

Stagecraft in Crisis: Theatre's Role as a Catalyst for Societal Healing and Change amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the multifaceted role of theatre in a Covid-19-affected society, focusing on its functions in education, entertainment, and social change. It explores theatre's capacity for raising awareness, disseminating critical health information, and providing therapeutic relief amidst the pandemic. The analysis examined the discrepancy between advocated guidelines and actual practice within the theatre community, emphasizing the importance of aligning actions with messages for credibility and impact.

Keywords: Theatre, Covid-19, Social Change, Health Communication and Entertainment

INTRODUCTION

In the latter part of 2019, the world was abruptly shaken by the unforeseen emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, originating in Wuhan, China. Initially downplayed as a minor concern, the virus swiftly propagated, catching the world unprepared and triggering a substantial economic downturn. As reported by [1], the Covid-19 pandemic has evolved into a global health crisis, imposing a significant economic burden on nearly every nation. [2] further underscores that Covid-19 has inflicted considerable collateral damage across various sectors, including education, crime, healthcare, and the economy. The virus spread rapidly, reaching approximately 215 countries within seven months of its detection in China, resulting in around nine million confirmed cases and nearly 469,587 deaths worldwide [3, 4]. Notably, Nigeria reported its first case in Lagos, allegedly imported by an Italian in February 2020, leading to 21,371 confirmed cases, 7,338 recoveries, and 533 deaths [5]. As of June 15, 2022, Nigeria has confirmed 256,352 cases, with 250,131 individuals discharged, and 3,077 active cases [6]. This pandemic has not only posed a severe threat to global health but has also unveiled vulnerabilities in various aspects of society. The statistics underscore the urgency for sustained global efforts to manage and overcome the challenges posed by Covid-19, with particular attention to the unique circumstances faced by nations like Nigeria. As we navigate through the ongoing pandemic,

comprehensive strategies, international collaboration, and adherence to public health measures remain crucial to mitigating its impact and fostering a resilient global community. In the current landscape, the ongoing pandemic presents a grim outlook, with the potential for further deterioration in the absence of proactive measures [7]. To address this concern, global organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and national entities like the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), alongside various health and research institutions, have been actively involved in formulating strategies to combat the pandemic. In this critical effort, the humanities, including theatre, have emerged as instrumental players. This study utilizes artistic and literary research methods to delve into the role of theatre in a society grappling with the impact of Covid-19, both during and after the pandemic. Theatre, renowned for its capacity to instigate change and illuminate societal challenges, takes center stage in this exploration [8]. Given the imperative need for behavioral and attitudinal shifts to combat and contain the virus, theatre becomes a powerful medium for conveying these messages. Individuals and society at large must depart from conventional routines and embrace new norms, including practices such as maintaining a minimum social distance of six feet, avoiding crowded spaces, and using face masks, as recommended by authoritative sources like [9]. In the context of

<https://www.inosr.net/inosr-experimental-sciences/> Africa, there exists a prevalent skepticism regarding the existence of the virus. Many Africans harbor the belief that the virus is a fabrication orchestrated by the political elite to deceive and exploit them under the guise of providing assistance [10]. This skepticism has given rise to the dissemination of propaganda and conspiracy theories, diverting valuable energies away from constructive solutions. The distinctive contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the unique role of theatre in a society affected by Covid-19. While vaccines and

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conventional medicine like AstraZeneca directly address the disease, theatre serves as a complementary tool with its own set of influences. Despite the extensive scholarly discourse surrounding the pandemic, the specific contribution of theatre in this context has been overlooked. This study seeks to fill this gap by portraying theatre as a distinctive and potent instrument for mitigating the spread of the virus, offering a novel perspective to the existing body of literature on this subject [7].

Conceptual framework

The term "theatre" encompasses diverse interpretations, and this study specifically delves into two aspects: theatre structure and theatre content, relating to physical space and artistic expressions. Traditionally, theatre refers to a venue where theatrical events unfold, derived from the Greek word "theatron," indicating a place for viewing [8]. As defined by [11], theatre is a designated space where performances are presented to an audience, akin to the "hardware" of a computer, according to Cohen [8]. The theatre structure is tangible and visible, extending beyond physical spaces to include diverse settings like gardens, town squares, suspended spaces, and modern mediums such as radio and television.

Conversely, the activities within the theatre building, encompassing drama, music, and dance, constitute the theatre's "software," according to Cohen [8]. This element is the content of the building, rendering it functional. [12], in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, defines theatre as a collaborative fine art form utilizing live performers to present real or imagined events before a live audience. This involves

the use of gesture, speech, song, music, dance, and drama, aimed at entertaining, enlightening, and edifying the audience. While theatre and drama are often used interchangeably [8, 13], drama is recognized as one element within the broader scope of theatre. In this study, theatre is defined as any theatrical activity conducted through the stage, radio, television, or film, with the purpose of entertaining, informing, and educating. Considering the definition by [12], one might question whether theatre is synonymous with fine art. While not synonymous, there is a convergence, as theatre incorporates aesthetics such as lines and colors in performances. As a collaborative art form, theatre integrates various elements to deliver a holistic performance addressing human issues. [14] Observes the evolving nature of the conventional stage due to the growing influence of contemporary media. Theatre has migrated to platforms like radio, film, television, and other electronic media, contributing to the orientation and re-orientation of societal members.

The business of theatre

As previously highlighted, theatre encompasses a diverse array of activities, constituting its essence and purpose. The focus of this study centers on the business of theatre, specifically directed towards human entertainment and enlightenment without a primary commercial motive, in contrast to the theatre of business as delineated by [13].

The business of theatre, according to [13], is the utilization of theatre to meet human needs for entertainment, education, and information without an explicit commercial agenda. In contrast, the theatre of business places a significant emphasis on profit maximization. Illustrative examples of the business of theatre include the ancient Broad Way Theatres in the US, Roundabout Theatre in New York, and Yoruba Traveling theatres in Nigeria, such as Hubert Ogunde Theatre. For the purpose of this study, the focus remains on the business of theatre, dedicated to human entertainment and

enlightenment, devoid of a primarily commercial intent. As noted earlier, the business of theatre revolves around the pivotal functions and roles that theatre plays in society. Historically, theatre has been acknowledged for fulfilling three fundamental roles: entertainment, information, and education [15, 13]. In contemporary times, it has evolved to encompass various communication media functions. Theatre serves as a communicative art and medium, effectively covering nearly all media functions, including instruction, persuasion, education, entertainment, development, and more [16]. Furthermore, the functions of theatre align with media functions outlined by [17] and [18], such as surveillance, interpretation, linkage, transmission of values, correlation of information, and the transmission of culture from generation to generation. These functions aptly elucidate the business of theatre. For instance, the surveillance of

<https://www.inosr.net/inosr-experimental-sciences/> the environment involves a systematic study of a phenomenon, followed by interpretation, leading to the creation of a performance that entertains and enlightens society members while aligning with specific cultural values. Theatre, therefore, acts as a rejuvenating force for culture, guiding society towards ethical life values. In the pursuit of meaningful change, sensitization plays a crucial role, and effective sensitization can lead to transformative

Theatre in Covid-19 and Post-Covid-19 Environment

In the landscape shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the role of theatre is examined through its fundamental functions: surveillance, instruction, persuasion, education, and entertainment. Among these, surveillance takes center stage, proving particularly crucial in the face of a pandemic outbreak. This function involves the meticulous collection of first-hand information from society and the environment, forming the foundation for subsequent educational and entertaining presentations by theatre practitioners, disseminated through various mass media channels. In this scenario, the surveillance process entails rigorous research conducted by content producers, a task streamlined by the ubiquity of the internet. Valuable insights into the pandemic, including its origins, causes, and preventive measures, can be gleaned from extensive databases maintained by reputable organizations such as the World Health Organization, Africa Centre for Disease Control, and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. This digital engagement not only expedites the content production process but also lightens the workload for artists and creators. The theatre's adept navigation and leverage of online resources significantly enhance its capacity to inform and engage the public on critical health issues like Covid-19. This integrated approach empowers theatre practitioners to deliver timely and accurate information through compelling and impactful performances. The information gathered through diligent research becomes the content of creative or dramatic works, aimed at enlightening and entertaining society, thereby fostering social awareness and potential social change. In productions geared towards social reformation, it is imperative to uphold respect for the beliefs and religion of the intended audience. Theatre practitioners must ensure that performances avoid degrading these beliefs. If contrary beliefs exist that may hinder efforts to combat the spread of the disease, the principle of persuasion should be applied to encourage the audience to reconsider and discard any such beliefs. Over the past two years of the Covid-19 outbreak, the theatre has actively engaged

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social change. Theatre for Social Change (TfSC), as defined by [21], serves the purpose of instigating social change. TfSC captures people's interest through engaging entertainment, ultimately fostering shifts in behavior. Particularly in the context of a Covid-19-affected society, TfSC becomes a powerful tool for encouraging ethical lifestyles and driving positive social transformations.

in the production of informative and entertaining audio, stage, and video performances about the virus. Notably, these productions are easily accessible through various mass media channels, with social media leading the way. Importantly, these productions are based on expert directives, showcasing the dynamic interaction between theatre and technology and underscoring the vital role of theatre in disseminating crucial information during a global health crisis. Consider, for instance, one of the guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) to mitigate the spread of the formidable Covid-19 virus: the regular washing of hands. This practice was unfamiliar to rural dwellers who typically only engaged in such a task when preparing to eat, especially a traditional African delicacy like eba, typically consumed with bare hands. This cultural inclination became the subject of an online trending video during the early days of the pandemic. In the video, a mother from the village visited her son in the city. Upon arrival, she was prompted by the son's security personnel at the entrance to wash her hands with water and liquid soap, strategically placed for hygiene. To this request, she became indignant, viewing it as a "humiliation" and threatening to place a curse on her son for subjecting her to such an act and denying her access to his home. The son, alerted by the commotion, intervened and explained the importance of handwashing as a preventive measure against the virus. Initially resistant, the mother eventually complied after much persuasion from her son, realizing the significance of the practice. Subsequently, she carried this newfound knowledge back to the village. This episode underscores the vital role of persuasion in instigating change. The persuasive function of theatre holds immense importance in influencing individuals to adopt positive attitudes and behaviors. When a theatre artist aims to introduce a new social order into a given society, persuasion cannot be overlooked. Through persuasive storytelling and repetition of messages over time, theatre has the power to shape behavior and lifestyles, making it a potent tool for societal transformation. In this way,

<https://www.inosr.net/inosr-experimental-sciences/> the theatre becomes a vehicle for delivering messages that society can easily internalize, fostering positive change in attitudes and practices. In a related animated video titled "The Great Race: A COVID-19 Story," crafted by Maya Adam and animated by Matt Torode, the imperative of wearing facemasks by everyone, regardless of class or position, to control the spread of the coronavirus was emphasized. In this brief video clip of approximately one minute and seventeen seconds, those who defiantly ignored the preventive directive, as recommended by the WHO, were depicted as vulnerable and actively sought after by the virus [22]. In another engaging three-and-a-half-minute video, students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa utilized popular theatrical elements, including dance, clapping, drama, and music, to effectively communicate crucial information about the virus. Their performance underscored essential precautionary measures such as thorough handwashing for at least 20 seconds and the recommended practice of sneezing or coughing into one's elbow. Furthermore, the production aimed to dispel prevalent misconceptions surrounding the virus.

These instances represent just a few examples of the innovative approaches taken by creators during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such productions have been widely disseminated across modern mass media platforms, particularly on social media channels like YouTube. Their primary goal is to raise awareness and make it pertinent for individuals within society to adopt necessary safety measures, thereby ensuring their well-being and survival. This underscores the vital role of theatre in a society undergoing significant changes to adapt to the 'new normal,' ultimately safeguarding its members from the potential ravages of a pandemic. The theatre community has remained steadfast in fulfilling this crucial function since the onset of the coronavirus outbreak. In the post-Covid-19 environment, the business of theatre takes on a nuanced role that aligns with its previously enumerated functions. This time, there is a pressing need for enlightenment coupled with entertainment for societal readjustment after being ravaged and traumatized, perhaps due to the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, and an unfriendly economic environment. In this regard, theatre becomes a means to address the pains

In its enduring role as a potent tool for education and enlightenment, theatre remains a dynamic force, especially in the face of the ongoing global challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Beyond the realms of entertainment, theatrical

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of society members and provide relief from the humdrum travails of life, offering a distraction from the problems confronting them. However, the message this time should be one of hope for a better future. As posited by Bharata, cited in [23], theatre provides "relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief." The theatre also plays a crucial role in immortalizing the memories of the pandemic era, providing both entertainment and a documented record for future generations. Theatre has a distinguished track record of preserving historical events [24]. It is highly likely that, if not already in progress, productions depicting the impacts and potential outlook of the pandemic will be adapted into films. Audiences will find solace and even humor in these portrayals, a cathartic experience akin to what is known in theatre as the purgation of emotions, as envisioned by Ghosh.

While theatre has been at the forefront of driving social change during this period, research findings indicate a lack of self-reflection within the theatre community. This raises a notable inconsistency - a case of "do as I say, not as I do." In the sample performances analyzed for this study, it was evident that theatre practitioners sometimes fail to adhere to the guidelines they advocate for, potentially undermining the effectiveness of their messaging. This incongruity highlights the importance of aligning actions with messages to maintain credibility and trust with the audience. The paper's scrutiny of various performances during this research revealed a notable discrepancy: many of these productions failed to adhere to the very guidelines they sought to promote. This inconsistency sends a mixed message, potentially eroding the credibility of the theatre in the eyes of the audience. It's important to recognize that while there may have been initial skepticism among the public [10], theatre artists hold a unique position as ambassadors at the forefront of disseminating crucial information about this illness. As such, upholding and embodying the recommended safety measures is not just advisable, but imperative. It ensures that the message conveyed through their work aligns with the actions they themselves take, reinforcing the call for societal change to effectively combat the pandemic. This integrity is fundamental in maintaining trust and fostering a collective commitment to overcoming this health crisis.

CONCLUSION

performances wield the power to convey crucial messages, serving as a medium of instruction that transcends mere spectacle. As the world grapples with the far-reaching impacts of the virus, theatre assumes a pivotal role in disseminating awareness

<https://www.inosr.net/inosr-experimental-sciences/> regarding its dangers, advocating preventive measures, and emphasizing the importance of adherence to guidelines. Moreover, theatre emerges as a therapeutic refuge for individuals navigating the complexities of grief and economic hardships in these trying times. By providing a temporary escape from pain and agony, it offers solace and a communal space for reflection. While the theatre steadfastly continues to accomplish its societal role, a critical imperative arises for it to embody the principles it

Ashaba passionately promotes in its creative works. This self-reflexivity, where the theatre aligns its actions with its advocacy, is paramount. It not only enhances the credibility of the theatre as a catalyst for social change but also amplifies its impact as a healing force in the face of adversity. In these challenging times, the theatre stands not only as a source of enlightenment but as a beacon of resilience, embodying the potential for positive transformation and societal healing.

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