completed at each reading session. After the second reading, another forty minutes meeting was scheduled for play analysis. The scheduling of zoom meetings was the responsibility of the stage manager.

### **Rehearsals**

The major approach here was to organize pocket rehearsals. This was in a bid to reduce human contact and possibility of contracting the disease. The groups' director and stage manager arrived at a workable rehearsal schedule

that allowed actors in some scenes at rehearsals. Songs were learnt via zoom meetings. Also blockings and movements of actors were majorly notated in prompt books by the directors with the assistance of stage managers and given to actors to visualise and comply in their own space. Movements were minimised to reduce bodily contact and emphasis were laid on the message of the play by insisting on actors' interpretation of roles and characterisation. After the third week of zoom rehearsal, it was discovered that little progress was made by students in achieving any outstanding result. Therefore, the last three weeks were dedicated to pocket rehearsals. The rehearsals which spanned six weeks culminated in a stage performance on Nov. 4, 2020. At this point, cast and crew members were mandated to wear face masks and observe social distance. It was observed that students were more comfortable with following instructions and attaining achievements when physical rehearsals resumed. Blockings were easier to achieve, lines were learnt faster and these boosted the morale of students. All students attended dress and technical rehearsals to fuse all aspects of production in just three hours.

### **Performance**

The performance took place on November 4, 2020 with a lot of changes to the usual mode. First the performance was not made public, so tickets were not sold to the audience. Rather, two students from the group were responsible for streaming on line or uploading to any social media platform such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. To ensure compliance with social distance, the performance was held in a large space to contain few actors on stage and lecturers as examiners. By so doing, the performance was restricted to only the people that had direct connection to the production while observing covid-19 protocols.

### **Observations**

Being the first time such a method would be adopted in teaching and learning practical courses in this institution, some observations were made and would be highlighted in preceding paragraphs. Facilities and Equipment: It exposed the inadequacies in facilities and equipment in the department. The hall used for performance was a lecture hall not a theatre building as the institution is yet to complete an on-going project in this regard. The use of nose masks produced muffled speeches which could have been improved with use of lapel microphones, but the department could only produce two.

**On-line rehearsal:** Students did not make considerable progress during the period of on-line rehearsal because they were not used to it. It was at the point of pocket and joint rehearsal that considerable progress was made.



**Internet Access:** Although students had access to College Wi-Fi, some of them did not have android phones. This prompted pairing in twos which was contrary to social distancing protocols.

**Financial loss:** The department lost out financially because there was no paying audience to watch performances as students were only graded for examination. The gate-takings which is a major source of IGR to the department was not realised. This took its toll on other activities of the department during the period in session.

**Audience:** The absence of audience affected the morale of students during performance as there were no reactions to acting. All efforts made by students to put the production up lacked the presence of the final consumer. It made the students too conscious of the fact that they were performing solely for examination and it was obvious that actors did not enjoy themselves on stage.

### **Recommendations**

Given the present development of the spread of Covid-19, it is evident that there is still no closure in sight to this epidemic. Thus, it has become expedient that adequate provision be made towards improving on-line learning and teaching by all lecturers and students of higher institutions. The Nigerian Government and policy makers need to stop playing lip service to education. This is the time to brace up to the situation and provide basic teaching facilities that will spur on-line learning. There could be a policy enforcing network providers to create special platforms for e-learning which would be affordable and cost effective to teachers and students. This could be part of their social responsibilities to touch many lives positively. Providing adequate training for teachers to improve their skills and facilitate effective on-line learning. This will include acquiring requisite skills in the use of apps and teaching platforms. The 21st century teacher must embrace the use of technology in all ramifications and re-educate themselves to be at par with counterparts from other climes. While some students are already conversant with on-line learning, there is the need to improve and up-grade the disadvantaged ones who might not have access to android phones or internet. Customised phones with on-line learning apps could be made available at reduced rate solely for this purpose especially for public institutions.

### **Conclusion**

E-learning and digitalised education is still relatively new, especially for practical oriented courses in the arts. This is the age of increasing access to information and communication technology and theatre practitioners, teachers

and students must not be left out of this movement. While hoping that the spread of Covid-19 will abate, stakeholders should be proactive by coming up with creative and innovative measures that would comply with the new normal and still afford them opportunities to function maximally. According to scientists and researchers, Covid-19 will be with us for a while and we must learn to live with it. Although the first time experiment at LASUED theatre arts department, online rehearsal culminating in physical performance might not be said to be fully successful, yet it is a move in the right direction and can be improved upon. It is indeed a confirmation that change is constant and there is the need to move with the tide or drown. Students should also acquire relevant skills that will aid maximum exploration of on-line teaching and learning, especially for practical courses. They should be encouraged to use their technology skill of the 21st century positively for e-learning and not just for social media platforms. Departments involved in practical works, culminating in performances in the arts could design apps that will meet the needs of students for performances. This will make provision for the period of rehearsals to productions and also enable the public to watch such performances online.

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