

Theatre Practice in a Pandemic: Minimalism to the Rescue

Alex Chinwuba Asigbo, Phd & Emmanuel C. Udeh

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract: The artist is not only a visionary but also, a very proactive individual. Oftentimes, he anticipates and takes remedial action against situations that have not yet manifested to the rest of humanity. Thus, from Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, to the myriad of artistic plays and novels that accurately predicted events, one notices that the Artist/Playwright is gifted with the power of vision. Theatre practice is usually very adversely affected either by a depressed economy or by pandemics. However, since the motto of the Theatre is "the show must go on", it is not surprising that Playwrights, always find ways to ensure that Theatre practice continues against all odds. One of the most ingenious ways invented by Playwrights towards sustaining Theatre practice either in a depressed economy or in a pandemic is the Minimalist Theatre. Minimalism or Minimalist theatre is a type of play that uses very few characters and set in conveying its message. Thus, plays like Greg Mbjajorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*, Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and the various other plays that employ minimal cast, can effectively be produced with minimal health risks, especially in pandemic periods. This work will therefore attempt a review of different minimalist plays to show that they hold the potential of sustaining theatre practice even in the most difficult periods.

Keywords: Theatre, Pandemic, artist, Minimalism to the Rescue

INTRODUCTION

Buoyed by their unrelenting nature, artists continue to strive for progress and improvement in the affairs of their fellow beings. Nigerian artists are globally known to live with purposes only artists could fulfil: as visionaries, guardians of a people's sacred identity, projectors of the possibilities and most importantly, the unhinged maestro of expressive dynamism in performance. All these have had to pan out in an undeniably hostile environment where the government seem to perpetually view artists as threats. This atmosphere of hostility is though, somewhat positive to those artists who need tension or terror as motivation to develop, the likes of prolific writer, Femi Osofisan. Osofisan believes strongly that:

No playwright develops without a close intimacy with terror. In Africa, and in Nigeria nowadays, the terror assumes a particular, frightening mask. And it is this, not the playtext alone, but the continual gamble with menace, that shapes the totem of kinship between the playwright, actor, the director and their audience, between the craftsmen of the stage on the one side, and their willing collaborators. ...in the embrace of fear: growing up in the Nigerian theatre has been more or less... a ritual of initiation as awesome and painful as our ancient rites. (1998).

With what psychologists could call survivalist masochism, some artists' embrace the pain in their environment and creatively deploy it for productive arts. The relevance of Osofisan's stance here is the appropriation of the challenges around an artist for art purposes; letting the negative emotions caused by abnormalities fuel creativity,

both as an outlet to exhale and a stabilizing process. In this light, a golden era seems to be on artists once more.

Nigeria is facing unusual threats to its existence: scaled up terrorism, collapsing economy, massive unemployment 33.3%; Underemployment 22.8%; Youth Unemployment/Underemployment 42.5%, this is unarguably beyond tolerable boundaries, divisions along ethnic and sectional lines, criminality and worse of all, hopelessness presided over by an inept and seemingly complicit federal government. In these uncertainties, the world got suddenly plunged into a pandemic and Nigeria was not spared. What this means is that living in present day Nigeria is a romance with danger. This is because, hardly any day passes without stories of gruesome murders, arson and other forms of criminalities.

Viewed suspiciously as a mythical rival by power holders, scathed by the harsh economic realities of the times and confronted by the never ending need to call for accountability, justice and the betterment of the human conditions in largely social and administrative spheres of the country, Nigerian artists were dealt a different blow with COVID-19. Terrified as it were by this novel pandemic, the government reacted by shutting down almost all avenues for inter-personal interactions. The theatre as a social art was most hit.

On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan City,

China and by 7th January 2020, a novel coronavirus was identified by the Chinese authorities as the cause and they named it 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCov). Eventually, it was noted that the pneumonia was caused by a new strain of coronavirus, now globally known as COVID-19; ‘CO’ stands for corona, ‘VI’ for virus, and ‘D’ for disease. “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus.” -WHO.

In reaction to the pandemic, there was a seeming uniform order: most outdoor activities were shut down and as written by Chelsea Toczaer “the performing arts and entertainment industry at large—including in-person plays and performances as well as content production for film, television and streaming services—has been forced to shut down as part of the effort to stem the spread of the pandemic.” With sparse knowledge of its nature and dynamics, the world went into frenzy and as people began to die in their numbers, policy makers came up with different measures to curtail the raging virus. One of the measures was a ban on contact-sports and activities and these included performing arts. Lives must be saved as much as possible both from the disease-causing virus as well as the hunger that the lack of economic activities was now instigating. To find a solution, art must consult art while acting on science.

The theatre is among other things, an industry where many people earn their living. From writers who produce scripts and play texts, directors, stage managers, publicity/marketing managers, props, set, light and costume designers, actors and other production team members are all people who, beyond working together in the ensemble to stage plays, earn their living. It is also important to know that some of these people are bread winners of families with many dependants. With the disruption of economic activities through government ban on public gatherings and eventual lockdown, truncating previously planned productions, the need for creative staging of plays became one of the ways forward.

It is not just a wish, moving forward is a necessity. Put succinctly, Giovanni Rene Rodriguez wrote: “as any artist will tell you, it’s not about setting and meeting milestones. To move forward means having the resilience and earned luck to move forward.” While theatre practitioners in the developed countries swiftly embraced technology to bridge the gap, the developing world had a

tougher time. Embracing technology, Toczaer wrote “For example, NYU’s Tisch School of Drama experimented in launching a new course integrating virtual reality (VR) technology for students to use in practice and producing a play for a tele-audience in a social virtual reality space.”

The Challenges

Most plays are written to be performed through physical contacts, actions and body interactions. The physical contact components make these plays a tough choice for stage production during a pandemic like COVID-19. It is important to note, on one hand that Nigeria has poor digital infrastructure, expensive internet services, poor technical skills and unstable power for reliable digital experience and on the other hand, there is the pressing need for the transition from physical practices to a substantially virtual space. There is also the economic twist: for the average Nigerian, technology is expensive to adopt either as a producer or a consumer.

Addressing the Challenges

To thrive amid COVID-19, we need to rely on our playwrights, creativity and technology. But first, what is the uniqueness of our terrain vis-à-vis, Nigeria, its theatre and economics? Nigeria has a rich historical link in almost all spheres, theatre being somewhat woven into the people’s cultural identity in its many variants. Attempting to reflect on an acknowledgement, Martin Banham wrote:

Nigeria stands out in the continent for the vigour and range of its theatre. The rich cultural heritage of the nation, particularly of the south, made performance the natural means for political debate, social cohesion, celebration, and lament. The Nigerian playwright has grown up in a world where theatre literally takes place on the street, in the performances of such masquerade figures as the Egungun, or the festivals relating to trades, crafts, or seasonal rhythms, marriages and funerals. (2016).

There is a popular Western belief that “Nigerian theatre deals with three types of themes: the fantastic folktale, the farcical social satire, and the historical or mythological account derived from oral tradition. Both text and music evolved from a synthesis of liturgies from different religious sects.”- (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). While the validity or otherwise of this assertion is not the thrust of its import, the relevance of social class would serve here.

With Nigerians actively ‘living’ and ‘seeing’ theatre in their environments, some have evolved their lives and livelihood through it. For clarity, this paper admits that a circumstance specific categorization has been employed thus: that theatre practitioners loosely function in three broad titles: the professionals (these are individuals with some requisite training, who deploy their skills creatively and earn their living in the field); the practitioners (this group refers to all the people actively involved in theatre practice, whether trained or not, for economic reasons); the scholars (this encompass teachers, researchers and trainers). While some function in specific areas, others feature in multiple groups to reflect their interests.

A theatre that operates in an environment with patent expectations and latent needs must be dynamic, especially on how it survives both its environmental challenges as well as COVID-19. Expectations because, in addition to their core functions, theatre practitioners in Nigeria, like most entertainers, seem to accept the social expectation to appear rich and famous regardless, “but behind the glitter, the reality of the film and music sectors in Africa's most populous nation can often be far less glamorous: wages are low, there are no social protections and copyright law is rarely enforced.”- (France24). It is worse for theatre practitioners with dwindling audience and technology offering more convenient delivery systems and alternatives to their wares.

Thematic relevance of this piece is woven into its essence; living a meaningful life in a pandemic like COVID-19 wherever you are. Technology is to the rescue where it is available and accessible but for those with limited opportunities, things must be done differently. To champion the move for relevance and survival in the uncertain times like every other times, are playwrights. Plays with adaptable features to the time’s circumstances will be sought or scripted. In this enterprise, experiments are unavoidable.

For instance, to creatively experiment with physical rehearsal and still observe the mandatory Covid-19 protocols, a production team- the *Uwangbede Mistrels Troupe*, opted for a few-cast play, choosing Ola Rotimi’s *Holding Talks*. Cast and crew members were made to read the play in their private lockdown locations and series of virtual pre-production meetings were held. The moment the director became convinced that the lengthy lines have largely been memorized and government lockdowns were relaxed, the first

physical rehearsal was called. At the rehearsal venue, the first scene began at the barber’s shop and the reality of how to cut a client’s hair or help resuscitate a fainted man without body contact re-echoed the challenge of the time for theatre practitioners.

While it is undeniable that the challenges abound, it is instructive to admit the opportunities inherent: the need for tailor-made scripts and plays for the moment, focusing more on dramatic dialogue and rich language; exploiting the generality of the problem – both the production team and their audience are variously affected, with concerns for their health; the vacuum of inactivity or restricted movement created the need for distractions and entertainment through the creative industry, etc.

COVID-19 is not just inspiring us to look for ways to survive and thrive, it is also raising questions about ‘how’ we do it. The relevance is, process and result would equally become quite important. Making minimalist plays would therefore elevate the idea and how it is propagated. A minimalist theatre would focus on many things like promoting minimalism as lifestyle for people to get by, producing plays that adopt minimalism, championing a switch in values; a play production does not have to be cumbersome or elaborate to achieve results, etc. Here are 10 simple minimalism guidelines from Anthony Ongaro. These are towards lifestyles, but they also could guide a playwright or director’s message in a time like this.

It doesn’t need to Cost Any Money

Minimalism or the pursuit of a more minimal lifestyle does not need to cost you anything. Embracing minimalism in your life doesn’t mean buying new things that have a certain minimalistic aesthetic. The best way to get started is by decluttering the things in your home that are no longer adding value while continuing to use what you already have.

The Process is Dynamic, Not Static

Minimalism isn’t a one-time project. It may start small, but the impact, benefits and what it looks like will build over time. While it may feel great to reach a certain point of decluttering that you feel good about, know that it may change over time. What minimalism looks like for you will change as your needs and lifestyle change.

Declutter First, Organize Second

This one is from Joshua Becker over at *Becoming Minimalist*. Instead of spending more time

organizing, save yourself the storage space, energy and organizing work by getting rid of things first. Start with decluttering and then organize what remains. It's much easier to organize when you have fewer things.

Not letting things or the Pursuit of things get in the Way

One of [the] main guiding principles of minimalism is not letting the things or the pursuit of things get in the way of doing what truly matters to you. What this means is removing things you don't need and reducing the inflow of new things so you can focus your time and energy on the important stuff.

No Magical Number of Items

There's no number of items to strive for with minimalism. Obsessing over whether or not you have more than 100 items is just as bad as impulsively buying more than you need. In both instances, there is an over-emphasis on the stuff. Don't worry about the number, and view minimalism as a process of continuously letting go what you're ready to declutter.

It's Not about Swapping Experiences for Things

There are quite a few studies that say experiences are better than things. But there are other studies that have come out saying that intentional purchases of both experiences and things are what makes you the happiest. It's not about swapping one impulsive behaviour for another. It's about intentional choices overall.

Detaching Your Sense of Self-Worth from Things You Own

An unexpected yet important side effect from minimalism is the self-confidence gained. As you declutter and consume less, you'll realize that your self-worth doesn't have anything to do with the brand of clothes you wear, what kind of car you drive or what furniture you have. You'll realize that the things you own don't define you, which will make it easier when you start decluttering more expensive or sentimental items.

Building Your Decision Muscle

Especially if you're just starting out with minimalism, start small at the beginning. Tackle the easy stuff first and save the harder items for later. Use the decluttering process to build your decision muscle. As you make more and more decisions about what you want and don't want in your life, you'll get better at making intentional

decisions. Building this muscle is what makes intentional living easier over time.

It's not about having an Easier Life

Minimalism isn't about living an easier life. It may be simple, but it's not easy. The purpose behind minimalism is about creating more space for doing more of what matters, learning different things and tackling bigger challenges. Minimalism is a process of removing distractions so that you can make more meaningful contributions.

Minimizing Distractions of All Types, Including Projects

Distractions take shape in all forms. We all know what it's like to have so many projects you don't even know where to start. Minimalism isn't just about the stuff; it can also be the projects, to-do lists, and responsibilities we take on. Minimizing distractions is removing the less essential projects so you have more attention and time to finish the ones that truly matter. By removing the project clutter, you're removing the distractions that prevent you from finishing anything at all. A play could validly encapsulate these and more with both economics and message in focus.

Minimalist Plays To the Rescue

Minimalism has its established definition and application in theatrical performances and literature. However, the exigencies of a COVID-19 pandemic and their resultant health concerns inadvertently necessitate an expansion of where and how the concept of could be deployed. One of such instance is the promotion of fewer actors playing multiple roles. Daunting, no doubt but a practical way of keeping the show on.

Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

Examining Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the play opens in Styles photo studio with Styles as the only character on stage. Yet, his discussion of newspaper headlines through dramatic monologue elevates the scene. Styles remained the only character on stage, switching roles until Man, a second character joins him. Through the play, Fugard had prepared a play for this season when no other seemed to anticipate this reality. This is also feasible with Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *A Dance of The Forest* and others with minimalist casts.

Technology is also undeniably useful, especially in our delivery process. The adoption of social media, digital platforms and other technological media to reach the audience become a strategic need for theatre practitioners. Regardless of one's skill or

disposition, the collaborative nature of theatre would further mean, working with those who are technically skilful.

Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* within the purview of minimalist plays, the first performance of this play had only two actors play the three characters; John Kani played both Styles and Buntu while Winston Ntshona played Sizwe Bansi. The introductory stage direction goes thus:

Styles' Photographic Studio in the African township of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. Positioned prominently, the nameboard:

Styles Photographic Studio

Reference Books; Passport; Weddings; Engagements; Birthdays Parties, and Parties.

Prop. – Styles.

Underneath this is a display of photographs of various sizes. Centre stage, a table and chair. This is obviously used for photographs because a camera on a tripod stands ready a short distance away. There is also another table, or desk with odds and ends of photographic equipment and an assortment of 'props' for photographs.

The description of the setting shows its minimalist set and the author was quick to caution in the stage direction that “*the setting for this and subsequent scenes should be as simple as possible so that the action can be continuous*”.

The reduction of elaborate scenery, properties and set to their minimal necessities go to show their relevance and appropriateness to the times we are. There is no gainsaying that Fugard subtly showed how folks have also lived minimally, with Style as a character.

Greg Mbajiogu's *The Prime Minister's Son*

Examining Greg Mbajiogu's *The Prime Minister's Son* as a minimalist play.

Dramatis Personae Prime Minister's Son

This play is aptly captured as a soloist drama and fits Jo Booney's assertion that “soloist plays in general are characterized by their naked presentation of a single personae in an empty space”. The brief consideration of this works is not an outright endorsement of solo performances as the way forward, it is rather, an embrace of all arts that thrive on minimalism with a view to practicing theatre during the pandemic, safely. In Greg Mbajiogu's words:

from the reductionist setting to the solitary actor required for the realization of this play, there is no doubt that this play adheres to the doctrines of minimalism. Even the stage direction in the first page of the published text indicates that it will be performed in an empty space beside a cemetery, with no scenic material or set visible on stage except the symbolic tombstone of the Narrator's late mother.

The Prime Minister's Son is both economically viable and practically safe to stage. It basically requires a trained and versatile actor who could crisscross the length and breadth the stage, switch between roles and deliver as different characters. The phenomenon is as intriguing as it could be exciting for an audience.

At the end, it is important to state that theatre must adapt to survive. Its adoption of such things as technology, minimalism and few casts' plays is as important as the actor's super human qualities required to skilfully take multiple roles.

CONCLUSION

The show must go on, remains a veritable motto of the Theatre. This simply implies that no matter the odds; no matter the situation, productions must continue to happen. This on a larger scale, captures man's resilient spirit.

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