

Pandemic era and theatre for development interventions: Experiences from two educational theatres in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

The magnitude of health and socio-economic challenges which the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic posed to human communities on a global scale cannot be overemphasised. It was so unprecedented a development that imperatively triggered off not just an urgent necessity for solution; but also the conscientisation of the generality of the world populace in order to properly guide people's actions in navigating associated challenges of this inimical pandemic. Such prevailing sensitisation necessity incontrovertibly reinforced the potentiality of theatre as a highly viable, dynamic and powerful conscientisation medium in meeting the vital conscientisation need of the time. The study, therefore, is an attempt to highlight Theatre for Development (TfD) intervention experiences from two educational theatres in Southeast Nigeria in fitting into this profound 'conscientisation' mould within their performance environments under the period; and a further assessment of the level of impact of the evolving performances in promptly guiding the actions of their target audiences during the period. Findings actually reveal remarkable positive impacts of the evolving performances in the two educational theatre experiences in promptly guiding the actions of their target audiences during the period. This, in conclusion, essentially encapsulates theatre's remarkable role in its propensity as a social phenomenon, which has all through the ages established itself as not just a functional; but also a veritable educational communication tool in the universality of human societies.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Educational theatre, Theatre intervention, TfD

1. Introduction

The unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and its associated health and socio-economic implications evidently portrayed the reality and magnitude of danger which the entire globe found itself. This danger is more reinforced by the surge/widespread of false or misleading information that consequently circulated almost on daily basis about the virus following the outbreak, with regard to its origin or source, cause, treatment and mode of spread, all without any background or quality checking. This widespread of false or misleading information – 'information epidemic' or 'infodemic' – as PAHO (2020) observed, is no doubt facilitated by advancement in information and communication technology which resulted to increase in global access to cell phones with internet connection and social media for such exponential production of information as well as the possible ways of accessing them. Social media consumption, as Allington, Duffy, Wessely, Dhavan, and Rubin (2020) hinted, were also linked to the widespread endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theories; including the causal link between COVID-19 and 5G networks, as identified by Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe (2020), which were further promoted by religious leaders, politicians and celebrities.

It is only pertinent in the light of the foregoing to acknowledge the crucial role which information plays in shaping a people's perception as well as response to their social environment and its makeup. For instance, false or misleading information in most cases have not only had causal effects on fear at the individual level but also brought about instability at the social or public level (Landa-Blanco, Andino & Agurcia, 2021). Hassan (2020) also affirms that the plethora of misinformation/disinformation which accompanied the pandemic did not only provoke fear among the people, but also exploited their vulnerabilities; more so, since fear can be far-reaching in mystifying a people's reasoning and in obstructing or obscuring their rational thinking to jettison objective facts. Therefore, proper understanding of the effects of information on public behaviour is quite pertinent, especially in the context of the pandemic as it was essentially crucial in contributing to either undermine or reinforce efforts in combating it. The implication of the foregoing is that there arose an imperative need to constantly provide the people with appropriate information that would enable them to be properly

guided in their actions in navigating associated challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The study, therefore, highlights Theatre for Development intervention experiences from Theatre Arts Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo and Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University, Uturu, Nigeria respectively, in their conscientisation or public enlightenment efforts during the pandemic period; and further assesses the level of impact of the evolving performances thereof in promptly guiding the actions of their target audiences during the period.

2. “The Marginalised Ears”: Tfd and Participatory Video Documentary Project of Theatre Arts Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo

This project, which spanned from 2nd May to 11th June 2020, was a critical survey on the impact of media reportage on COVID-19 on rural community dwellers, particularly the aged and the most vulnerable – who may not have access to electronic media. It is an initiative that seems to reinforce Lucas, Targema, Jibril, Sambo and Istifanus’s (2020: 4) pessimism on effective “access to information on COVID-19 in Nigeria among people living in rural settlements”, as occasioned by “neglect and deprivation of basic social amenities, including those that would facilitate access to information from conventional and emerging media platforms”. The project, which was also part of the department’s community service initiative in responding to the coronavirus pandemic concern, was coordinated by lecturers, who worked in conjunction with selected students; and it held in four designated zones of Southeast, namely: Enugu at Iva Valley community [Forest Hill]; Owerri at Umualumu community, Old Road, Nekede; Nsukka at Ogbagu, Obukpa community; and Ikwo, the university’s host town, at Ohankwu, Ikwo community (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2020a: 4). The coordinators and students were reported to have first embarked on a research (information gathering) mission in these communities and interviewed the aged ones on their notion about the coronavirus, basically to determine their level of information and misinformation on the virus as influenced by unregulated media space. From the interview, the team was able to find out what the people knew about the virus, their source of information as well as their misinformation, attitude and myths surrounding their beliefs about the virus. The outcome of the interview was what actually formed the basis of the team’s productions in sensitising and enlightening the people and in guiding their consciousness against already ‘rooted’ misinformation, misconceptions and wrong notions/attitudes which have been aggregated as follows:

- i. Doubt about the reality of the virus and its health/lethal effect.
- ii. The notion of the pandemic being shrouded in one myth or the other; or even associated with some other weird narratives, especially about the emergence of 5G networks as well as the prophesied end of the age.
- iii. Non adherence to recommended safety measures, especially the wearing of face masks and social distancing, even in the market, or other social gatherings.
- iv. The belief that the virus was only a fabricated hoax and an avenue to embezzle public funds; and
- v. That the virus was rather a judgment from God because of His kindled wrath for the enormous sins of the world.

2.1. Production Location and Performance Analysis

Table 1: Production location and performance analysis of Theatre Arts Department of FUNAI’s Tfd and Participatory Video Documentary Project

<i>Production Location</i>	<i>Performance Analysis</i>
Ikwo	<i>The drama by the Ikwo team was targeted at sensitising the people on the coronavirus pandemic and how best to protect themselves from contracting the virus. Social distancing, wearing of face mask, constant washing of hands with running water, as well as the use of an alcohol-based hand sanitiser in the absence of water for the safety of the people were basically emphasised.</i>
Enugu	<i>In Enugu, the drama also focused on sensitising the people on the ethics of the COVID-19 pandemic, educating them on the importance of the face mask, social distancing and all they needed to know about the recommended preventive measures.</i>
Owerri	<i>The Owerri team’s drama skit titled, “Corona Wahala”, also emphasised the wearing of face mask, regular hand washing/use of hand sanitizer, avoidance of crowded gathering of more than 20 people, and keeping of safe distance (2 meters from people).</i>
Nsukka	<i>In Nsukka, the team’s drama emphasized regular washing of hands and use of hand sanitiser, proper use of face mask which is always to be used when sneezing or coughing or speaking to people. It also discouraged the use of hands on the nose, eyes or in touching the mouth since these are possible ways of contracting the virus.</i>

Table 1 above shows in a nutshell the production location and performance analysis of Theatre Arts Department of FUNAI’s Tfd and Participatory Video Documentary Project.

3. “Coronavirus – Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication: Gregory University Uturu, Theatre in Community Development Experiment

This attitudinal change theatre intervention initiative which held at Amaokwe university community Achara Uturu, Abia State in March 2021, was the maiden effort of the department at using the instrumentality of drama for ‘community’ engagement/conscientisation, amidst the ravaging incidents of the coronavirus pandemic. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2022) revealed that the production held at a time when the coronavirus pandemic was not only ravaging the entire globe, having already claimed so many lives worldwide including Nigeria, but also at a time when the pandemic was grossly enmeshed

in so many misconceptions as gathered from the background research that preceded the production. It is worthy of note too that Amaokwe is the host community of Gregory University, Uturu; and that the university environment is also where the students and a good number of the staff reside. It is also not surprising that the presence of Gregory University and Abia State University (two prominent universities in Abia State), among other educational and socio-economic establishments in Uturu, makes the town a rather semi-urban city, especially with the nature of development and human cluster usually attracted by such privileged disposition, including those with negatively inflexible attitude regarding the coronavirus pandemic as apparently resulting from misconceptions held about it. Rife among these misconceptions also was that coronavirus was not real; but rather a fabricated hoax by the government at embezzling public fund. Hence, all other sermonisation about contracting it, its prevention, as well as cure, was also a big hoax. There was also this common perception that it could not survive in hot environments, besides those that equally held the view that it was a disease of wealthy people, and only affected older people. Hence:

it was on the strength of the foregoing that the impetus for proper education and enlightenment among the people sprung especially the Amaokwe university community audience, particularly staff and scholars/students, as well as other sundry business operators within the environment. (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2022: 26)

In summary, therefore, this attitudinal change intervention initiative which was essentially motivated by the need to provide a more balanced perspective on Covid-19 pandemic and perception of issues that surrounded it, was targeted mainly at what has been aptly identified as “the presumably ‘semi-literate’ class” (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2022: 26). That is:

those even though they were not illiterate in the real sense of ‘illiteracy’, but were not literate enough as to actually come to terms with the reality of the coronavirus and its implications; since majority of this class did not think there was anything like coronavirus, despite the media sensitisation efforts of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Covid-19 and the continuous update by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on the rate of infection as well as death resulting from the virus.

Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2022: 28) has further aggregated the major issues which the attitudinal change intervention initiative addressed as follows:

- (i) audience’s wrong perceptions about coronavirus;
- (ii) their wrong attitude towards issues concerning coronavirus despite media sensitisation efforts;
- (iii) reinforcing the reality of coronavirus pandemic, irrespective of the many/varied misinformation, misconceptions, rumours and point of views surrounding it;
- (iv) balancing of perspectives/perceptions on coronavirus pandemic and issues that surrounded it; as well as
- (v) providing direction (precautionary measures) for people in safeguarding themselves and others around them against the dreaded virus.

3.1. Production Location and Performance Analysis

Table 2: Production location and performance analysis of the “Coronavirus – Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication of Gregory University Uturu, Nigeria Theatre in Community Development Experiment

<i>Production Location</i>	<i>Performance Analysis</i>
Amaokwe University Community, Uturu	<i>Coronavirus – Fake or Real? Attitudinal Change Communication which targeted mainly the presumably semi-literate audience within the university environment basically reinforced the reality of coronavirus pandemic, irrespective of the myriads/varied misinformation, misconceptions, rumours and point of views that surrounded its emergence/presence. With simplicity of actions and clarity of message communication, the production highlighted issues regarding the virus and the various precautionary measures the people needed to take to safeguard themselves and others around them against it. The follow-up/interactive (question and answer) session that took place later at the venue of the production was an opportunity to balance the people’s views on what they thought about issues raised in the production. It was also a period for more education and enlightenment on Covid-19 and its implications based on handy feedback. It was, therefore, evident from the interactions and observations from the follow-up that the production recorded commendable level of success in making people see the need, both personal and collective, to be properly aware and therefore take measures to guard themselves against the dreaded coronavirus.</i>

Table 2 above represents the production location and performance analysis of the “Coronavirus – Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication of Gregory University Uturu, Nigeria Theatre in Community Development Experiment.

4. Discussion

A careful examination of the two educational theatrical experiences highlighted above shows that they had common characteristic features in terms of audience misinformation, misconceptions or perceptions as well as responses to issues that concern the coronavirus pandemic, as reinforced by the background research findings that preceded the productions. This also portrays the ubiquitous nature of the prevalent level of misinformation and misconceptions that had trailed the

issue of coronavirus right from its emergence, considering the audiences' location spread (distance from each other). Prominent among these misinformation, misconceptions and perceptions is that the coronavirus was only a fabricated hoax by the government to embezzle public fund. This perhaps, explains the reason why Saidu (2021: 2) has succinctly noted that "The Nigerian public has not believed the government's information on the prevalence of COVID-19"; which is only a clear demonstration of the level of people's mistrust on leadership that is not exclusive to Nigeria on issues relating to Covid-19, among others. Perhaps also, part of the reasons why the above development seemed to have assumed more credence within the period, could be traced to the compounding case of the evolutionary nature of the virus's constant discovery: "from its evolution from respiratory illnesses to broader health concerns, from the simple wearing of masks for medical personnel to all people...from not airborne to now being airborne" (Saidu, 2021, p.1), among several others, which is a clear reflection of a whole lot of inconsistencies; a development that further helped in reinforcing people's lack of,

confidence in the existence of the virus, the authenticity of the funds the government has spent on COVID19 intervention measures, the reasons behind the closure of religious institutions or schools, and the appropriate treatment of the virus...etc. (Saidu, 2021: 2)

Hence, because of this fixed mindset/orientation by most of the people, all other responses/reactions from them only naturally revolve around it. For instance, the mere perception/belief of the virus being a fabricated hoax invariably makes it nonexistent; and as such, the entire fuse about contracting it and the precaution thereof makes no meaning to them, to further strengthen, in the views of Imhoff and Lamberty (2020), their low containment [or precautionary] behaviours. This once more reinforces Chukwu-Okoronkwo's (2020a: 33) assertion that "the information at a people's disposal has a remarkable way of shaping their perception of life, issues, events, surrounding or environment and of course, attitude and actions". Here, the information in context is only, as it appears, negatively conceived; and as such, 'such shaping', is also negatively predisposed. What, therefore, is of utmost concern here is that such negative predisposition could really prove fatal, since it would not give the persons/people involved the opportunity to apply necessary precautionary measures to safeguard themselves against resulting dangers; and as such increase their risk of adopting harmful practices that may lead to an even greater increase in coronavirus cases.

However, while the "The Marginalised Ears" productions were essentially targeted at an apparently disadvantaged class (those who may not have had access to electronic media) in their assessment of the impact of media reportage on COVID-19 on rural community dwellers; "Coronavirus – Fake or Real?" Attitudinal Change Communication on the other hand, was targeted mainly at a 'semi-literate' class – those who, even though they may not be said to be illiterate in the real sense of 'illiteracy', but were not literate enough to actually come to terms with the reality of the coronavirus and its implications. Hence, the susceptibility to the influence of misinformation, misconception, rumours and disbelief observed from the two sets of audiences represented above; which, as Hassan infers, has thus exploited their vulnerabilities in reinforcing their mystification, as revealed by the productions' background research findings, could be explained by obvious factors:

- i. while the former contended with a rather disadvantaged audience on account of their limitation (inaccessibility to electronic media) in accessing the right source of/appropriate media information for proper guidance in the face of the ravaging coronavirus pandemic;
- ii. the latter contended with what one may unassumingly classify as an advantaged audience on account of their 'enlightened' status (staff, students, and sundry business operators) and the environment in which they found themselves; but who, perhaps, rather chose to erroneously live in sheer ignorance of the reality of the time.

It is, therefore, also on account of the above factors that the re-conscientisation of these audiences became most imperative; in order to appropriately redirect their consciousness (through a process of unlearning and demystification) from the realm of misguided information or 'already rooted' misinformation (and relearning) unto a new realm of right or proper information, as evidently reflected in the productions.

Hence, in assessing the level of impact of the evolving performances in these two educational theatre experiences in promptly guiding the actions of their target audiences during the period, very instructive factors/facts are worthy of note. In the first instance, the "Marginalised Ears" project, reveals a class of audience who were undeniably marginalised by their inaccessibility to the means of right information (in meeting the very crucial sensitisation need of the time) for their proper guidance/direction in the face of the pandemic and its challenges, and so were inevitably mostly fed through the 'rumour-mills', which invariably negatively conditioned their perceptions and reactions; but for whom also, this marginalisation gap was graciously bridged by the weaponry of the theatre, as demonstrated by the performances. This suffices, therefore, to affirm that the people were unarguably empowered through this "weapon" of the theatre (the performances), to therefore "wield it" [apply their learning/knowledge] (Boal, 2000: 122) for the right attitudinal change "based on their awakened consciousness" (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012: 394). The implication is that they did not only benefit from having access to the right information from which they were hitherto denied because of the limitation placed on them by the situation in which they found themselves, but were also better informed to appropriately respond to issues relating to the coronavirus pandemic. Secondly, the "Coronavirus – Fake or Real?" Attitudinal Change Communication production reveals a set of audience, who though expected to be better informed, but whose susceptibility to the influence of misinformation, misconception and rumours was perpetuated and reinforced by their own disbelief or self-denial of the realities on ground. So, for this audience, it was rather a case of sheer ignorance for erroneously choosing to live out

of the reality of the time. Here also, the strength of the weaponry of the theatre as a veritable communication tool (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2020b) and a powerful (re)conscientisation medium against entrenched wrong belief/attitude, is further demonstrated; as its role as a catalyst for introspection or self-interrogation on the part of the audience cannot be overemphasised.

From a follow up on the performance venue after the production date, as gathered by the researcher, it was discovered that the wearing of face masks in and out of the university gates became mandatory, unlike before when people never saw the need for adherence. It was also observed that there was renewed effort at the maintenance of hand washing/sanitising facilities at strategic points in the university community, unlike before when the water would finish and will not be refilled. These observations from the follow-up feedback clearly affirm that the production, indeed, brought an increased level of consciousness within the university community on issues relating to Covid-19, including necessary steps to take in staying safe. In all, therefore, it was evident that the authorities of the school imbibed the idea or positively responded to the issues which the production had raised, such that the people were naturally guided to follow suit.

5. Contribution of the Study

In the light of the positive impacts recorded from the evolving performances in the two educational theatre experiences studied, in promptly guiding the actions of their target audiences during the pandemic period under study, the study has practically provided a convincing proof/evidence that theatre – and indeed, Theatre for Development – can rightly intervene in critical areas of community education for the general well-being of the people.

6. Implications of the Study

The study has not only reinforced the strength of the weaponry of theatre as a powerful conscientisation medium against entrenched wrong belief/attitude resulting from sheer misinformation; but further demonstrated its invaluable role as a catalyst for introspection or self-interrogation on the part of the audience for proper guidance/direction.

7. Conclusion

The study has succinctly reinforced the instrumentality of theatre as a veritable education communication tool in the human society. This is explored through Theatre for Development intervention experiences from Theatre Arts Department, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo and Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University, Uturu, Nigeria respectively, in their respective conscientisation efforts during the pandemic period. These are educational theatres, not because they emanated from educational institutions; but essentially on the strength of the educational content embedded in their productions in context. Hence, an educational theatre is a theatre of conscientisation; if you like, conscious awakening, sensitisation or enlightenment. Conscientisation, therefore, is what these educational theatres experiences had provided to their respective target audiences. Noteworthy is the very common perception/misconception held by these audiences as addressed in these sensitisation efforts (their location/distances from each other notwithstanding) with regard to their misinformation and consequent reactions to issues that concern the coronavirus pandemic; which only portrays the ubiquitous nature of the level of misinformation and misconceptions that had trailed the issue of coronavirus right from the moment it emerged.

However, noticeable also was the obvious disparity in the reason for the susceptibility to the influence of misinformation, misconception, rumours and disbelief observed from these sets of audiences. While “The Marginalised Ears” contended with a rather disadvantaged audience on account of their limitation (inaccessibility to electronic media) in accessing the right source of/appropriate media information for proper guidance in the face of the ravaging coronavirus pandemic; “Coronavirus – Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication contended with a presumably advantaged audience on account of their ‘enlightened’ status and the environment in which they found themselves, but who rather chose to erroneously live in sheer ignorance of the reality of the time. In the final analysis, while the former set of audience did not only benefit from having access to the right information from which they were hitherto denied because of the limitation placed on them by the situation in which they found themselves, but were also better informed to appropriately respond to issues relating to the coronavirus pandemic; the latter set of audience were rather provided with a catalyst for introspection or self-interrogation on the rationale behind their entrenched wrong belief/attitude for proper (re)direction as demonstrated in the reported follow-up observation/s/feedback information. Therefore, if, as Eyoh (1987: 58) has asserted, that “theatre can [rightly] intervene in several areas of community education... [and has, indeed,] proven itself to...” [Additional emphasis]; the cases in context have once more reinforced the above assertion.

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