

IMPERATIVES FOR EFFECTIVE ACTOR TRAINING IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Actor training in Nigerian university system is pursued under an academic programme that embodies drama, theatre and film related courses. This arrangement is aimed at ensuring that the actor is effectively trained in physique, intellect and psyche, for all the demands on the stage and the screen. A university trained thespian has much given to him and should have much to offer in return. He is expected to excel in the arts; excelling implies that his acting techniques and job engagements should outshine and outnumber those of amateurs, charlatans and non-academically groomed artisans in the field. This distinction becomes obvious through the trained actor's voice and speech productions, his stage presence, movements, gestures, and role interpretations. Other qualities include his social image, economic stand and a wide spectrum of other criteria. Currently, in Nigeria, the ivory tower sets in motion, a wide range of checks and balances, including constant updating of curriculum, accreditation visits, relentless lecturing and field exercises. Administrative authorities are also involved in complementing the academic efforts. But an interaction with the graduate actors, their stage performances, and their level of professional engagements suggest that a great percentage of them have not received effective training. This paper seeks to track down the factors that obstruct effective actor training in Nigeria's university system, with the objective of proffering workable imperatives for tackling them.

Introduction

In the words of theatre historians – Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball, “In the twentieth century, actor training gradually gained a foothold in colleges and universities, which became the principal trainers of actors, although there are still many actor-training studios, especially in large cities” (350).

This remark makes certain vital insinuations: The university is preceded by earlier training grounds, which invariably had their methods of approach; the ivory tower as an embodiment of necessary intellectual, technical, theoretical and practical potentials is best equipped for producing balanced actors; if the university exploits all the educational potentials available to it, and channels them appropriately, training hindrances will be largely alleviated. Finally, if would-be actors can be made to exploit to the fullest, the potentials of the tertiary institution, they can reap the fruits of effective training and pedagogy.

The genesis of actor training may be traced back to the beginnings of theatre in traditional society. Such origins involved ritual displays like dance, song, acrobatics, mime, story-telling, masquerading and other forms of impersonation and imitation. These skills demanded talents that were nurtured through training, while the performers belonged to performance groups or cults that determined the rules of the art.

In ancient Greece, actors were trained under the banner of acting companies which were registered in a trade guild that dictated the mode of operation. Actors were highly valued, hence, they were carefully selected for training.

Jerry V. Pickering opines that,

The Greeks put primary emphasis on vocal training, judging an actor's competence in terms of beauty of tone, ability to create mood and character, and ability to speak beautifully from any posture. The actor was also trained as a singer.... Training in movement was important (46).

Each epoch in theatre history, since the classical Greece, articulated some evidences of its approach to actor-training. However, "until the end of the nineteenth century, most actors trained as apprentices in a repertory company" (Kennedy 5). As apprentices within a company, the actors learned by observing their older and more established counterparts, and through acting minor roles in different productions. Generally, Europe and North America "sustained a long history of actor apprenticeship, but not the systematic training traditions of Eastern performance cultures, such as those of Japanese Noh theatre, Balinese dance drama and Indian Kathakali" (Hodge XIII). Describing the Kathakali actor's training procedure, John Russel Brown writes:

Well before sunrise during the monsoon season, a foot massage is given daily to youthful actors by their teachers after a regimen of strenuous exercises Training was required of actors beginning with purgation of the bowels, dietary restrictions, and a regimen of exercises to build strength, flexibility and endurance ... (49)

"The first system of actor training in Europe and North America emerged at the beginning of twentieth century after the Russian actor and director, Konstantin Stanislavsky perceived the need to harness the actor's creativity, inspiration and talent through the introduction of disciplined techniques" (Hodge XVIII). After Stanislavsky's establishment of actor training studio at Moscow in 1898, other actor training studios emerged. Some of them were created by Vsevelod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and others.

The actor training programmes introduced by these studios provided part of the theoretical and practical source materials for colleges and universities, which as already pointed out above, serve as major actor-training grounds in Europe and America. Since the introduction of academic theatre in Nigeria in the late 1950s, through the creation of "drama and theatre courses at the University College, Ibadan in 1957", the European and North American training tradition has been established, and is fast spreading in Nigeria.

The potentials of the ivory tower which highly empowers it for actor-training are obvious: the high impetus for research; maximum appeal to stake holders, government and non-governmental organizations who can offer fiscal and material support; opportunity for recruitment of high quality academic and technical staff; chances for appropriate, comfortable, study and practical environment; availability of workable machinery for student's screening, admission and examination. The question to be addressed now, is: if all these opportunities are available to the university for actor-training, why are they not effectively exploited, and what steps can be taken to harness the potential fully?

Problems of Actor Training in Nigeria's Ivory Tower

The predicaments of actor training in Nigeria's ivory tower are mostly artistic, administrative, academic, sociopolitical, and economic. A great percentage of Nigerian universities where theatre arts and theatre related courses are studied, experience these problems in varying degrees. Moreover, some of the predicaments derive from Nigerian academic theatre's theoretical and practical links with the Occidental system which transferred its weaknesses and alienating idioms to Nigerian soil.

Commenting on the European avante-garde actor training, which Nigeria partially draws from, Peter Brook notes that Grotowski's teaching centre is perhaps the only avant-garde theatre whose poverty is not a drawback, where lack of fund is not a hindrance to experimental training sessions. Furthermore, in Grotowski's teaching centre, the experiments are scientifically valid, since necessary conditions are adhered to in teaching, while "there is absolute concentration by a small group" (11).

These positive remarks about Grotowski's centre can hardly be made about actor training in Nigerian university system. Here, too many things are placed on demand – technology, funds, time and number of trainees; all of which weaken the vigour of the trainees' creative urge if badly managed. Oftentimes, there is scarcity or total lack of funding for equipping the departments, too many students are sometimes and in some places offered admission, the short time mapped out for practical work – in order to accommodate classroom lecture periods – are either insufficient or poorly managed to allow concentration on rigorous skill learning.

Commenting further, Brook enunciates that Grotowski vigorously tackled his actor trainee's inability to surrender their instruments to difficult challenges, their inability to identify their imaginative, physical and vocal powers, their ignorance of what acting is all about, and their lack of seriousness in learning. In Nigeria's ivory tower, actor-trainees suffer these inabilities. Many of the students consider their course of study as a joke, they get into the field without conviction, dedication and self commitment. Some of them see the study as a refuge or an escape from failure in other fields. Also identifying some problems of Occidental theatre practice which invariably extends to actor training. Ossie Enekwe maintains:

It is surprising that most of our writers and critics are still enchanted by the European theatre that is considered by many Westerners themselves as effete, dull and mechanical. Some of these Europeans have even gone on to invite the forms of Asian ... traditional dramas so as to bring their theatre back to life (154)

To emphasize this weakness further, Enekwe cites Pronko who considers European theatre as a form that produces actors who are "exceedingly loquacious, and singularly incapable of doing anything other than talking" on the stage. A form that is more intellectually demanding on the audience, than feasting their senses and minds (154).

The above weaknesses give an insight into the poor quality and ineffectiveness of actor training practice in European theatre, and these opinions also apply to Nigerian university's situation, where actors are sometimes observed to be more loquacious than mobile. Training is not rigorously oriented towards creative experimentation and physical drill. It remains considerably below the level of Grotowski's scientific method.

Marginalization of students in training is a notable problem. Some of the trainees, who we interacted with in one of the ivory towers, complained of marginalization, favouritism or wrong procedures during play productions. The practice whereby a number of students are markedly prejudged to lack talent and are never allowed to try their learning on stage, is grossly counter-productive. The result is that some of them may graduate without experiencing or learning the practical dimensions of even the basic acting techniques.

In the sphere of administration, problems that emanate from wrong administrative policies, administrative insincerity and denial of appropriate working environment for academic staff, grossly obstruct effective actor training. For example, erroneous admission practices come to play, when candidates that apply for the training course are not thoroughly examined, screened, and interviewed

before final admission. To admit a student into the acting course, without first, seeing him, speaking with him and confirming his handicaps, interests and potentials, is a misnomer which does not augur well for successful training.

Favouritism, corruption, examination malpractice, and craze for paper qualification have opened the way for misfits who find ways to circumvent the tolerant and somewhat elastic temperament of some administrative authorities. Every job has some necessary working atmosphere that can enhance its productivity. The university administration understands what the lecturers need for their best to be actualized. These needs include comfortable office space, well seated classrooms, adequate financial security, enough research materials like standard books, research grants, electronic gadgets, and others. The administration knows all this, but it only waits for some serious occasion of 'reckoning' such as accreditation visit, before it hurriedly installs some of the needs.

Academically, there is a serious need for research in actor training. Consequently, intellectual exercise in this connection is highly demanding. Many students are never found using the library and often attribute their failures in this direction to what they call "excess practical engagement". But practical activities per se do not constitute the problem because, it is sadly inadequate to train an actor in body and neglect his intellect. This is the implication of Meyerhold's injunction when he says,

Training! Training! Training! But if it's the kind of training which exercises only the body and not the mind, then No, thank you! I have no use for actors who know how to move but cannot think (Aleksandr 104)

However, practical training becomes a problem when it is monotonous and improperly guided. Some of the socio-economic and political forces that deter students from settling down religiously to be effectively trained in the art of acting are poor economic prospects, poor audience patronage, erroneous and obsolete perception of the acting profession, and absence of post graduate examining board. Commenting on the status of Roman actors, Oscar Brockett remarked that "the social status of the actor varied considerably, although the majority always ranked low in public esteem" (65). In Elizabethan England, "on one hand, the actor was a constant target of the law, always on the verge of arrest for vagabondage, condemned and maligned as vagrant, thief, and worse; yet on the other hand, the actor was often a respected consort of the highest level of society, able to mingle with nobility ... (Pickering 244). Even in ancient Greece, Plato argued that dramatists had a corrupting influence on the mind, and should be expelled from the state.

As in Elizabethan England, and elsewhere, there are many remarks that vindicate the high esteem of actors. Yet the above outdated, negative perception of their status has become deeply implanted in the psyche of many members of the society. Consequently, parents and guardians are sceptical about encouraging their children and wards in the acting study. Rather, they urge them to change to other fields. If the change fails, the disinterested and dispirited students absent mindedly remain in the training, constituting a distraction to lecturers and other students. Such distracting culprits may graduate as mediocres in the art. Again adding to this factor, some political leaders tacitly discourage the idea of promoting artists and giving support to universities for providing effective training to the student actors.

Furthermore, due to poor audience patronage of stage performances, theatre companies in big cities are not vibrant enough to provide fiscal support for students to be engaged in industrial training within their establishments. Therefore, paucity of opportunity for industrial training denies students in some universities the important dividends of practical or working experience before graduation.

Job scarcity in the country scares would-be actors. They anticipate pessimistic futures after graduation and this affects their learning inspiration. “The decision to become a professional actor takes courage, because the number of aspirants greatly exceeds the available jobs” (Brockett and Ball 350) both in film and on stage. Furthermore, “although a would-be actor may complete training programs and receive a degree or certificate, there are no exams or boards as there are for lawyers or doctors to certify an actor’s readiness (and adequate training) to practice the profession” (350). This absence of post-graduation screening engenders false confidence in the actor-trainees who look up to nothing that would check their professional incompetence on graduation.

Approaches to Effective Actor Training

The first significant imperative is proper management of available human and material resources. Available funds must be utilized promptly and directly in servicing the training equipment, staff and library. Misappropriation of funds mars the possibilities of effective training. Time management in actor training is vital. Robert Leach writes:

The actor for the task which Meyerhold was to set – the ability to perform farce and tragedy, melodrama, pantomime and circus style skits, to name but some of the genres he was interested in – needed a rigorous and long-lasting training: ‘An actor must study as a violinist does, for seven to nine years. You can’t make yourself into an actor in three to four years’⁷(28).

This remark touches on the issue of duration for actor training. The four years duration of study during which it is expected that an acting student in Nigeria should have effectively learnt enough skills, become physically and psychologically trained to respond to all demands of stage and screen, appears inadequate, just as the above opinion portrays. To provide adequate time is important, but proper management of the available period is more crucial. If all the time wasted on a number of avoidable problems, like industrial actions, multiple extracurricular activities, and misappropriation of lecture periods, can be judiciously utilized, then the problem of actor training will be drastically reduced.

Nevertheless, universities should draw practical examples from the Oriental and traditional African training durations. In respect of the Japanese Noh Theatre, Oscar Brockett writes: “The actors are trained from childhood and expect to devote twenty or more years to perfecting their craft” (266). In traditional Africa, performers also train from childhood, through participation, observation and apprenticeship in their cultural dances, songs, drumming, acrobatics, masquerading and others. They spend more than twenty years becoming experts. Because the universities cannot programme any candidate for the acting course, from childhood to a period of twenty years or more, indigenous African and the Oriental approaches – physical vigour, acrobaticism and agility, stylized bodily and vocal challenges, and complex imaginative creations – which students are more attuned to since childhood – should be intensified in the training sessions. This approach can help build the actor’s instrument artistically even for tasks that are more complex than the Western conventional methods can achieve.

The training techniques of some of the European actor trainers who have drawn heavily on the above Oriental and African training imperatives should also be encouraged in the ivory towers more than they are currently being exploited. Meyerhold’s “Bio mechanical techniques”, Michael Saint-Denis’, methods of “training the complete actor”, Jacques Copeau and his “quest for sincerity”, and others, too numerous to illustrate here, are examples. These instances are briefly enunciated

below: In Meyerhold's biomechanical training, the following illustration provides an idea of what transpires:

The actor seized his partner's body as it was stretched in the sun, threw it over his shoulder and carried it off. He dropped this body. He threw a discus and traced its imaginary course. He gave the partner a slap in the face, and received one back. He leaped on his partner's chest, and received him on his chest. He jumped onto his partner's shoulders, and his partner ran, carrying him ... (Leach 31-32)

The objectives of Meyerhold's design is to train the actor in "(1) balance (physical control.) (2) rhythmic awareness, both spatial and temporal; and (3) responsiveness to the partner, to the audience, to other external stimuli, especially through the ability to observe, to listen, and to react" (32). Meyerhold sought to make theatre, more 'theatrical'.

Michael Saint – Denis differed from his contemporaries like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Chekhov and Copeau, who were, with him, the early pioneers of European actor training. His training approach aimed to develop practitioners in each discipline (as Nigerian universities are currently doing): acting, directing, design, playwriting, and stage management. His schools functioned as embryonic theatre companies (Baldwin 81).

Saint-Denis' training techniques involved, "a physical approach in which the body is trained to become a fully expressive instrument and ... a more internal approach that might be termed realistic characterization" (81). This is described as a "holistic model"

Jacques Copeau taught his actors the practice of "discovering dramatic principles within oneself, embracing the naïve without intellectual reservation, developing an authenticity of gesture to emotional impulse" (51) These approaches were part of the methods he used in imparting the techniques of sincerity. Copeau pursued "a natural simplicity and spontaneity from his performer" through insistence on "well spoken text and a sense of collective playfulness..." (44).

To complement the preceding suggestions, theatre companies can be made more vibrant through financial support from government, NGOs and public spirited individuals. These bodies must consider this support a moral obligation, knowing that the theatre companies can alleviate unemployment problems, promote our culture, and serve pedagogic roles in the society. Considering the enormous and indispensable role of actors in sustaining the moral stability of the nation, government and philanthropists should not hesitate in searching for every minute avenue to promote the service of these actors. When theatre companies begin to vibrate and absorb student actors on industrial attachment, the efforts of the universities will be complemented towards ensuring effective actor training. Industrial attachment encourages job experiences, apprenticeship dividends and orientation to theatre entrepreneurship.

To enhance audience patronage of the live stage, which will sharpen the hope and zeal of actor trainees and make them serious in their studies, certain moves should be put in place. A new impetus should be injected into the praxis of life stage in Nigeria. This can be achieved by recognizing theatre's first and foremost potential as a stylized, entertaining, celebrative and festive art. These qualities must be highlighted and exploited in mobilizing more audience patronage rather than the realistic dramatization of every day experiences, overlaid with intellectual and moral concerns. The intellectual and moral issues should be given attention, but they should not becloud the celebrative and entertainment energy.

Furthermore, borrowing partly from the methods of Community Theatre and Yoruba Travelling Theatre models, the life stage should begin to “take theatre to the people”, with greater vigour and regularity. After all, the Home Movie takes theatre even to the bedrooms of its audience. With greater audience patronage, hopes of job opportunities will encourage actors in training, to settle down happily in the university and face their studies with more seriousness.

The problem of wrong public perception of actors, as it still lingers in the psyche of some people, can be conquered. For example, names of established actors the world over, especially in Nigeria, must continue to be cited. Such names will serve as encouraging role models for actor trainees and create impetus for sponsorship from patrons and guardians. Actors, since ancient ages, have distinguished themselves as national leaders, nobles, and famous personalities in various positions of the society.

Finally, the creation of a separate, one year post-degree, training school should be considered for specialization and final award of certificate. The sole responsibility of such an institution will be to ratify the actor’s expertise in the process of acting. The medical and law courses offer such programmes, which are respectively referred to as “Housemanship” or “Internship”, and the “Law School”. Given the exigency of ensuring effective actor-training in the ivory tower, acting teachers should be recruited from such a post-degree training institution.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to examine the possibilities of ensuring effective actor training in Nigeria’s university. In this exercise, the factors that impede this vision are outlined. This preliminary attention to the obstacles provides direction towards the suggestion of imperatives for actor training. These suggestions are proper management of resources, including the elements of time for training; and the exploitation of the Oriental, African and Western training models, which can impact on the physical and psychological instrument of the actor in training. Complementary approaches to the artistic and technical factors, such as greater encouragement for industrial attachment programme, enhancement of audience patronage, creation of extra one year training school, and others, are also suggested. Significantly, therefore, teachers of acting, and their students in the country’s institutions of higher learning, as well as university administration should harness these imperatives for ensuring quality and effective actor training.

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Teachers effectiveness: Imperative for implementing universal basic education (UBE) in Nigeria. Journal of the Nigerian Academy of Education, 1(1), 1-19. Meeting of Committee of Deans of Education in Nigerian Universities in Quality Assurance in Teacher Education. Esu, A. E. O., & Inyang-Abia, M. E. (2004). Social studies: Technologies, methods and media. Nigeria, officially the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is located in West Africa and shares land borders with the Republic of Benin in the west, Chad and Cameroon in the east, and Niger in the north. Its coast in the south lies on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. It is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world. Its oil reserves have brought great revenues to the country and is listed among the "Next Eleven" economies. Nigeria is a member of both the Commonwealth of Nations, and the African Union. Located in West Africa and named for The Chartered institute of personnel management of Nigeria is an institution established in 1968. Initially called Association for practitioners personnel management when newly established later renamed as Chartered institute of personnel management. This association gives out certificates to people who have successfully enrolled in their professional personnel management training programs thereby adding value to already certified and intending personnel managers. Who can participate? Holders of SSCE, ND, HND/BSC. Read Also: 10 Hottest Professional Courses needed in the Oil and Gas Industry. P Appendix B Nigerian Universities Federal Universities State Universities Private Universities. 51 51 51 52. Appendix C Sample Program Structures Appendix C1. Indigenous education in Nigeria existed long before the arrival of the Europeans. Often referred to as traditional or community-based education, it provides practical training to turn individuals into productive members of the society and serves the function of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another. It instills culturally accepted norms and values such as integrity, hospitality, respect for elders, self-reliance and hard work.