

Directorial Approach of Reflective Darkness in Handling Plays with the Visually Impaired: Case Study of Federal College of Education (SP) Oyo, Nigeria

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Abstract—Practicability of theatre (irrespective of actor’s physiological condition) is the availability of a body that is capable of moving in an occupied space and responds to direction. Consequently, this study examines the process involved in directing plays for the visually impaired. It employs the analytical and historical methods while participant-observation serves as an instrument used. Adopted is Jaques Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction which is grounded in how communication is effected and how languages, codes, signs and movements and symbols are interpreted. Undoubtedly, the visually impaired persons are fit for theatre practice and directing them though challenging, is an interesting endeavor but this is better achieved through reflective darkness. It is hereby recommended that for the visually impaired, reflective darkness, which is a synthesis of spatial arrangement, verbal and non-verbal communication is the way to enhance their communication capability and creative ability. Therefore, attention should be given to people with special needs in general and the visually impaired in particular, as their involvement in theatre practice/performance will tremendously provide a better future for them as it ensures self-reliance which will be a complete departure from the usual degrading and dehumanising practices such as alms begging, crime and caricature known of them.

Index Terms—visually impaired, theatre, deconstruction, production

I. INTRODUCTION

Drama is a mirror of life. In fact, citing William Shakespeare, Heminge (1996, p. 680) states that it is “mirror held up to nature”. This mirror is being held up by characters, and these characters are the agents of the action as Aristotle cited in Dukore (1974, p. 37) avers that “characters hold a second place. Thus tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents, mainly with a view to the action”. The statement above implies that characters hold a central place in a performance as they are the agents, instruments or vehicles through which the plot of a play develops. As a matter of fact, Aristotle posits that character is the most important element in drama, after the plot. They are pivotal in the dramatic process. Every dramatic enactment, has the actor put his visual and aural faculties to play. Hence, Adedeji (1988, p. 1) posits that drama “include the use of mind, body and voice in expression for adequate communication with the audience”.

People with special needs such as the crippled, the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, the dumb and others find it difficult one way or other to participate in dramatic performances. In fact, “visually impaired individuals would normally experience a lot of difficulties performing jobs that require sight” (Durojaiye, 1996, p. 131). Durojaiye’s assertion poses the conviction that the disabled (the crippled, the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, the dumb, the normally retarded and others) are not predisposed to dramatic enactment. Therefore, there is the belief that there is a limitation to their contribution to the society, societal development and so on. Conversely, scholars, researchers and academics in education of people with special needs, such as Giwa (2008), Durojaye(2009), Okuoyibo (2010), Adebisi (2012), Ajobiewe (2014) posit that the visually impaired can as well contribute to educational and societal development. Hence, Ojo, (1996, p. 132) also avers that “the visually impaired can be well integrated into the society if adequate training and provisions are made to compensate for the loss of vision”. Thus, the ability and place of the visually impaired in the society cannot be overemphasized. Consequently, this study examines the visually impaired as apt subject to dramatic performances. It investigates Reflective Darkness, as a directorial approach to handling plays with the visually impaired.

A Contextual Study of Visual Impairment

In recent times, people with special needs such as the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the crippled and so on, have been a subject of discussion in different disciplines in the academia. These discussions have been on how they can be relevant

in the society and to the society. This is because there is the notion that people with special needs are not germane in the society. That because of their inability, they cannot contribute to societal development. Amongst these set of people, are the visually impaired. The visually impaired in the context of this study, are people who are unable to see and those born blind which may be congenital or acquired. This inability to see may be congenital or acquired. The discrimination of the handicapped in general and the visually impaired persons in particular is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, “before the 20th century, handicapped persons were killed, domestically sold as slaves or used as sacrifices to the gods” (Giwa, 1996, p. 155). They were/are seen as nondescript. Even Adolf Hitler of Germany had the handicapped subjected to euthanasia and experimentation because he felt they were a liability to the state.

In Nigeria, “missionaries started custodian services while later the government laws further endorsed the right of the handicapped” (Giwa, 1996, p. 155). To integrate the blind and other impaired victims in the society, the Christian missionaries did not only play a major role, the Nigerian government also enacted laws to protect the interest of the visually handicapped. Thus, citing Nigerian Policy of Education, Giwa (1996, p. 155) states that “the Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education has as one of its objectives that it will provide adequate education for all handicapped children and adults in order that they may fully play their roles in the development of the nation”. This has led to the establishment of subjects for the visually impaired in schools of primary and second study, the formation of departments for training students with disability in universities, and the creation of a college of education for educating the blind and people with special needs in general. A good example of such a school is Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Oyo State.

Furthermore, “blind pupils will require specialised equipment and additional elements in adapting to the environment... the blind will depend on tactile and auditory means in his/her attempt to reach the information which is easily available to the sighted” (Agbaje, 1996, p. 188). This is the reason the visually impaired have been portrayed by artists in a deleterious light. Hence, the *International Organisation on Arts and Disability Magazine* (2011, p. 11) states that artists such as filmmakers, playwrights and so on, portray “sensory disabilities such as deafness and blindness in negative light”. Hence, in some dramatic performances, the roles of traditional doctor or an antagonist, is usually played by someone with disability.

On the other hand, some people with disability do not see their disability as a challenge. Rather, they see it as a part of life. Citing Belluso, the *International Organisation on Arts and Disability* (2011, p. 1) states that “disability is an experience that shapes my life and view of the world, and a topic that I find endlessly fascinating because there is that universal element. It is the one minority class in which anyone can become a member at any time”. In corroboration of John Belluso’s claim, Akanbi (1996, p. 162) states that “people often forget that it is possible for the visually impaired child to be independent in these skills if he or she has acquired the skills”. If anyone could become disabled at any time, the responsibility to make sure the disabled are made self-reliant and independent becomes communal, that is why:

In 1979, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published two editions of an experimental manual on rehabilitation and disability prevention for developing countries. The volume introduced the concept of Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) of disabled persons. As the name implies, CBR involves measures taken at community level to use and build on the resources of the community, including the impaired, their families and the whole community. Such measures would be conditions to enable the disabled and handicapped to participate actively in the mainstream of community life (Ajobiwe, 1996, pp. 143-144).

Thus, the study attempts to stand between this existing gap and make theatre practice accessible for the disabled.

The Visually Impaired and Acting

Though, there are a dearth of literatures on drama and the visually impaired. The few materials that are available on theatre and the visually impaired, are on music and dance. The subject of acting and the visually impaired have not been given adequate attention in Nigeria. Perhaps, this is because of the belief of the inability of the blind in executing certain functions. However, the *International Organisation on Arts and Disability Magazine* (2011, p. 10) states that:

The ancient Greek dramatists Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides include characters with disabilities in their plays as do the early writers from other cultures and eras. These characters’ disabilities determined how the character functioned but do not necessarily reflect how people with disability truly lived, thought, or behaved. In other words, most playwrights have used disability as a metaphor so that the character has a special meaning within the play. Usually these metaphors reflect and reinforce society’s negative or limiting attitudes about people with disabilities.

The ancient Greek dramatists thus, used characters with special needs not only as performers but also as a topic of discourse. In *Oedipus at Collonus*, King Oedipus is portrayed as visually impaired. However, in the past few centuries, the place of the blind, the deaf and dumb, the neurotic, and other people with special needs have been able to find a place in the theatrical space. Hence, the foray of an artist such as Bethoveen in the music art. Bethoveen, a musician and composer of international acclaim/repute was deaf. Though, this limited his aesthetic appreciation of his art, it did not deter him from composing more musical scores. In the same vein, Antonin Artaud, the proponent of the theatre theory, called *Theatre of Cruelty*, wrote most of his plays, when he suffered from neurosis and was being hospitalised in the sanatorium. Thus, Adeoye (2009, p. 6), notes that “Nietzsche’s madness, pneumonia and stroke were repercussions for blasphemy”. Though, not an artist in the real sense of the word, the philosopher cum art critic still surged in his career in spite of impairment.

Furthermore, Ojo (1996, p. 72), states that “children who are visually impaired learn to indulge in theatrical activities the same way as their sighted peers”. Abosi and Ozoji (1985, p. 1) also corroborate the above statement, that “no single mental activity of the congenitally blind is distorted by the absence of sight”. Therefore, visual impairment does not impede the creative ability of the blind-in-relation to acting. Creativity in acting and in other theatrical arts is not determined by the seeing faculty of the actor. There are some actors “and not only those with special needs, who will find some form of drama activities, or even the drama space itself, challenging” (Eibar, 2002, p. 18). However, this is predicated on the directorial approach the director uses in the directorial process. The visually impaired can be well integrated into the society if adequate training and provisions are made to compensate for the loss of vision. Indeed, “techniques and technology only need to be developed or adapted for them to perform duties that require vision and precision” (Durojaiye, 1996, p. 132).j

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction Theory. Jacques Derrida crystallised the theory of deconstruction also known as Poststructuralism. “The Poststructuralists point out that in a single text, one can find many meanings, all of them possible and all of them replaceable by others. Instead of showing how the conventions of a text work, deconstruction shows how they falter” (Dobie, 2009, p. 155). Therefore, this study explicates how the conventional approaches in directing falter, when it comes to directing the visually impaired.

Furthermore, in the context of this study, the theory of Deconstruction means a dislocation of all other approaches in directing and a reconstruction of what we appropriate as the theory of Reflective Darkness. Deconstruction “recognises that any human utterance has a multitude of possibilities of meaning. The simplest statement may be heard in a variety of ways, giving language a tendency to undermine itself by refuting what appears to be saying” (Dobie, 2009, p. 156). Deconstructionist believes that language is perceived, interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways. Therefore, Deconstruction Theory according to Dobie (2009, p 156) looks for places where texts contradict, and thereby deconstruct themselves, while the structuralists are scientific, the deconstructionalists are passionate and emotional.

The following are some of the notable features inherent in the deconstructionist theory of Jaques Derrida:

- enables directors to rework existing directorial approach(es).
- rejects conservatism
- seeks to bridge the gap between texts and performances.
- affords the director unfettered liberty with a text in performance.
- explicates how theory forecast instead of how they work.
- does not give room for stereotype.
- does not legislate strict adherence.

Therefore, Deconstruction theory will allow us to explore the directorial approach of Reflective Darkness which is the spatial placement or arrangement of actors and props on stage, with codified sound and bodily expression a director employs in passing across his message to the blind actors. However, the multi-faceted nature of interpreting gestures, body language and movements, becomes a weakness of Deconstruction Theory.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this work is participant observation whose major aim is to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time. There are five types of participant observation namely Non-Participatory, Passive Participation, Moderate Participation, Active Participation and complete participation. The researchers adopted complete participation observation which allows for deep involvement of the researchers with other members involved in the experiment. This is akin to the homestead methodological approach used in Theatre for Development whereby catalysts integrates themselves with community members to gain their confidence and trust in order to have a more accurate result. Usage of participant observation by reflective darkness is a synthesis of spatial arrangement, codified sounds and bodily expression, body contact, voice perception, verbal and non-verbal communication that a director employs in passing across his message to and through visually impaired actors. Its features include body contacts, voice perception, humour, props guide. spatial arrangement (space of the stage), codified sounds, inter-dependency, metrical measurement of stage area and steps counting.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The directorial approach employed in directing the visually impaired, is what determines the effectiveness or otherwise of the actor in enacting his role effectively. First, like in any other directing experience, thorough understanding of the script was undertaken by the director and while doing this, the director identifies the important roles that will be played by actors who are impaired. After this, he proceeds to rehearsal with his actors who in this instance are visually impaired. Typical of rehearsals, he begins with exercise sessions and this time around, his exercises were fashioned in respect of the condition of the visually impaired. First, he leads them in what is called

walking the stage. This he does by allowing them to walk the length and breadth of the stage, first with their mobility canes, next, he walks them without the mobility cane, but by himself. This time, he insists they count the number of steps taken from one end of the stage to the other in order for them to get to know the metrical extent of the stage in terms of the length and breadth. He allows them to key this into memory to be recalled later and execute into actions when it is needed.



Fig. 1: A researcher leading the visually impaired actors in walking the stage.
Picture Credit: Researchers.

Furthermore, the director narrates the story line to the actors even before handling the script to them. This is in accordance with Gbegbin's submission that "Storytelling and drama techniques provide opportunities for impaired children to use language across a wide range of functions to explain, to reason, to predict, project or to imagine" (1996, pp. 79-80). It is ideal for the director to understand their peculiarity in terms of vision.

The next most important thing after keying in the measurement of the stage including the marked exists and entrances is the voice training. For a visually impaired actor, his voice is his most potent instrument. Hence, his voice ought to be handled in such a way that it possesses the appropriate timbre and resonance that makes it pleasing to the ear. That is why Styan (1979, p. 163) states that:

Much of the success of radio drama, even though it is using a blind medium, is due to the fact that the sound of a voice has the power to stimulate the listener's motor imagination, to excite him to reproduce imaginatively some muscular activity.

The director ensures this and made sure they understood his motives by letting them know what he seeks out in them. This is very important because a play well heard will make-up for the inadequacy of composition as well as picturisation which their lack of sight might generate. That is, clumsy pictures would be made up for with clear and resonate renditions by the visually challenged actors. Hence the director took cognizance of this and gives it the adequate attention it deserves.



Fig. 2: Visually impaired actors singing and dancing during voice training session
Picture Credit: Researchers.

Furthermore, the director built a very high level of confidence and trust in the actors. That is, he made them to get them out of their shells and helped them overcome the complex of low self-esteem that they are generally characterised with. This he achieved by building intimacy and sense of belonging in the actors. Though humorous, was careful and choosy about his jokes and nature of humour he employs for fear of misinterpretation. Having achieved this desired level of trust and confidence in his actors, he then admonishes them to rely solely on his eyes for their seeing. That is,

he begins to “see” for every actor in rehearsals, this is important in order to eliminate mechanical acting. Thus, the visually impaired actor relies solely on the director for guidance and sight and therefore was able to walk on stage without exaggerated precaution or inhibition. They begin to walk freely and confidently on stage as if they can see. This is very important in Reflective Darkness as an approach of directing as it is the very reflective situation in which the director serves as mirror or eyes that sees and allows the actor to reflect his sight in their performance. The actor sees on stage through the director’s sight and performs based on his guidance.

Thus, he needs to invent and originates various communication codes with which he communicates with his actors (beyond spoken words e.g. clapping and whistle blowing). Also, the director answers questions from the actors in relation to the story line



Fig. 3: A researcher and the visually impaired actors discussing the various communication codes invented by the researcher.
Picture Credit: Researchers.

The next phase is the casting process which is democratic in nature. That is, the directors allow them to choose a select roles they feel they can handle. Two major reasons for adopting this is to increase intimacy with the actors as well as to boost their sense of self-esteem, secondly, it helps them to have the feeling that they are an integral part of the play, hence to put in their best.

However, during course of the rehearsals, observation was made keenly to ascertain that the actors are suitable for the role, and if not, appropriately change them. This casting of course is after audition as it may be fatal to cast without audition. This warning again was sounded by Agoro who states that “do not cast people who you know personally, unless they happen to audition” (2001, p. 80). In doing this, the director was not to be biased in his casting so as to select the right actors for the right roles. Casting the visually impaired is challenging, this is because, they are the ones who suffer low self-esteem the most, out of all impaired persons, hence, there is always this initial reluctance to come out of their shells. It is due to this reasons and many more that the director needs to employ reflective darkness style which not only make them feel at home but also be able to engage in character portrayal. The director must lead the actors in effective script interpretation. This was an onerous task for the visually impaired as we are deconstructing their conventional means of reading which is the braille. The director at this stage gives his actors a sense of belonging and carefully narrates the events in the performance to them and what is expected of them. He was not dictatorial which eases communication gap and made them feel more at home.

Having understood the play, the directors allow them to do what they can do on stage through improvisation. He however makes adjustment where and when it is necessary. With this, there was an exploration of the creative impulse of the actors by the director. The actors bring their own idea which the director critically examines. This directorial approach could be linked to the Montessori teaching approach in which “the teacher’s role is to guide the child from any harm and concentrate in the training of the senses” (Okuoyibo, 2008, p. 180). Despite the directors exploration of the creative ability of the actors, he discards their unnecessary contribution and integrate the necessary ones into the performance. At the embryonic stage of rehearsals, the director made sure that the visually impaired actors memorised their lines and also know their blockings before full blockings are effected:

When you are in verbal intercourse on the stage, speak not so much to the ears of the eye’. Stanislavsky’s paradox is easily resolved, since intonation and gesture, the terms by which is specified any motion by one actor for himself, are twin and inseparable. (Styan, 1979, p. 98)

It is in rehearsals that the director employs the ingredients of reflective darkness on the actors who are visually impaired. In order to bring about a successful production, he employs the space of the stage (Spatial arrangement) body contact and codified sounds to pass instructions to his actors. This, he achieves, by establishing defined exits and entrances for the actors who already know the metrical extent of the stage area and then rely on their sense of rhythm in reflecting this measurement in rehearsals, such that two actors coming from two different directions on stage, counting

and executing the recommended number of steps, cannot collide on stage despite not seeing. Coupled with this, the director relied on voice perception to achieve good and pleasing pictures on stage.



Fig. 4: Visually impaired actors relying on spatial arrangement move on stage without colliding with one another.
Picture Credit: Researchers.

Apart from the above, the directors employed the use of props as well as fellow actors as “body contact” to make his challenged actors aware of themselves on stage. That is, the director made use of props and other actors to prompt his actor on stage. He instructs them that, once the actor comes into contact with either an actor or a prop he moves no more. This entails that the director placed his actor and properties strategically on stage in order to conform with his blockings and how he wants to move his actor on stage.



Fig. 5: Visually impaired actors are trained to freeze on contact with another actor
Picture Credit: Researchers.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Directing the visually impaired in a play production is not an easy task. Beyond the director’s attention on his cast, he also works with the stage manager whose task includes easing the director of the strenuous task of directing the visually challenged and be ready to take orders and be able to work patiently and diligently with the visually impaired actors in order to achieve the director’s intent. Increasing the comfort level of the visually impaired is where theatre provides opportunities to stretch and grow, not only in speaking within larger groups, but expanding life enhancing skill as well. The outcome of this experiment reveals that drama can liberate the visually impaired from inferiority complex, low self-esteem and act as a socialising medium of fraternisation as well as elicit the creative ability in them, with a view towards creating a place for them in the society.

This is in view of the discovery that societal perception of the disability limits their expression and creative power. In the same vein, it discovers that discrimination against the visually and the hearing impaired contribute immensely to their low self esteem and further degrade their hidden talent which invariably leads to inferiority complex. Also, psychology becomes an important factor in directing the impaired as it is highly challenging and interesting especially with the visually and hearing impaired. Directing the impaired opens the director to streams of communicative network.

In the disabilities of the impaired lies great opportunity that could be explored by themselves and concerned stakeholders for self dependency.

VI. DISCUSSION

The theatre could be a good teaching intervention medium for the impaired. It can also facilitate socialisation between the unimpaired and the impaired thereby obliterating every form of inferiority complex in their psyche. It is recommended that integrative approaches should be adopted in the process of directing people with one form of disability or the other. This will extend the frontiers of directing the impaired beyond the vocational exploration by projecting it as only a means to an end but rather as an end in itself. It will be a welcome development if upcoming researchers beams their searchlights on the therapeutic tendencies of the directing practice by focusing their engagement to serve as therapy for the impaired, just as consistent involvement of the impaired will keep them relevant in problem solving situations and expose them to overcome some disability challenges.

Giving the creative power of the impaired as revealed by this experiment, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), governmental agencies and policy makers need to take more interest in their plight as they are willing to contribute their own quota to the development of the nation despite their various challenges. Adequate measures should be put in place to prevent accident on stage by making sure that actors are familiarised with given stage for performances which may be remarkably different in structural design from the rehearsal stage.

VII. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this paper opines that the theatre is good for the visually impaired, because they are also suitably fit for theatre practice despite their challenging predicament. That the theatre, being the mirror which reflects the society's image for evaluation, and given the universal beliefs that; someone in the darkened medium (auditorium in the theatre) sees images clearly in a lit medium (on stage). The visually impaired being in the darkened medium of the society, sees the society clearer and succinctly enough to adequately reflect such society in re-enactment in such an emotionally deep manner that can effect very positive changes in the society. That the Reflective Darkness, which is a synthesis of spatial arrangement, voice perception, body contact, codified sounds, verbal and non-verbal communication on stage is the way to enhance their communication capability and creative ability. It is therefore suggested that more attention should be given to people with special needs in general and the visually impaired in particular, as their involvement in theatre practice/performance will tremendously provide a better future for them. It will ensure self-reliance and a complete departure from degrading and dehumanising practices such as alms begging, crime and caricature known of them. It is equally recommended that Nigerian theatre directors should not sideline the visually impaired in the pre-production, production and the post-production stages of the theatre enterprise.

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