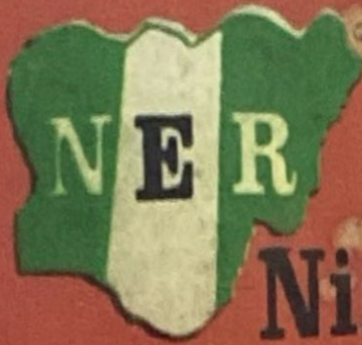




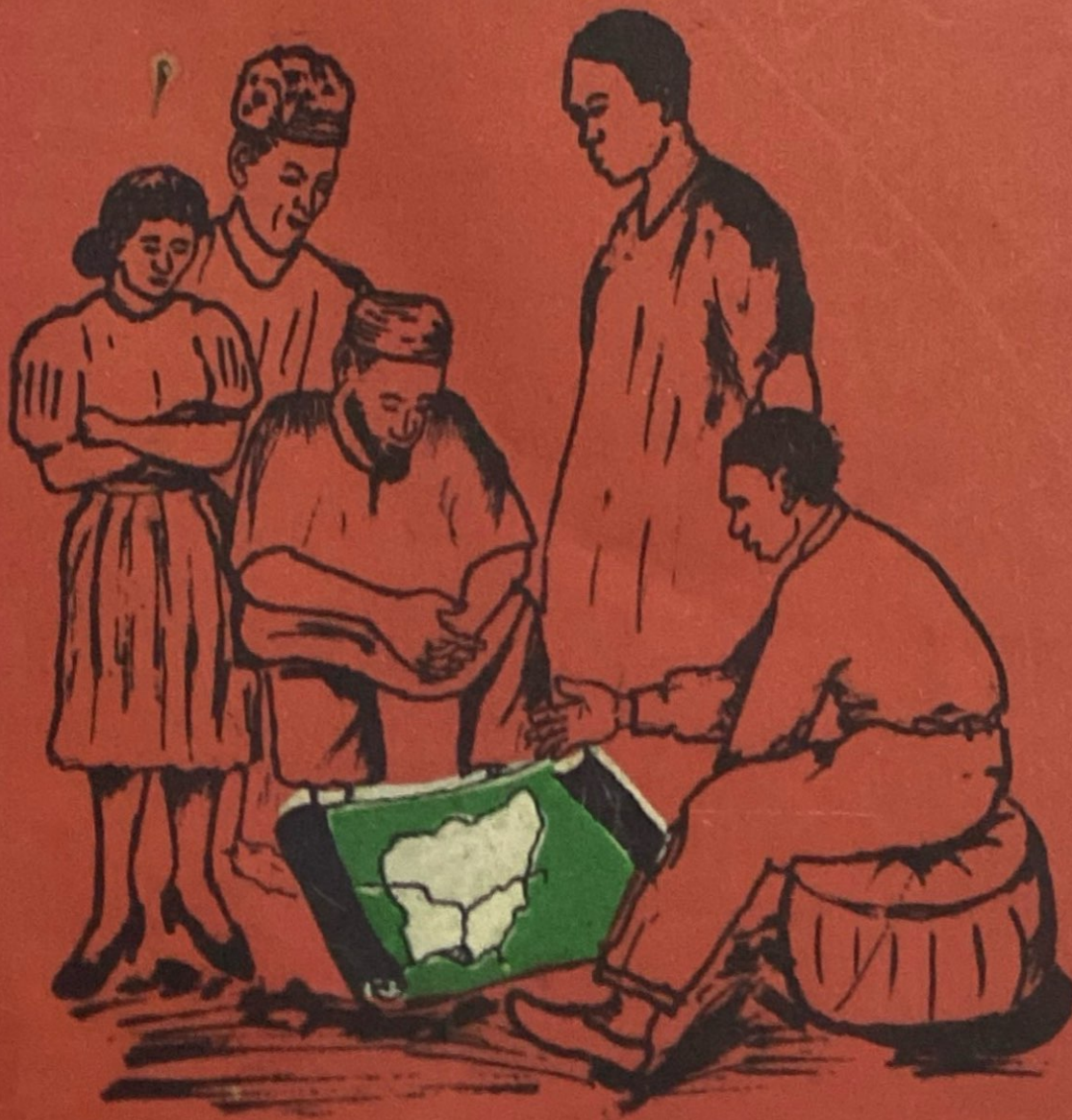
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RE-ENGINEERING EDUCATIONAL THEATRE: PUBLICITY AS A PANACEA

By

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ABSTRACT

The Theatre has been defined (Brockett 2000) and its functions discussed. Within the Theatre field is Educational Theatre which performs the dual functions of training and producing Theatre Arts graduates. The prevalent technological advancement makes it imperative for educational Theatre to change. This paper highlights the place and importance of publicity in educational theatre within the Nigeria context. There is a discussion of the functions and effective deployment of publicity as a means of elevating the standard of educational theatre.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, educational theatre has been known and popular for her statutory role of producing theatre Arts graduates. However, in the new millennium specifically, there is an upsurge in technological advance in various fields and aspects of human existence. Competition has therefore become stiffer and keener. It is then of paramount importance that educational theater go beyond her unitary role by adopting new approaches and strategies in order to remain viable. This will also enable her products meet new challenges in the larger society. Furthermore, they will also be able to compete favourably with specialists/professionals in other disciplines and also make indelible marks in the course of history.

Based on this premise, this paper set out to examine and highlight the place of "Publicity" in educational theatre in the Nigeria context. It will also look at the functions and importance of publicity and how it can be effectively employed to promote educational theatre so as to remain on board among growing rivalry. Publicity in the theatre is traceable to the very beginnings of formal theatre in ancient Greece. Famous Pissistratus is noted for his reformatations and reorganization of the City

Dionysian in 534 B.C in the 6th century. Part of the publicity given to this religious festival include, introduction of competition, making it is national festival, providing financiers, (that is choragus) prizes and awards. These made the festival a much celebrated one in the entire nation of Greece. Theatrical performances were staged and watched by an audience due to the prominence and recognition of the festival through publicity. Ever since then publicity has become an integral aspect of Theatre productions. Publicity as defined by Stanley (1977: 249) is news or information about a product, service or idea that is published on behalf of a sponsor but is not paid for by the sponsor. In the same vein, Clifford (1972:136) sees publicity as that activity whose aim is the promulgation of information to the public with the intention of influencing opinion and conduct. In both definitions, information is a key word. This information is however intended for an individual or group of persons outside the original group, in order to influence decision and attitude in favour of a product or service. In his own study Majaro (1977:167) examines thoroughly the premises of publicity. He noted that publicity is a stimulated motivation to patronize a product. In other words, without publicity, the product will remain unknown to the public and consequently there will be no demand for it.

Publicity in the arts is a specialised field and it is a major aspect of the theatre profession (Iwenya 1991:12) publicity in the theatre is solely to inform the public about a play to be staged and to convince them to be an audience during the production. A theatrical production is more difficult to sell than other products. This is because, theatrical productions cannot be qualified rather, it is qualitative. As of the time of publicity, it is a good that cannot be seen until its performance. Having defined a key term in this paper, we should go further by defining the other term Educational Theatre and discuss its emergence.

Emergence of Educational Theatre

The innovation of arts of the Theatre, originated from the Western countries, notably Greece, but it was not listed as an academic course or programme. Educational Theatre was birthed in the United States of America in the 20th century. It was the invention of a theatre artist and educationalist, known as George Baker. As an English Lecturer in Harvard University, he taught play writing and later developed a workshop known as '47 workshop', where he introduced play productions. Students were encouraged to produce plays written in the playwriting class and by so doing all aspects of the theatre such as acting, music, dance, mime and so on, were

directly or indirectly included. In effect, George Baker produced many professional playwrights who also taught in other tertiary institutions spreading the gospel like wild fire. In 1925, he transferred to Yale University where he started a postgraduate course in theatre the first of its kind.

Origin of Educational Theatre in Nigeria

The birth of educational Theatre in Nigeria is associated with the University of Ibadan. One of the disciples of George Baker known as Geoffrey Axworthy was a lecturer in the Department of English in 1964 in the then University College, now University of Ibadan. However, before his arrival a theatre hall has already been built in 1954 though there was no Department of Theatre Arts or drama. Then, it was mainly used by the institution for concerts or drama productions of the already established University of Ibadan dramatic arts group/musical group. These group was made up of both students and lecturers of the institution.

Geoffrey Axworthy started the study of drama in extra mural classes under the auspices of Extra Moral department in the faculty of Education. He produced a lot of plays through his workshop classes. Later he introduced the school of drama under the department of English and this was the first in Africa in 1962/63. The Rock Feller foundation of America gave a grant of a quarter of a million dollars for the take off of the school of drama. Among other things, Axworthy also introduced University Community Theatre and Theatre on the wheel. Students under his tutelage include Kola Ogúnmla (first product) and Sunbo Marinho. Foundation teachers of the school of drama are. Egun Clark, Prof. Adedeji, Wole Soyinka, Mrs. Ajayi Dexter Lindersay, and Darny Mokwat (later married to Dexter) The first production of the school of drama was Ogúnmla's Palmwine Drunkard written by Amos Tutuola.

The school of drama later became a full fledge Department of Theatre Arts, and it is was from here that other tertiary institutions tapped from a as their source. The next institution to establish school of drama was Jos; it was then a campus of university of Ibadan and the department of Theatre Arts University of Ibadan is the founding father of university of Jos school of drama sprung up in other institution years later, after Jos under various names like, Theatre Arts, Dramatic Arts and performing Arts. The fire kept on spreading even recent times and other tertiary institutions such as, Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and State Universities.

After tracing the emergence of Educational Theatre in the West and in Nigeria, the question is what is the relationship between Publicity and Educational Theatre?

Publicity and Educational Theatre

Educational Theatre's main concern is to train theatre graduates. As a subject in the curriculum it is an art form designed for development and creativity of basic skills of communication and creativity of basic skills of communication and expression through the mind, body and voice. The role of Educational Theatre could be summed up as:

- Medium for appreciating cultural and creative arts.
- Improvement of participants through classes, rehearsals and practicals
- Developing skills of communication
- Expression of other arts such as, music, literature, dance etc. through the mind body and voice.
- Production of professionals and experts using the acquired skills as a source of livelihood.

For educational theatre to perform the above roles, publicity has a crucial role to play. Over the years, the principles of publicity has been handled with great levity. It is even regarded as needed only in commercial theatres, primarily initiated for profit making. This has in no little way affected the dwindling popularity of Educational Theatre. However, publicity, if seen as the nucleus in the activities of educational theatre will lead to a revolution and positive changes in the system. What then are the functions of publicity in Education Theatre?

Functions of Publicity in the Theatre

The function of publicity in Education Theatre includes:

Information

Clifford (1972:137) submits that publicity is the vehicle for propagation of information. This information is intended for the public with the ultimate aims of providing audience for the Theatre. The immediate environment of educational theatre is the tertiary institution where it is established. The people in this constituency are, students, lecturers, non academic staff and dependants. Inclusive is the society in which the institution is established as well as the larger society. Here, the first function of publicity is the creation of awareness through adequate information of programme

and activities. Part of the information to be disseminated about educational theatre are, existence, importance, relevance, contributions and impact in that society.

Persuasion

It is not enough to inform the society as identified above. The aim of information is targeted at persuasion. Individuals must be persuaded and convinced to attend productions. All the various arts of the theatre are given full expression during a theatrical production. This cycle cannot be complete without an audience to watch the performance. This is because, audience response and feedback is essential in most cases in appraising a production. Educational theatre has an already made crowd from which her audience is drawn. It is only the activity of publicity that can coinscientize and persuades audience to the theatre.

Finance

Formerly the funding of educational theatre was the sole responsibility of the government through subventions. However, in recent times it has become an arduous task given the biting economic situation in the country. Though the box office is not usually the main source of finance in educational theatre, (since it is not a profit oriented enterprise) yet it could serve as a subsidy. By providing audience, publicity is indirectly opening up other channels of financing educational theatre.

Public Image

The image of educational theatre could be enhanced through publicity. It could help re-orientate the theatre in the society where it exist and also open up new doors of opportunity. More so, the public will constantly be reminded and be in constant touch with activities. It could motivate certain individuals into taking certain actions or steps that will benefit educational theatre, either in policy making or recognition. Also, constant and future patronage is ensured via publicity.

Factors affecting Publicity in Educational Theatre

As earlier stated, educational theatre exists in an academic institution. The underlisted are some factors militating against publicity in an educational theatre.

- Academic Calendar
- Lecture time table
- Social activities

- Hostel accommodation
- Finance
- Societal prejudice
- Inconsistency in activities
- Uncertainty
- Lack of personnel

Academic Calendar

This the order which any academic semester/session is to take. Usually, lecturers are to last for twelve (12) weeks revision two (2) weeks and examination two (2) weeks. It has however been discovered that this order is not strictly adhered to. Contingencies arise and in the bid to meet up, a lot of alterations and adjustments are made which affect the longevity of the school calendar. This is a major disadvantage to educational theatre where students have to attend lectures in other Departments and also feature in class/departmental productions. Departmental activities also become a 'rush-rush' affair in order to comply with the academic calendar. By so doing little or no attention is paid to publicity due to the amputated time.

Lecture Timetable

The schedule of lectures run into evenings in most departments. It is also this same evening that has been set aside by educational theatre for rehearsals of oncoming productions. Students therefore have very tight schedules, which make it impossible for them to be involved in any publicity drive.

Social Activities

In recent times, the theatre has to content with stiff competition with other rival modes of entertainment, more prominent in educational institutions. They include, television, film, musical shows, religious activities etc; all of which normally feature at the same time with theatrical productions. More so, audience for all these forms of entertainment are drawn from within the same sphere or radius.

Hostel Accommodation

Due to population explosion of students in most tertiary institutions, hostel accommodation no longer meet the skyrocketed demand. Institutions that do not have enough of such facilities or none at all, find it very difficult to embark on such prospects because it is capital intensive. So, students are left with an only option of

staying 'off campus' at certain levels like 2nd and 3rd levels or throughout the duration of their study. Bearing in mind that the audience for educational theatre comes from her immediate environment, publicity demands might not be met and so will not be adequately rewarded.

Finance

Lack of funds from the government through subventions, grants and subsidy has caused a major handicap for publicity in educational theatre. There is often a repetition of the forms of publicity adopted e.g. posters, handbills, public address system, carnival etc as a result of the meagre disbursement of fund. This in turn affect innovations and creativity in publicity.

Societal Prejudice

The unfavourable disposition of the society at large to theatre practice is an age they long issue that rubs off on every generation. This attitude to the theatre, have posed a threat to her existence, survival and success in no little measure. In effect, the prejudiced portions of the society, which also include students, are hardly ever moved to watch performance, even when there is good publicity.

Inconsistency in Educational Theatre Programme

Lack of consistency in educational theatre activities or productions keep away prospective audience, especially when the time lag is too long. Unlike community, theatre most educational theatre does not have a programme of events spanning the semester/session, which could aid audience, build up. The long intervals between productions enable the audience to develop interest in other areas of entertainment. The implication is that publicity process must always start all over, information whenever there is a production instead of reminding subsequently.

Uncertainty

The country as a whole is over ridden by a lot of uncertainties. Crisis, strikes, disorder and anarchy have become the order of the day. These at times have to be curbed by the declaration of security beef up, restrained movement or other forms of sanctions, which adversely disrupt the school academic calendar. This takes its toll on educational theatre given the sudden closure of institutions. There might have been good publicity for the theatre, only to be stopped abruptly by closure and then start all over when re-opened.

Lack of Theatre Personnel

Since educational theatre survives on grants and subsidy, it becomes impossible to employ the needed personnel to boost publicity, such as publicity director/public relation officer. Often times, students are saddled with the responsibility of the publicity director despite their little or no experience. The amateur handling of this important phase affect the total outcome of publicity. After an assessment of the factors affecting publicity in educational theatre, it is pertinent for us to give suggestions that will enhance publicity in Educational Theater.

Suggestions for good publicity in Educational Theatre

The followings are steps that could be taken to ensure good publicity in Educational Theatre.

- Planning
- Communication
- Public Relations
- Knowledge of environment

Planning

Planning is very essential in publicity. According to Nwosu (1997:13) "it is deciding in the present how to use resources in the future". It involves a foresight of likely problems to arise in the future and making advanced decisions about the formulation of a good directed programme. A close relationship exist between plans and objectives. Planning activities must be goal oriented because the goals determines plans and plans are a means of reaching goals.

Educational Theatre could embark on short, intermediate or long range plans as it suits the institution. Publicity plan should include publicity objectives, targets, budget, media possibilities, schedule of activities and events, with news value and means of measuring the result of publicity, planning for publicity must entail the following characteristics:

- relevance to news items
- guide to the achievement of publicity objectives
- practical
- executed with financial and human resources of the theatre
- completed and detailed
- anticipate emergencies and make provisions

- sharing authority and responsibility
- clarity of scheduled activities
- fixing costs to each phase of the plan
- proper coordination

Documentation to ensure focus and interpretation planning in publicity ensures thorough thinking by the management to sharpen its objectives, strategies and policies. It encourages the development of performance standards. It also lead to better coordination of finance, human and productive resources. Above all, it prepares educational theatre to meet sudden change in her internal and external environment.

Communication

Communication according to Adeniyi (2003:7) can be described as a process by which thought is transferred from a person (s) to another person (s). Also, Communication is the act of relaying news or information to an "individual or group of people. It is not enough to communicate but to communicate effectively. Educational theatre publicists with good communication skills tend to motivate people at all levels both within and without her immediate environment. Six steps are important for effective communication.

- Knowledge of the purpose, message and strategy
- Overcoming barriers
- Selecting the appropriate type of communication
- Identifying the target audience
- Transmitting the message
- Obtaining feedback

Samovar and porter (1993:viii) asserts that communication is a social activity; it is something people do with and to each other. While the activity might begin in our heads, it is manifested in our behaviours...

In communication, words, signs and symbols are used. Words used in publicity must be clear, correct and concise to avoid confusion in the minds of prospective audience. Communication in publicity should answer such questions like what, when, where and how? It is beneficial to repeat publicity message over and over again. By so doing continuity of impression is developed in the minds of the public. It is more difficult to retain an information when repetition is absent.

Also, the communication signs and symbols adopted in form of publicity, such as colour, size, shape etc must be understood by the public. It is the ability of the public

to decode the message that makes communication effective. Therefore, each educational theatre must study and know acceptable coded language of the society in which they exist. This implies that the means of communication must be understood and accepted by both educational theatres its immediate environment. Publicity is a channel of information to communicate with the public effectively on the activities, productions and services of educational theatre.

Public Relations

Publicity either succeeds in attracting audience to the theatre or it does not. Educational theatre should see it as a continuous endeavour. Stanley (1977:248) says:

Public relations is a state of being.....Publicity and institutional advertising are major promotional tools that can be used in the public relations program....

This implies that even after a production is sold out, publicity must continue in order to improve the image of the theatre in the public for future events. Public relations is the tool required for the projection of the image of a person, group or organisation to the larger public. Educational theatre needs to be on the right side and in the good books of the public. This can be achieved by good and constant rapport with the print and non-print media. These are the electronic media, such as, television and radio, and the print media like newspapers, magazines etc. It will be a Herculean task for an educational theatre to employ the services of a public relations officer due to financial constraints, yet it could achieve as much and even more than such a personnel would. A channel of doing this is by presenting quality and standard productions on a regular basis. Another way is by always intimating the public of events and activities of the theatre. Educational theatre could also make provision for gift items, especially for special occasions like award nights, founder's day, graduation, matriculation etc. such events could serve as opportunities to appreciate the loyal patronage of the audience. A step could be further taken by designing special programmes to address the needs of the people in her immediate environment, suggest solutions and ensure implementation.

Knowledge of Environment

For publicity to be successful in an educational theatre it must take into consideration the behavioural pattern of the people in her immediate environment. Thing to consider are, cultural values and heritage, belief system, level of education, status, needs,

areas of interests etc. a detailed knowledge of the people exposes all aspects of their lives to the publicity director who is able to reach them in the most appropriate way.

The behavioural pattern of the public to theatrical productions must also be noted, because it has effects on the turn out of audience at productions. Also educational theatre must look into the public's perception, motivation, personality, role, significance, relevance and value. This will enable her to identify with their needs, problems, aspirations and success. On the other hand, the society will develop a sense of belonging to the institutionalized theatre and will not see it as irrelevant. Furthermore, Educational Theatre will be able to gear some of her productions towards promoting the society's way of life, that is, culture, religion, dressing, language etc.

Conclusion

For any individual, group or organisation to sell their products or services, close attention must be paid to publicity. In this wise, the theatre is not left out, especially educational theatre, which has been the focus of this discussion. It is not enough that educational theatre should be contented with the audience she pulls to the theatre. There is the need to re-activate her effort in publicity because her products are intangible. This requires push, drive and innovations in publicity approach.

Apart from performing its functions of information, persuasion, funding and public image publicity could also achieve the followings:

Increase in box office sales

- enlightenment
- awareness
- encourage competition
- preference
- familiarization
- precipitation
- stimulation
- consistency
- reminding
- re-enforcement
- spreading news

Through the creation of awareness, the public is enlightened and motivated to choose among other alternatives, visit the theatre. There is also constant reminding through constant spread of news, which allows for familiarity between educational theatre and the public. It is believed that if the prescribed measures are followed, vibrancy will return once more to educational theatre.

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