



Children in Nollywood: Authenticity and naturalness of acting craft

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Abstract

Authentic acting is truthful and consistent, fostering an immutable connection with an audience. It presumes naturalness in the presentation, imbued with feeling, yet a performative self, playing for the camera. A child actor may be charming and cute on the camera but lacking in craft, raising the question of performance authenticity. Existing literature has revealed that contemporary acting promotes naturalness in enactments, compelling a suspension of disbelief. This study addresses the challenges impacting the quality of child performance in Nollywood, such as authenticity, naturalness, selfhood, and the talent pool. This study examined whether a child's unaffected and immature nature could be averse to truthful theatrical depictions. Research suggests that a lack of training is one of the factors impacting authentic child-acting in Nollywood. Spontaneity theory and the Meisner acting technique form the theoretical framework and validate a child actor's dependence on spontaneous freshness and imaginative play in role enactment. Research is exploratory and relies on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with filmmakers to analyze child-acting craft. The findings show that formal training for child actors can elevate their craft; spontaneity reinforces naturalness; and when juvenile actors wield naturalness, the performance is authentic.

Keywords: Authenticity, Child-Acting, Filmmaking, Nollywood, Spontaneity

1. Introduction

Children now play weightier roles in Nollywood films. For a country with a large youth population, it is not surprising that children are receiving more representation in films. Today, the child can be central to the story, garnering substantial speaking lines and screen time. *Mikolo*, the live action fantasy film of 2023, was Nollywood's first animated movie for children and was produced from a child's perspective. One of the earliest films featuring a child actor was the 1895 film *Watering the Gardener*, which ran for just a minute and marked the beginning of children in film (Wojcik-Andrews, 2000). Child actors have contributed to cementing film culture, telling riveting stories, and contrasting the innocence and vulnerability of childhood with the complexities of adulthood. Filmmakers know the appeal of child actors and the connections they build with their audience. "There is possibility of being cast having never worked on set when you are a child actor, much less likely for the adults" (Mink, 2024: 4).

Sanford Meisner described acting as "behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (Meisner & Longwell, 1987). Filmmaking is simply manipulating reality and capturing a slice of life using a marked-out approach. The actor is the medium for birthing the filmmaker's vision, and the camera is the filmmaker's tool to "approximate the representation of reality extremely closely" (Geanotes, 2005). Good child-acting is imaginative, spontaneous, natural, and relatable. In a performance, the relatability of a character's experience is directly tied to the audience's ability to make emotional connections. Fantastic portrayals of the human condition are always appreciated by movie audiences, and it is the reason "we give awards and large sums of money to those who can do it well" (Goldstein & Bloom, 2015).

Not much has been written about child-acting in Nollywood, and little is known about how directors evoke compelling acting from children. As there is no standard way to direct them on set, filmmakers often have to rely on their own ingenuity to get child actors to deliver. For this study, children were grouped into 0 – 8 years (younger children) and 9 – 16 years (older children).

2. Purpose of study

Questions regarding naturalness of the Nollywood child actor's craft, the place of imagination in the performance, and how to boost the quality of child acting were central to the research. The specific objectives of this study are listed below:

- i. Examine the impact of a child's immaturity on truthful acting?
- ii. Examine the place of selfhood and spontaneity in child acting?
- iii. Examine the benefit of training on the child actor's craft?

3. Literature review

Contemporary actors rely on selfhood, naturalness, and authenticity when inhabiting characters otherwise the camera will catch the lie, and expose it as false acting. This study reviewed existing literature to analyze concepts that anchor realistic performance.

3.1. Concept of naturalness

Naturalness is the “quality of being like real life or happening in a normal way that you would expect” (Oxford Learner’s, n.d.). In performance, to achieve naturalness, the actor employs natural acting in role-play. This means “responding to a situation exactly the way the character would, without trying to artificially add anything to your performance” (Bentsen, 2024). Spontaneity, creativity, and emotional play are at the heart of a natural performance. Reactions are typical of how people behave in real life, “expressions are natural, and actors say lines in a conversational tone with conventional body movement” (Goldstein & Bloom, 2015).

You cannot fake it enough to make it in front of the camera. If the audience can clearly see the mask the actor is wearing, the acting lacks naturalness. “When everything really does turn out naturally in front of the camera, as if the child weren’t acting but just being him or herself, it’s perceived as good acting on the part of the child actor” (Gaisbauer, 2018). Today’s cinematic universe is quite advanced, and the audience expects realistic depictions in films. Questionable acting by children can leave audiences exasperated. It is difficult to watch a child not acting like a child, reciting lines, or being wooden on screen.

3.2. Concept of authenticity

Authenticity is defined as being true to oneself (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). To understand the term authenticity, two labels stand out: genuineness and value. It is assumed that the creation is true to the original and not fake or false; therefore, it is deemed acceptable. Authenticity is ascribed to personality: the ability to stay real in the prevailing situation. It connotes fidelity to truth, and as a utilitarian concept, can be applied to human nature and art. “Authenticity is supposed to be an aesthetic good” (Young, 2013) and as the faithful depiction of real life and emotions, it exposes false acting as cringy and unattractive. Young also alludes to the element of creativity in authenticity, the product of a performer’s individual genius, and interpretation. Maslow (1971) frames it within the context of spontaneity, allowing behavior to reflect spontaneous expression and presenting actual characteristics and desires of real life.

There is an element of consistency threading authentic theatrical performances – the consistency of the naturalness of acting. The responses are appropriate, as in everyday life, with no exaggerated expressions or movements. “Thus, an authentic performance is one that seems natural or true to an underlying essence, while an inauthentic performance feels faked, forced, or imitative” (Henderson & Gabora, 2013). The naturalness of acting confers authenticity on the entire performance. Steven Spielberg captures this experience in the work of Henry Thomas, a nine-year-old actor in the movie *ET*. “His performance is so controlled, unlike most kid performers, who seem to be giving you 150 percent on every shot. Henry’s performance is just a bread crumb at a time [leading] to a rousing catharsis” (Royal, 1982: 89). Performance in itself is not all entertainment but a question. The audience is required to formulate answers, and in doing so, authenticate the performance. Authenticity occurs in the union between a genuine actor, honest acting, and a committed spectator. (Derbaix & Decrop, 2007) suggest that a “highly involved audience adds authenticity to a show.

In the movie *TOKUNBO* (Nouah, 2024) Nike, the young daughter of the Central Bank Governor, is kidnapped and drugged several times. She wakes up in the back seat of a vehicle driven by her kidnappers. Oddly, she is clear-eyed, calm, and coherent, and shows no fear, even bantering with her kidnapper, like he is a favorite uncle. Her behavior is perplexing, and one movie reviewer agrees, “I couldn’t fathom Nike’s reaction to what was going on; this guy was drugging her and yet they are forming paddy, paddy, chummy, chummy” (Eniola, 2024, 10:10). The authenticity of the situation is questionable: Does Nike understand that this is an active kidnapping and that she is in danger? If she does, should it not prompt a natural reaction to her plight in conformity with the tenets of authenticity? Directorial competencies should be considered as one of the factors that impact authenticity. If the film is riddled with unrealistic dialogue, improbable actions, and storylines, the actor may be overacting to compensate.

3.3. Concept of selfhood

The Socratic dictum, man know thyself, underpins selfhood – the search for inner truth and authenticity of being. Selfhood is an idea comprising knowledge of self, the awareness of being a distinct individual, and is built over time from lived experiences. An adult’s knowledge of self is derived from experiences amassed from a rich internal world. This does not apply to children, since the entirety of a child’s world is just beginning to expand. To interpret a character’s motivation, an actor is aided by their understanding of human nature, “being grounded and secure within your own identity and then temporarily expanding your identity and consciousness to feel and encompass another” (Yusim, 2022: 10). The internal world is a bank of lived experiences from which the actor draws to make characterization believable. The marriage between a character’s external world and an actor’s internal world creates authentic acting. If the child actor has never experienced the required emotion (or feeling) or anything like it, the child may not be able to recreate this emotion in a performance. The emotional problems of the character [will] seem deeper than the capacity of the actor (Meisner, 1987).

4. Theoretical framework

4.1. Spontaneity theory

Moreno (1953) referred to spontaneity as a suitable response to a situation or a novel response to an old situation. Regarding adequacy and creative potential, Moreno described spontaneity as being mentally ready to provide the requisite response. Balmores-Paulino (2020) highlighted its curative benefits and suggested that it encourages openness and psychological well-being, while alleviating inhibitions. (Sorokin, 1949) disagrees with Moreno's labelling of spontaneity as impulsive and reactionary. He favored the notion of a known response, doing nothing as a sufficient response to a new activity, or a quiet, slow, and creative solution to the situation. Spontaneous actions manifest as "unexpected comments, gestures, facial expressions, and actions that occur as a result of an unsuppressed emotional upsurge" (Lichtenberg, 1999).

Spontaneity is a deeply instinctive behavior and the basis for truthfulness (Meisner & Longwell, 1987). By nature, younger children have to rely on improvisation in role-playing, as well-rehearsed performances tend to look contrived. Since the child actor is limited in life experiences that could enrich their performance, spontaneity is key to helping children deliver authentic performances. "A spontaneous reaction from a child will be the most convincing and truthful reaction you will be able to record" (Genotes, 2005). The child actor may be brilliant, able to memorize and recite lines confidently before the camera, and still not connect with the audience. Calculated and mechanical acting belies the truthfulness and authenticity of a performance. Voskuil (2004) calls this a "failure to animate their acting with a depth of feeling." She agrees with theatre critic William Hazlitt that performances that are predictable and missing the contingency of spontaneity are not natural. This paper contends that for a child acting in Nollywood to be natural, it also needs spontaneity, the exigency of improvisation, and imaginative play.

4.2. Meisner's acting technique

This technique labels real acting as good acting. This means that the performer lives truthfully, in the moment, trusting their instincts when responding to situations similar to everyday life. The technique "encourages actors to behave as real people – not as performers putting on a show" (Mellema, 2023: 27). It stresses the dynamics of attentive partnerships between actors in an environment. Meisner's acting is "focused primarily on imagination and instinct. [The actor] is meant to imagine being in a situation for real, responding to everything that happens at the moment by pure instinct" (Bentsen, 2024). Imagination is the buffer between an actor's fickle memories and emotions that are difficult to recall. "Your imagination is in all likelihood deeper and more persuasive than the real experience" (Meisner & Longwell, 1987).

Acting is truthful with the Meisner technique; it does not look like acting. Actors exist as in real life, and the goal is to make acting spontaneous and believable for the audience. Spontaneity is the backbone of the Meisner technique and a suitable acting style to adopt when working with child actors. It leans into moment-to-moment play, disregarding rehearsals and cues, and preferring to be attentive to impulses that aid truthful reactions. The case has been made that younger child actors require fewer rehearsals or none at all.

5. Research method

This study utilized a qualitative approach to review content from interviews with filmmakers about their working experience with child actors. Data was analyzed to identify and interpret themes around the artistic direction of child talent in Nollywood productions. It offers actionable insights into managing children on set and drawing out their natural responses.

6. Discussion

To understand the delicateness of working with children in Nollywood, one older actor and four directors who had worked with child actors were interviewed. The discussions focused on how children interpreted characters and how filmmakers could evoke authentic performances from their child actors. Glikpoe and Horsu (2023) state that the director develops a close bond while working closely with the actor, and assists them in giving life to characters.

6.1. Does the immature nature of the child impact acting craft?

The veteran actor-director (E. Obi, personal communication, October 19, 2024) believes that each child brings unique characteristics to the set, and the director adopts different approaches when working with children. According to Obi, the filmmaker should have a close relationship with the child to understand their background and ascertain the suitability of the actor and their parents. E. Aghimien (personal communication, October 10, 2024) Director of the award-winning movie, *Slow Country* approves of background checks. Aghimien recalls an experience with the child actor with whom he worked. "The boy did everything right until he had to do a hospital scene. He refused to lie on the hospital bed and began to cry – he had a phobia for hospital beds" (E. Aghimien, personal communication, October 10, 2024). In the end, the child did not do the scene, and they wasted valuable time on the set. It is advisable that directors know the nature of the child on their set.

Immature behavior and cognition are innate to children under eight years. They are easily distracted and need to be reminded to focus on tasks. (A. Tijani, personal communication, October 9, 2024) another veteran director in the industry compared working with young children to preschool. According to Tijani, children experience mood swings, and since things can go wrong on set, he works to build a rapport with younger cast members before shooting begins. The director stoops to conquer – sits, and plays with them until they see him as a friend.

It is difficult for younger children to engage in real performance. It is much easier for them to participate in pretend play than genuine acting. “Preschool aged children have difficulties convincingly lying – that is, they cannot perceptually act as though the lie is reality while the truth of the situation is something different” (Talwar et al., 2007). With strategic planning, it is possible to capture emotionally compelling scenes with children. Younger child actors – under eight – who cannot evoke the required responses to cues can benefit from intentional directions that spur spontaneity. Here, the director can either be creative with his magic bag of tricks, play games with the child, or walk the child through the scene while the camera rolls. The director should also cast adult actors who can work with child actors to achieve organic responses. Filmmaker Julia Zborowska affirms that “If the right playmates for the child can be found, then what happens on camera will seem natural” (Gaisbauer, 2018).

6.2. If the actor has limitations of selfhood, how is naturalness evoked?

It is easier for adults who have experienced life struggles to adapt and interpret their roles (E. Obi, personal communication, October 19, 2024). The actor must first connect with the story to connect with the audience; if this is not the case, the authenticity of the performance is compromised. Though limited by a knowledge of self, K. Ndukwu (personal communication, October 10, 2024), a filmmaker, believes that children can evoke emotions, but they must be guided. E. Daniel (personal communication, October 7, 2024) Director of *Ever After*, estimated that emotional performance is more possible with older children. He imagines that they are beginning to understand emotions and can give you what is needed.

E. Aghimien (personal communication October 8, 2024) argues that children are instinctive and can surpass expectations if they have a natural acting talent. According to Aghimien, directors must find children who can bring characters to life or struggle with them. A. Tijani (personal communication, October 8, 2024) attributes much of the success of capturing screen-worthy moments to luck. He gives an example of a child actor who was required to cry in a scene but was not in the mood. The boy had been playing, and could not understand why he needed to cry. When his mother became furious at him, the child ended up crying, and because the camera was rolling, they captured the shot. This does not seem to be an ethical way to elicit emotion from child actors, and it is quite tasking for everyone on set. “It is easier with a talented child; you can walk them into the feeling you want” (E. Aghimien, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Every director must find a more creative way to get child actors to deliver on set. However, several directors prefer to work with known faces to optimize productivity, leveraging the actor’s fame, ubiquitous value, and screen aura to lend authenticity to their work. (K. Ndukwu, personal communication, October 10, 2024) does not believe auditions to be the truest tests for acting and thinks it is best to discover child talents from their previous projects. E. Daniel (personal communication, October 9, 2024) admits that he prefers to work with children who have acted before, so he asks for referrals to their guardians. In contrast, many more directors prefer to unearth diamonds in rough – inexperienced child actors – and burnish them into twinkling stars. “What happens when you cast an actor who has not had a lot of experience is that they bring in a tremendous amount of reality, naturalism, and comedy based on instinct” (Radulovic, 2021). Not being a seasoned actor is not bad in itself if the child is talented and can follow directions well. Unlike adult actors, younger children require fewer rehearsals. Their responses are more natural when they cannot anticipate a line or movement.

6.3. Is the dearth in training impacting authentic child performance

Every talent requires tutoring, and establishing acting academies to train juvenile actors is long been overdue. E. Obi (personal communication, October 19, 2024) suggests that the industry cannot have authentic child actor performance without training. According to Obi, child actors who know what they are doing on set simply have raw talent because training is just what they see on television. Without innate acting talent or training, child actors who learn only from screens may exhibit poor acting skills. A. Tijani (personal communication, October 8, 2024) believes that with more trained child actors, writers will be motivated to create more roles for children. The director affirms that working with children is easier when they have training in basic acting skills.

Mimi Haaga, the mother of the child actor Darasimi Nadi, worked to make her child comfortable with the camera. “I noticed she was a good actor but was camera shy, so [I] took it upon [myself] to correct that. We designed and started a cooking series of eight episodes, and by the third episode, she was excelling” (Obed, 2024). The South Korean film industry features many young people in its films and variety shows, spurring a demand for young talent. This has led to an increase in acting academies throughout the country. TI is an acting academy for minors in Korea that trains children from “physical exercise to dialect coaching, facial expression exercises, and memorizing monologues that the children can use at auditions” (Doo, 2016). Nollywood needs more actor-training schools for minors and schools that groom talent like the Korean academy. E. Daniel (personal communication, October 9, 2024) agrees that the lack of academies is the reason why few child actors are usually over-circulated. Directors may create environments to prompt spontaneous, authentic acting from children, but formal training is highly recommended for child actors to sustain talent beyond tender years. The lack of training is why many child actors in Nigeria abandon craft when they grow up (E. Obi, personal communication, October 19, 2024). The actor-director posits that they did not have formal training to metamorphose into more mature actors, and this is why Nollywood has a dearth of child actors who become older successful actors.

7. Contribution of the study

Children in Nollywood: Authenticity and Naturalness in Acting Craft is a study of the artistic challenges faced by filmmakers in evoking authentic child performance in movies. This research highlights the director's primary responsibility for eliciting real responses from child actors. By tackling this subject, this study offers practical insights into how directors can creatively employ spontaneity and imaginative play to achieve the naturalness of acting from children. This study provides a key understanding of the nature of children and the management of child talent during audition, rehearsal, and performance. This study is a valuable addition to the scarce body of knowledge on the acting craft of children in Nollywood. In addressing the authenticity challenge, this study highlights the gaps in artistry, and naturalness in child actor performance, and how filmmakers can boost these on sets. It also makes a case for establishing training academies to help juvenile actors refine their craft and sustain talent. The contributions of this study to theatre and film studies provide constructive insights for directors working with child actors and other aspiring filmmakers who are concerned about casting children in their productions. Ultimately, this study can help improve the experience of working with children in Nollywood, and increase the number of child actors in the industry.

8. Implications of the study

There are opportunities to develop guidance regarding creative spontaneity techniques in child acting. Considering that child actors will largely be inexperienced, more studies are needed to determine directorial competencies in optimizing spontaneity on sets and the quality of screen outcomes. Artistic truthfulness in teenage actors over 16 years of age was not addressed here, and it can be useful to study their potential as future adult talents. It is also worth exploring the correlation between poor scripting, directing, and poor child acting. It is unfair to focus on child actor inadequacies rather than directorial incompetence. There is no reason to demand emotional authenticity from the juvenile actor when directing is bad and the story is riddled with plot holes. It is the responsibility of the director to present footage that displays the naturalness of the actor. The actor's success rests squarely on the director's shoulder.

9. Conclusion

It is possible for a child actor to maintain authenticity and consistency of characterization during the entire run of a movie. Everything is largely dependent on the skill of the director and the quality of the child actor. Talented child actors are not common in Nollywood; even when auditions are open, it is challenging to find the right child for a role. As such, many directors are hesitant to take on films that involve working with inexperienced child actors. There is usually very little time to build the child into the role and creatively set up a natural environment to help them deliver. This study recommends that intentional investments should be made in growing juvenile acting talent to match the expansion of Nigerian films on streaming platforms. For a country with a massive youth population, the film industry should produce more youth-centric content. Consequently, children score substantial representation in Nollywood productions and raise the overall quality of films from the country.

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