

Newspaper Reportage of Theatre Performance in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines Nigerian newspaper reportage of live theatre production in Nigeria. The study adopted content analysis to examine the content of newspaper stories on theatre performance in Nigeria. A total of three newspapers namely New Telegraph, The Guardian and National Mirror were purposively selected based on their national coverage. Semi-structured interviews were also held to augment newspaper stories selected. The researcher was only interested in newspaper art columns which feature different art genres such as drama, movie (film, television), festivals, dance, book review, culture (celebrations, revue), media, music, visual arts, stand-up comedy, and other related genres. Overall, the result showed very scant reportage of live theatre productions in the national dailies during the period of study when compared to other genres of entertainment, like music video and film in the country. The study also identifies the factors inhibiting the reportage of theatre performances and advances possible solutions to them.

Keywords: Newspaper, Reportage, Theatre, Performance, Nigeria

Introduction

Over the years, efforts have been made to revitalize live theatre practice in Nigeria leading to conferences and scholarly publications. These efforts however, have proved inadequate or ineffectual. A closer observation has shown that, other equally important ways of addressing this problem are neglected. One of the ways is through sustained media reportage of live theatre performances. In the past, media reportage of live theatre performances played a vital role in the promotion of theatre in Nigeria. The case of Hubert Ogunde and his contemporaries is an example. However, this very crucial aspect which contributes to the live wire of theatre has nearly vanished. Consequently, there is dearth of reportage of live theatre performances. Stage performance no longer sparks public interest and discussions on the pages of our national dailies, instead, the spaces have been taken over by other performance genre.

The concept of mass media is very wide, embracing the print, electronic and the Internet media. Thus, examining all of this will amount to a scope and volume too large for a study like

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this. Consequently, this paper focuses on the print media, particularly Nigerian Newspapers, which is more accessible, durable and patronised as reference materials. Even the print media alone comprises newspapers too numerous to sample all.

To prosecute this study, the researcher deployed the Agenda-Setting. Agenda-setting theory holds that the media; most especially the news media, dictate what issues (agenda) to be considered most important by the society. The brain behind media agenda setting is attributed to Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which opened with a chapter captioned “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads (Lippmann 1922,p.29). Lippmann had argued that the agenda of issues or other objects presented by the news media influence what the pictures in our heads are about. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. McCombs and Shaw studied voters at Chapel Hill Community North Carolina, United States of America and reported that the editors, in choosing and displaying news, pictures, etc, play an important role in shaping public reality. Cohen (1963,p. 13) avers that the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Scholars (Folarin. 2005; McQuail, 2005; McCombs, 1993,2005; Nwodu, 2007; Ukonu, 2011) argue that agenda setting theory position the media as capable of shaping public discourse. This theory is relevant to the current study because it provides the framework for understanding the power of the media in projecting theatre performance to the general public.

Material and Methods

This study adopted content analysis to examine the content of newspaper stories on theatre performance in Nigeria. A total of three newspapers namely *New Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *National Mirror* were purposively selected based on their national coverage. The researcher was only interested in newspaper art columns. Usually, newspaper art columns feature different art genres such as drama, movie (film, television), festivals, dance, book review, culture (celebrations, revue), media, music, visual arts, stand-up comedy, and other related genres. Therefore, the researcher was interested in the art columns because theatre performance stories are likely to be reported on that segment. The study covered a period of February to October, 2015. To sample the editions of the newspapers, the researcher used the continuous sampling approach to selected all the stories within the duration. In the analysis of data for the study, the researcher analysed based on the individual newspapers.

Data Presentation

Among all the editions selected, only Forty-Seven (47) editions had stories on arts related issues. This is analysed thus:

NEW TELEGRAPH: On its June 13 2015 edition, the paper had only one page Arts coverage (Page 18) that it dedicated only to discussing the unique music creativity of a Nigerian artiste. On page 20 of its July 22 2015 edition, it featured book review that discussed issues in contemporary Nigerian Art. On September 11 2015, it had two pages of arts reportage, one page was dedicated to report of culture of a community; half a page discussed art exhibitions in

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Diaspora and the remaining half page focused on film festival. On June 12 2015, the paper had three pages of art columns; one page was dedicated to discussing the proposed additional infrastructural development of the National Arts Theatre. The second page featured an interview with television soap producer, while the third page was another interview on reading culture among children. On Saturday June 13 2015, the only Arts page celebrated paintings. Besides the arts one page are four pages of what is called ‘ShowBiz’ dedicated to music, and movies. On September 4 2015, out of three art pages, one page was devoted to celebrating the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, and discussing events that took place in a night for his honour. According to Tony Okuyeme, the Arts Editor and author of the story:

The evening was remarkably special not just for musical, literary and stage performances by renowned artistes, but for the fact that it was also a celebration of three young Nigerian literary stars.....the performances and other activities were preceded with cocktail and dance performances.....it began with an excerpt from Soyinka’s latest play, *AlapataApata*, a pulsating satire performed by the Bolanle Austen-Peters production (17).

The remaining two pages discussed personality and music. The September 12, 2015 edition of the paper has one art page devoted to paintings while the usual five pages of ShowBiz entertainment idolized music makers, Nollywood actors and actresses. The only page of September 16, 2015 edition was covered with a Book Review. On September 18, 2015, out of the two arts pages, one page discussed the culture of a community in Ondo State while the second page was an interview with an art collector and culture promoter. Again the *New Telegraph* did a splash on culture promotion of the Igbo New Yam festival at Transcorp Hilton celebration and another on the Yoruba Ifa festival and a news story on music summit. The third page did a reportage of music and arts event to be held at MUSON centre Lagos. On its three arts pages of October 2 2015, the paper feature stories on Nigerian gallery of arts, Bongo music festival in Imo, promotion of a radio station and a book review. The above submission is captured in the table below;

Table i: *New Telegraph* Review: Between June & October 2015

Genres	Number of Stories	Space Allotted
Music	6	8 pages
Book Review	3	2 and a half pages
Drama	1	1 page
Culture	4	3 pages
Visual Arts	6	5 pages
Film/Movie	3	5 and a half pages
Others	2	3 and a half pages

The next newspaper to be examined is *The Guardian*. This newspaper in its Sunday Art Magazine presents celebrities, Film (mostly Nollywood), Revue, literature, Theatre, Visual arts, heritage, Art House and much more. On its June 21, 2015 edition, ten pages of art discussions were presented. A garland for Actress, Mrs. Taiwo Ajai-lycett, was celebrated in three colourful pages. One page was for Nollywood. On literature page is reportage with stage pictorial story of how the award winning actress and culture producer, Bikiya Graham-Douglas, performed *Wait* at Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin, Ireland. According to the author of the story, the show was performed “to give a voice to African women and restate the importance of education, as a defining agency of women empowerment” (31).

On another page it reproduces a story on stage dance and its potential as a tool for information, education and entertainment. It equally splashed a stage picture to embellish the story. Visual arts treated Prince Yemisi Shyllon’s rescue mission for Nigerian Art through a donation of museum to Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos. Exhibitions and other painting stories were given two pages. There is also a mixed art house page that treated stories of book review, EbonylifeTv drama series and other forms of entertainment stories. *The Guardian* gives its Midweek Arts one page. The October 7, 2015 edition featured stories on Tv, film and African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA). Below we shall present the summary of art reportage in *The Guardian* for two months in 2013 and 2015 respectively to glimpse the number of theatre performance it featured.

Table II: *The Guardian* Review for June 21 2013 & October ,7 2015

Genres	Number of Stories	Space Allotted
Celebrities	1	3 pages
Film (Nollywood)	2	1 page
Revue	2	3 pages
Literature	1	1 page
Theatre	1	Half a page
Visual Arts	1	Half a page
Heritage	1	Quarter page
Art House	1	Quarter page

DAILY TIMES will be examined next. On December 29, 2014 treated a *Harvest of Dance at Theatre Centric Performance*. The elaborating stage picture makes one hungry for stage performance. It is a story of a stage performance of a Lagos based dance company, *Theatre Centric*, and how it used stage drama to drive home the need to safeguard Nigeria's culture and tradition.

The paucity of theatre review runs the gamut of quite a lot of the other newspapers such as *THISDAY* which on its Sunday June 7, 2015 has three pages of Arts & Review that gave more attention to Nigerian musicians, particularly Afro-Jazz artistes that use saxophones.

VANGUARD, which devoted its Sunday 'Potpourri' to Nigeria's film and music fiesta, featured only Nollywood and Nigeria Music stars. Its Saturday editions are no less the same. For instance the August 22, 2015 edition had twelve pages celebrating only fashion, music and movie stars on its 'Showtime.' *THE NATION* aptly captioned its art column 'ShowBiz' and featured only musicians on its July 23, 2015 edition. By the same token, *DAILY SUN* of Monday July 13, 2015 in its traditional outlandish and sensational front page carried a front page bold picture of a musical concert, an orchestra of the Deeper Life Bible Church, performing during a regional combined service. On its Saturday Literary Review of March 7, 2015, it did extensive tribute and reminisces on the death of a famous Northern literary author, Abubakar Gimba. Other stories were book reviews interview with authors. On March 20, 2015 it carried actors and celebrity interviews and the story on the Prize for Literature. The August 15, 2015 edition made an excursion into the museum of Nigeria's first stage travelling thespian, Hubert Ogunde. It also treated painting and book reviews. The August 21, 2015 edition was devoted to an interview of a Nollywood Actor. Another example we shall attempt to tabulate its effort at theatre reportage is

NATIONAL MIRROR. This paper in 23 editions, between February 25, 2015 and September 2, 2015, had only two editions that reported theatre performances. The other 21 editions reported music, television, film, book reviews, paintings and lifestyle. On the Friday April 3, 2015 edition, Chijioke Okike wrote about the stage production of a play titled *Belong* and how the stage production treated a theme of identity. In the story, the author said "In Lagos, it is glaring that the level of patronage that live theatre receives, is increasing geometrically on daily basis and the standard infused into the stage performances, also taking a better leap" (22). On the second edition of the Newspaper that reported about stage performance, April 17, 2015, the story piece gave promo to a stage drama slated to take place in Warri, Delta State, as part of commemoration of the 28th anniversary of the coronation of His Majesty, Ogiame Atuwase II. The author of the story, Olawale Oluwadahunsi, noted that the drama will feature popular Nollywood actors such as Norbert-Young, Ejike Asiegbu and Peter Fatimola. The report went thus:

The Olu of Warri, His Majesty, Ogiame Atuwase II, CON, outgoing Governor of Delta state, Dr. Emmanuel Eweta Uduaghan, CON and the state's Governor-elect in the just concluded Governorship elections, Distinguished Senator (Dr) Ifeanyi Okowa, are among to dignitaries that will be there to watch the performance (19).

The effort of *National Mirror* in theatre performance reportage can be glimpsed graphically from the table below.

Table III: 23 Editions of *National Mirror*: Between February 25 and September 2 2015

Genres	Number of Editions	Space Allotted
Theatre	2	2 and a half pages
Music	23	12 pages
Tv/Film	23	16 and half pages
Book Review/Literature	12	5 and a quarter pages
Paintings	17	4 pages
Lifestyle	23	18 and a quarter pages
Others	14	7 pages

* *Others include: Beauty Pageant, Royalty, etc*

It is still amazing that despite stage being a precursor to all other forms of modern dramatic performances in Nigeria, live performances have continued to attract low attention, particularly in the media. For instance, in the entire 47 editions of different Newspapers reviewed for this study, only 7 editions attracted reportage of theatre stage performances. One discernable methodology of art reviews in all the newspapers is their obvious overwhelming attention to music and Nollywood than any other art genre. For the newspapers, Nollywood and music are the arts in vogue. When stage dramatic performance is reported, it is just an aspect of a larger event that was not an entity on itself.

This study observes that *The Guardian's* treatment of a celebration by a stage matriarch, Mrs. Taiwo Ajai-lycett in three colourful pages is to an extent, reportage of stage performance; the reason being that the celebration of such an actress will draw attention to stage performances. As a veteran Arts Reporter, Chuka Nnabuife observed, reporting the personality of an Actor or Actress is also part of reporting the theatre because people's interest in the personality will also cause attention to watching the plays they participate in.

In *The Guardian* of June 9, 2015, one page was for Nollywood. On literature page is reportage with stage pictorial story of how the award-winning actress and culture producer, Bikiya Graham-Douglas performed *Wait* at Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin, Ireland. According to the author of the story, the show was performed "to give a voice to African women and restate the importance of education, as a defining agency of women empowerment." This is one of the functions of drama, to educate and entertain. The dance drama as featured by *The Guardian* is also commendable and presents the newspaper as stage reportage-friendly.

In a paper he delivered at the African Theatre Association (AfTA) Annual International Conference at Goldsmiths, University of London & University of Derby in July 2013, titled: *Re-inventing Live Theatre Practice in Nigeria: Leveraging on the Power of the Television Medium*, the Executive Secretary/CEO of National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) Abuja, Ayakoroma (2015, p.34) observes as follows:

There is no gainsaying the fact that all of the above positions paint the sorry state of theatre practice in Nigerian. It could be surmised that for theatre to rise from the present comatose state, from the total depression it is experiencing, there is urgent need to adopt strategies for its re-invention. One of such approaches is leveraging on the power of the television medium, as stand-up comedy and the film (Nollywood) industries have done successfully in the Nigerian entertainment landscape (34).

While the issue here is not directed at leveraging the theatre through the power of Television but rather through the Newspaper media, the wider readership of Newspapers in the present day Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. The important thing here is that the power of News media in drawing attention to theatre practice has been established but why do some media houses report stage performances more than others? Could it be the fault of such media houses, their personal abilities or the fault of the theatre practitioners that don't consider those media houses while extending invitations to the press?

Prospects for Improved Media Reportage of Stage Performances

In Nigeria like in other parts of the world, theatre has evolved. There is no question that both the process and purpose of mounting a theatrical production have been altered over the years particularly with the advent of internet and other electronic entertainment media. A survey asking if a group of youth ever attended a theatrical production performed on stage provided more strange looks than a 'yes'. Interestingly, some of the older generation vividly recounted scenes from the performance of Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Ironmole *The Forest of a Thousand Demons* based on D.O Fagunwa's literary drama of 1938, where traditional spirit beings are portrayed alongside the divine God, thus, bringing its hero, Akara-Ogun, closer to a deeper understanding of Christianity with every magical escapade. Is theatre beginning to become irrelevant? Based on Nigeria *Spur Magazine's* findings, available facts showed that the generation that went to the theatres and perhaps saw the works of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and the likes are gradually thinning out without the following generation having much of a reference. The near extinction of theatre contradicts the vibrancy of dramatic and theatrical activities in Nigeria in terms of playwright output. At this point of resuscitation of the dramatic stage performance, all apparatus would have to be tested. It has become imperative that the Dramatic Arts, Theatre and Films, Performing Arts or the later day Theatre and Media Studies departments have to, as a matter of urgency, develop curriculum that will take care of a course dealing with reporting the Theatre. Reporting the theatre, as observed by Shola Balogun (personal Interview), should be a professionalised endeavour. In other words, there are techniques required to report the theatre accurately, especially the stage performance that cannot rewind like the video or Cinema. A stage reporter should be able to know when an actor or actress has lost his lines and is using improvisation to keep the play running. If that

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happens, for instance, the report could devote particular space to the improvisational technique or excellence of such an actor or actress which is an edge in stage performance. It will also do the theatre good if producers could do with either a brief or elaborated critique of their productions and submit to media editor for publication before the plays go on stage. One of the problems of the media houses is that as they are called “Pressmen”, they are always under pressure and may not have all the time to do all the editorials required for publication. Media personnel, most times welcome aided jobs that will give them reprieve and not compound their jobs. Once there is space in the papers for the stories, and the piece is well written, the editor will be glad to publish them.

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