

THE AFRICA THEATRE ARTS SCHOLAR AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Towards the close of events of the twentieth century, the world started observing a gradual change in technology. As the curtain was about being drawn on this period in history, the entire world was looking into the problems and breakthroughs in all ramifications of life. The Africa Theatre Arts scholar is hereby being faced with how to cope with the technological invention which has brought improvement into the methods of research, knowing that, to be lukewarm may be suicidal to his progress and discipline. This paper adopting literature review looked at the Africa Theatre Arts scholar in the wake of the inherited development and problems of the twentieth century. It was revealed that the Africa theatre Arts scholar must get acquainted with the information communication technology (ICT) in order to be on the same pedestal with his counterparts in the developed nations, and also use his art to sensitize the people of the incurable nature of the inherited disease.

Keywords: *Africa theatre arts, scholar, challenges, development*

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century and its activities are gradually becoming history, but its memory in relations to achievements, breakthroughs and problems cannot be waved aside. It may probably be said that activities of the past centuries determine the set goals of the present period. If there are problems incurred from the past, finding solutions to these problems is one of the yardsticks that determine the survival and growth of the present; it also bemoans on the present to cope with, maintain and surpass the achievements and breakthroughs of the past for a better future. This is to attest to the claim that "the past promotes a great understanding of the present, and gives us a prognosis into the future." One of the major achievements of the twentieth century was the advancement information communication technology (ICT). This has necessitates various continents of the world (Africa inclusive) to design, build, and launch satellites; and companies and individuals to design websites and create e-mail boxes in order to move with the new invention. And for the Africa Theatre Arts scholar, it opens another channel of improvement in carrying out scholarly research.

However, a few of the other problems incurred are political instability and barbarity, and the emergent of several infectious diseases which are inimical to the human race. These infectious diseases emerged with deadly viruses such as Ebola and Hepatitis and the most dreaded being the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Ajayi - Vincent (2007) observed that "the leading cause of deaths in the twentieth century were the infectious diseases". Of all these infectious diseases however, HIV / AIDS remains a plagues which outright cure has been giving the medical world sleepless nights since the first case was reported in the early 80s. "Since it was reported sometimes in 1981, studies have shown that the epidemic has spread with rapacious speed and the fight against it though unabated" (Ajayi-Vincent 2007). All these problems and achievements undoubtedly were incurred from the last century, and therefore, the call to the Africa Theatre Arts scholar, to rise to these challenges is probably justified.

THE THEATRE ARTS DISCIPLINE

Taking a retrospective glance into the history of education in Africa, it may be right to say that the Theatre Arts started as a discipline at the University College, Ibadan, and the first citadel of higher education in the most populous black African nation. Therefore, what could be regarded as the foundation of the theatrical exploits of the Africa Theatre Arts scholar began at the University College, Ibadan. Kerr (1995) noted that "it started in 1956 with the arrival of two imaginative and enthusiastic expatriates- Martin Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy. "However, Adedokun (2001) claimed that" theatre study and practice began at the University of Ibadan as an extra-curricular activity in 1949 with Randal Hogart as the first producer". The difference in the dates of these schools of thought may likely generate controversy but what is not controversial is that many Theatre Arts scholars have emerged from the womb of this institution. There are Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ayo Akinwale, Mathew Umukoro, Zulu Sofola, Zikky Kofoworda to mention but a few.

The Theatre Arts as a discipline engrafts unto itself some of the contents of several other disciplines such as History, Physics, Social Studies, Literature, Religion and many more. The Africa Theatre Arts scholar is hereby faced with the task of dealing with these other disciplines which Theatre Art has brought into itself. It represents and also has the power to the rise up in the defense of these disciplines. Iji (2001) attests to this unique role of the Theatre Arts discipline when he asserts:

as the senior advocate of all the arts theatre is more than an ambassador plenipotentiary of all the arts. It is a reliable conscientizing advocate of the field of human drive... as Law, Economics, each of the social sciences, History ... it is a devoted father of literature, which it brings up and popularizes and religion, which it can adequately supplant but accommodates.

This assertion classified the Theatre Arts as an acrobatic discipline that summersaults into others for the fulfillment, enhancement and consolidation of its own. The practice of this discipline is however more effective when combined with these other disciplines that are related to it.

THE THEATRE ARTS SCHOLAR

A scholar is someone who knows a lot about a particular subject especially, one that is not a science subject. Thus, the Theatre Arts scholar is someone who is versed in the knowledge of theatre as a discipline. He is an agent of change and development who has the professional capacity to carry out campaigns on the ill of the society and also proffers solutions. However, the ephemeral nature of his arts and the bias attitudes of the people towards his discipline have made his social impacts to be less appreciated, albeit theatre remains a veritable and credible medium for propagating and enthroneing a culture of peace in the world. It was Heget (1927) who looking around the world, observed the "we live not in a primeval pure world, but in a world that is known and has been transformed, a world, where everything has, as it were, been given a human angle, a world permeated with our attitudes towards it, our needs, ideas, aims ideals joy and sufferings, a world that is part of the vortex of our existence."

The Africa Theatre Arts scholar is also part of this world so, he picks out the significant incidents from the chaos of daily happenings, and arranges them sequentially so that their relations to one another become significant, thus changing us from bewildered spectators of a monstrous confusion to men intelligently conscious of the world and its destinies. This is possible because he has learnt to use his arts for the benefit, growth and development of his society. This societal role of the Theatre Arts scholar may however not be enough for his assessment prior to his promotion as he is always called upon like his colleagues in the other disciplines to present papers at seminars and conferences. Why? It is simply because the appointment and promotion committee are ignorant of the fact that the commitment and rigour in realizing a play, designing or creating a dance, is equivalent if not more than putting a paper together. Though Edde (2004) believes "a theatre artist has a lot to give, because a lot more has been given to him through his training and education as a man or woman". Umukoro's (2001) observation of the predicament of the theatre artist in academia is the prim summary of this aspect of our discussion. He explains comprehensively that:

the ephemeral nature of his arts has serious implications for the performing artist in academia that is always called upon like his fellow scholars in other disciplines, to present the permanent fruits of his scholarship for the mandatory ritual of assessment prior to promotion. The playwright... at least has the text of his works to present, while the visual artist can make his drawings and paintings available for evaluation. But, what does the director, the designer, the actor, the dancer, the musician, or the theatre manager have to offer the appointment and promotion committee? Yet, a single, well conceived production in any of those arts of the theatre is equivalent to a solid academic publication.

Umukoro's observation above reveals the dilemma of the Africa Theatre Arts scholar in his discipline. Suffice it to say that apart from his scholarship, he is also endowed with the artistic abilities to create and co-ordinate into an organic unit a theatrical performance called production. This is an edge which his profession has above those of other scholars.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

It is unfortunate to comment that, almost a decade into the twenty-first century the bug of computer literacy is yet to fully bite the Africa Theatre Arts scholar. Attributing this deficiency to the Theatre Arts scholars may probably be unfair as the issue of information communication technology affects most scholars in various disciplines; suffice it to say that the effects of technological development on research is still minimal in Africa especially in our higher institutions of learning. In one of the editorial columns of the Daily Sun (2005) it was reported "Africa's Universities are nowhere yet in terms of their global competitiveness and their responses to the specific issue of research and scholarship which embody the University idea." It is sad to note that among world universities, Africa still lagged behind in Information Communication Technology.

A breakdown of the reports shows that "... Africa's top seven are to be found in South Africa and the best of them, University of Cape Town ranking 257th in the world. The American University, Cairo, Egypt which ranks eight on the continent, comes to a distant 1,526th position in the global rating. Interestingly, Nigeria's best... the University of Ibadan ranked

59th in Africa, actually comes to 6, 320th in the world", it is worthy to note that some of the criteria employed in the rankings included research output, measured by citations of published articles of staff in subject category." This is an open challenge to the Africa Theatre Arts Scholar who wants to remain relevant in the academic world. Before the advent of the computer, the location of library materials followed one of the two systems of classification - the Dewey Decimal Systems (DDS) or the Library of Congress System (LCS). These systems aid scholars and students to find books, and also get familiar with the contents from their call numbers (Gibaldi, 1996). However the computer has brought improvement into these old systems. It has brought along, system as: the Online Catalogue (OC) and the Database. Thus the research methodologies are being widened by this technological development. The computer stored catalogue has induced scholars to initiate more sophisticated searches, such as by key word or subject. A lot of work can be called up by checking on the main word or the word. These systems contain various categories of books, serials, audio-visuals materials and commonly incorporate a number of bibliographic databases which could be useful to scholars.

The Information Communication Technology (ICT) makes it possible for scholars to use a central information system, even if they are not available in the library. But, with a computer system and a modern telephone hook-up, a scholar is able to access information on the system from any location. The challenge here is, can the Africa Theatre Arts scholar afford the affordable prices of a desk-top computer or a laptop? If we consider the importance and contributions of information technology to the Theatre Artist in academia, the challenges here could be through practice and research. The latter is the activity of finding information about something that one is interested in, or a serious study of a subject that is intended to discover new facts while practices is a regular activity that we do in order to improve a skill. The Africa Theatre Arts scholar is bound to face challenges when in search for up-to-date information on his research topic.

It is not an overstatement to say that the various website on the international network (internet) contain facts and opinion of scholars on

various topical issues that may interest any researcher. In order to have a seasoned discussion of this aspect of the challenges it may be necessary to look at communication which could be regarded as the major factor behind the invention of the computer. Charles (1974) gives an embracing definition of communication as:

the mechanism through which human relation exist and develop by using all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time. It includes the expression of the face, attitude and gesture, the tones of the voice, words, writing, printing, railways, telegrams, telegrams, telephones and whatever else that may be the latest achievement in the conquest of space and time.

Although this definition lacks depth for not mentioning feedback which is the last stage of the communication circle, however, it contains in summary some of the functions of the computer. It is also worthy to note that if there was a recent edition of this book Charles Horton would have mentioned the computer as the latest achievement in the conquest of space and time. The complete circle of communication connotes that there should be the coder, the message, and, the decoder who gives the coder feedback in order to ascertain that he receives the coded message.

It has been mentioned in the forgoing that there is enough cogent information on various website to enhance researchers' studies in this part of the world. Is it not therefore necessary to ask whither the Africa Theatre Arts scholar is the snail speed with which the continent is approaching the issue of Information Communication Technology (ICT) the Nation on Monday October 16, 2006 reports on one of its pages "Africa nearer to getting own ICT4D plans". However, the story under this headline is not palatable. It states that "While Africa desire to have its economy leapfrog using ICTs, much of the steps taken to achieve this have either been false or completely far from hitting the mark. As a recent report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) shows, Africa state of e-readiness has remained extremely low." Another major challenge facing the Theatre Arts scholar, in the twenty-first century is the HIV/AIDS epidemics that are spreading in the African continent at an alarming rate. This disease is so dangerous and has no respect for age or sex, tribe or

colour. It was initially Misconceived that the HIV virus which causes AIDS was only transmitted through sexual intercourse, however, as more knowledge is gained concerning the disease and how to combat the spread, "it is discovered that even the fetus in its mother's womb is not safe" (Buni, 2006).

Considering one of the publications by the Nigerian Red Cross on the HIV/AIDS and children, one will deduce that on one is immune against this Killer disease. The statistic according to the Africa Red Cross shows that already 1.8 million children are now orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. It goes further to say that over 17,600 women become pregnant among whom about 1,000 are HIV/AIDS positive (The Nation, 2006) It is necessary to add here that there have been effects by agencies, schools, governmental and non-governmental organizations to fight this dreaded disease. Daily Champion of Wednesday September 14, 2005 carries a caption on one if its pages-"it reports that the Federal University of Technology, Yola is to collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Adamawa State to check the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS scourge. "Due to the escalating rate at which it is spreading governments and medical experts have not ceased to call on necessary quarters to give adequate information on the disease.

The Punch on Friday, September 22, 2006 report that Modupe Oduwale (a medical Practitioner) has urged media practitioners to report HIV/AIDS as a social service because information is the only potent weapon against the syndrome. "In a related development, Daily Champion of Wednesday, September 14, 2005, reports that "Mr. Femi Olabode the project director of Child Mission Charity Organization has urged the government to pass without further delay the bill on discrimination against HIV/AIDS, patients into law. Despite the fact that there is no outright cure for HIV/AIDS the story in the Sunday Champion of May 21, 2006, could be a respite to those living with this dreadful disease. The paper reports that "there is currently no cure for HIV infection and viable vaccine candidates are still in the making, However, the development of life-saving antiretroviral drug have brought new hope for persons living with the disease... combination of antiretroviral drugs have extended by even

20 years and also improves lives for large numbers of people living with HIV/AIDS. This has transferred perceptions HIV/AIDS from a fatal disease to a manageable illness". The Africa theatre arts scholar is also not immune against the disease and therefore should use his art to create awareness and also sensitize the people of the deadly nature, and the efforts of the entire world to find a cure. This is the challenge posed by this syndrome to the Africa Theatre Arts scholar in this century.

CONCLUSION

It has been established in the forgoing that the advent of computer and websites has brought improvement into the methods of research. The major challenge facing the Africa Theatre Arts scholar is that of adequate research source of information and facts and opinions that are up-to-date, modern methods for proper documentation of works and theatrical performances research reports, critiques, review of productions/ books, as well as audio and video records of stage productions that, are of historical and academic value. Brown (1974) sees communication as "the capacity of an individual (or group) to pass on his (or its) feeling and ideas to another individuals (or groups)." Suffice to say that if the Africa Theatre Art scholar could browse the internet for information on his research work, is it not wise, proper and necessary that the outside world should be able to seek information from his continent via the internet since his continent is not barren of literary information. But he is bedeviled with a culturally inherited hazard to the complete circle of communication. He finds himself in a continent where there is the problem of unrecorded past and present important events in a permanent mode which couple with the inability for simultaneous transmission of messages to a wider audience.

According to Umukoro (2001) "where there has been proper documentation of creative work in performance, all that the performing artist has to show for his creativity is his well arranged portfolio, covering the various stages of artistic growth from preliminary research to critical review" which could be put on a website for others consumption. Cohen (2002) observes the theatre as a weapon in a "strong position to force and focus public confrontation with social issues and at its best it

succeeds in bringing the audience into touch with its own thought and feelings about those issue." With Cohen's observation of the theatre as a veritable tool of awareness, it does become a challenge for the Africa theatre Arts scholar to use his weapon to inform and sensitize the people of the nature of HIV/AIDS as regards its sources of infection, management and treatment. The prophet Hosea says "my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Holy Bible)The Africa Theatre Arts scholar should use his are to enhance the knowledge of the people as regards HIV/AIDS since a man's freedom is actually a function of his knowledge.

Moreover, the issue of documentation remains an important criterion to the Theatre discipline. Umukoro (2001) buttresses this fact when he reiterates that "careful documentation aimed at fulfilling the adequate academic promotion." The Africa Theatre Arts scholar should brace up in order to cope with the demand of the 'global village'.

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