

## **Applied Theatre as an interventionist model for theatre for development projects: the Itchi-Agu experience**

Austin Chibueze **Okeke** and Uche Okey **Ofoedu**

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

\*Corresponding author: austin.okeke@unn.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Over the years, theatre art has distinguished itself as a very effective medium of communication in diverse spheres of life. Traditionally, the theatre situation requires the audience to come to the theatre, sit and see a performance. However, as time progressed, theatre practitioners saw the need to take the theatre to the people and use it as a tool for development, especially in rural African communities. This dimension of theatre practice is known as “Applied Theatre”, as it refers to the use of theatrical forms in unconventional theatre spaces to address issues of concern to communities. In such settings, theatre is often used as an interventionist tool to address the perceived needs of such communities. Theatre for Development projects have been undertaken on a number of subjects around Nsukka communities, but none has been devoted to addressing the issue of water hygiene in any of such communities. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to examine the steps employed in the Theatre for Development (TfD) workshop by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, towards addressing the precarious water situation of Itchi-Agu community of Enugu State, as well as to recommend it as essential and ideal for TfD projects. The theoretical framework shall be based on the “Bottom-Up” Theory.

**Keywords:** *Applied theatre, interventionist, Itchi-Agu, Performance, Water.*

## Introduction

The place of theatre in the enhancement of communication in different areas of life cannot be overemphasized. Applied theatre, a dimension of theatre practice also known as Theatre for Development (TfD), has been a veritable tool that offers a pragmatic and theoretical exploration of how arts can be used to create social transformation and sensitisation among target communities. Practitioners of TfD projects visit target rural communities, spend time with them, and upon interaction, identify diverse challenges of such a community. Through scenario building, they co-create theatre with the people of the community. Such performances usually capture the respective needs of the community, as well as proffer some suggestive remedies. Weeks or months after the performance, the practitioners return to such communities to determine the extent of the impact of the performance on the community. This paper discusses the Itchi-Agu TfD water project that was undertaken by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Itchi-Agu is a community in the Igboeze-South Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The people of the community hardly have any good source of drinking water, as much of their

drinking water comes from stagnant water sources, or at best scanty streams where people bath, wash and sometimes defecate. The paper shall highlight the practical steps taken in the above project to address their water situation as well as recommend such steps as necessary for TfD projects in any rural African community.

## Background

Applied theatre has been referred to as a "Theatre of Necessity" (Irobi, 2006, p. 34). Similarly, Abah (2005) describes it as perforaltics. According to him "Perforaltics is the oral and gestural amalgamation of a community's cultural systems into a dramatic representation of their own reality. It is the gamut of language which includes speech, song, drum and dance" (p. 39).

It is a development practice that utilizes performances as a tool to aid members of a target community to share their experiences and realities with the intent to engineer social transformation and sustenance. Theatre for Development achieves this vision through its participatory nature and sensitisation as advocated by Freire (2000). Similarly, the ideology of theatre becoming a tool for

education and social change has been lauded by authors like Okwori (2004) and popularized by authors like Augusto Boal, Ross Kidd and Bertolt Brecht, who expanded the canons of Karl Marx. Their efforts made shifts in the theatre, from the cathartic enclave to a medium of awakening critical consciousness. This type of theatre possesses several advantages towards attitudinal and behavioural change over other media of communication. One of the criticisms levelled against the traditional media of communication is that they are 'less participatory and ...lack the learning-by-doing approach'. Moreover, Applied Theatre has lent itself as a more credible medium for communicating with the people, especially as it is open to the realities of the living conditions of the target community such as their fears as well as their psychosocial and cultural dispositions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted a "bottom-up" approach to the practice of Theatre for Development. This is an 'inside-out' approach that encourages active community participation in development-based projects. In the 'Bottom-Up' approach, ideas emanate from the target communities about how their situations

could be better handled. "This endogenous model", according to Chinyowa (2005), "recognizes that processes of transformation are internal to the mechanisms of social structures and that they cannot necessarily be determined by external agents" (p. 3). The above theory can be likened to Freire's 'Problem-posing education' theory which centres on the liberation and active participation of students in any learning environment. This people-centred approach of Freire's was later adopted by Augusto Boal, as it would afterwards inform his concept of the 'Spect-actor', which according to Boal "... allows the idea of rebellion and the impetus for change to come from within the target group". According to Cash (2018), in Boal's theatre, spectators are empowered to participate actively in devising solutions to given conflict situations that are usually presented before them. This basic adaptive component of Boal's theatre would also eventually become an almost indispensable tool for the practice of Theatre for Development, especially in rural African communities.

Rural African societies exist in pockets of communities, with their varied challenges. In Theatre for Development exercises, such communities are

encouraged, via the medium of theatre, to turn catalysts for the desired changes in their given precarious conditions. The 'Bottom-Up approach to TFD practice, therefore, aids the quick actualisation of the desired change in their situations, as it helps to foster a friendly theatre environment which enables them to discuss or rehearse their lived experiences, as well as work out possible remedies.

### **Interventionist Theatre**

In interventionist theatre circumstances, theatre is taken to target communities and used to try to address the needs of such communities. Okeke et al. (2018) opine that "In the [interventionist] theatre, the term intervention becomes relevant as theatre has been moved from its traditional proscenium stage into the rural community in a bid to sensitize and conscientize the rural populace with a view to solving their nagging social problems. The concept of interventionist theatre is basically to create awareness among the rural communities particularly in Africa in the way of solving their societal problems" (p. 344)

The objective of interventionist theatre is to redeem the community from the shackles of poverty, societal chauvinism, and political manipulation. In

interventionist theatre, people living in conflict communities are encouraged to team up with theatre professionals in order to address their collective challenges. Interventionist theatre instils in the society or community the spirit of comradeship and community development. In some cases, it brings a particular community to the international focus.

### **Recommended Steps for Interventionist Theatre Practice in Africa**

For the success of any TFD project facilitation, certain critical and organized steps are employed. According to Ahura (1990), three key approaches generally guide the aspect of Interventionist Theatre practices, especially in Africa. The first is the Migration approach; the second is the Homestead approach; and the third is the Transfer of Theatre, (or the ToT) approach. For the Itchi-Agu Water project, the theatre facilitators adopted a combination of the Homestead and the Transfer of Theatre approaches. The Migration approach was dropped on the grounds that it does not encourage very active participation of the target communities, as they only focus on the finished product; hence communities, in this instance, are more like passive

receivers, and as a result, the impact of such projects tend to be short-lived.

### **The Homestead Approach**

In the homestead approach to TfD, practitioners move into a given community, live in the community and after a careful study of the community's needs, organise theatre with the people of the community. According to Abah (1977),

This is the most predominant [TfD] practice in Africa today. It also involves an outside group, that instead of a complete package from outside, it is developed in collaboration with the people. Most theatre for development workshops conducted in Africa belong in this category. This stage is the mid-point in the continuum (p. 31).

### **The Transfer of Theatre (ToT) Approach**

In this approach, the people are taught how to use the medium of the theatre to address their situation/s. Facilitators or TfD practitioners identify a community and then follow the prescribed format for executing TfD projects. According to Hagher (2004), 'In the Nigerian T.F.D. experience, the process involves the following stages: i. Introduction and

establishment of rapport, ii. Research data collection, iii. Data analysis, iv. Playmaking, v. Play Performances, and vi. Follow-up activities' (p.109).

The commendable thing about the above format is that the villagers, who had gotten very familiar with the practitioners and the essence of their mission, are taught how to use the medium of theatre to address future situations in their community.

### **Step One: Preliminaries**

The facilitators from the institution intending to embark on a TfD project should first and foremost identify and make several preliminary investigatory visits to a prospective community. Such visits should involve a two or three-person advance party who would be sent to the community to discuss the project's aims, modalities and logistics. Permission should be obtained from the community authority and some basic information also gathered about them.

Three preliminary visits were undertaken before the Itchi-AguTfD workshop. On the first visit, the Igwe (the village head), was unavoidably absent and was represented by some of his cabinet members and the President General of Itchi-Agu Town

Union. Generally, the first visit was for the community and the facilitating team from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to formally get acquainted with each other. They introduced themselves and the facilitating team notified the community of their objective for the water-based theatre project. The people showed so much enthusiasm and elation on hearing the theme of the workshop. The meeting was adjourned to a later date when the Igwe would be present.

The facilitating team returned to the community on a second preliminary visit. "The objective of the second preliminary visit", according to Abah(2004), "is to consolidate and firm up arrangements begun during the first visit" (p. 12). On this second visit, the Igwe of Itchi-Agu community was present with the '*Onowu*' (his Prime Minister) and some other members of his cabinet. The Igwe very generously offered to accommodate the

team in his community, having been briefed by his *Onowu* on the outcome of the first visit. He immediately instructed the Town Crier to notify the community about the workshop and promised that every group would be duly represented in the facilitators' next visit.

The third and last preliminary visit preceded the (Itchi-Agu) Workshop, and it was undertaken by five members of the facilitating team and a photographer. When they arrived in the community, they stopped briefly at the market square and bought a keg of fresh palm wine and some kola nuts. The team was warmly received by the Igwe, his *Onowu* and his cabinet members, the community's stakeholders and the representatives of various groups such as the Youth Leader, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) Woman Leader, the Community Women Leader and the Community's Security Chief.



**Plate 1: The Facilitating Team from UNN**

### **Step Two: Community Research Data Collection**

After the facilitators returned and settled within the community, they embarked on an investigatory mission within the environment. Staff and students spread among the community armed with carefully selected questions aimed at eliciting information in regard to the peculiar challenges of the environment. The essence was to articulate the various issues and problems of the community to be able to present them from the latter's perspective.

The community research took off in earnest with physical exercises conducted by the facilitating team. Some volunteers

participated from the six villages that make up Itchi-Agu community. The physical exercises, which lasted about thirty minutes, took place at the Igwe's palace.

In conducting the community research, the team employed the participatory learning and action (PLA) approach which helps to get the people involved in the process of community assessment of their needs. According to Abah (2005),

Participatory learning and action [approach] is an assemblage of tools and techniques which reconceptualises the traditional social science

research methods and make them more participatory...The use of approaches/tools such as transect-walks, community map[s], focused group discussions, etc, in which community members are involved in making and drawing, personalizes the experience (p. 124).

As such, PLA is a perspective for getting information and involving the community. It uses the natural interviewing approaches in order to facilitate a process of data collection,

analysis and probable solutions. It is a potent tool for negotiation because it goes beyond mere negotiations to promote the active involvement of the target community in bringing forth their challenges and seeking interventions to such challenges.

Some of the PLA tools employed for the success of the Itchi-Agu Workshop include Transect-Walks, Flooding, Participant Observation, The Problem Tree, Focus Group Discussion, Mapping, and Interviews.



Plate 2: Interviewing some key informant interviewees (KII) during Research Data Collection

**Step Three: Data Analysis**

The information gathered from the community was carefully analyzed by the project team. Attention was given to possible causes and effects of the established problems, as this enabled the team to appreciate the challenges facing the community from a much deeper perspective. Strategies were devised on how best to tackle the issues as observed.

**Step Four: Scenario Building**

This stage of developing the scenario and improvisation is made up of a composite of activities. It involves the analysis of the already gathered data and even more. In the case of Itchi-Agu, the scenario and improvised skits in the community were controlled by the research findings and demands of the community as it concerned their water.

**Step Five: Rehearsals**

This stage employs the problem tree because it captures all the information gathered from the field and includes them in the improvisation. Going by this, a summarized story of the problems of their water was told by the community

for dramatic purposes. Improvisation and role-play were the theatre elements that brought the story to life and made their water crisis real and physical on stage.

Before the rehearsal for the Itchi-AguTfD water project, the Igwe delegated the town crier to go round the villages of the community to announce the rehearsals to the people for an improved turnout. This yielded a positive result because the next day so many turned up for the kick-start of the rehearsals.

The improvisation started with an opening glee of the dance of the people, the song and music of the people and their dance steps. The improvisation of about four short scenes was fastened to each other by a narrator who was also a community member. The highlight of the skits was the performance of the eगरa (praise-singing by an indigenous oratory performer) by the eगरa performer who sang the praises of the Igwe, the community, some respected indigenes of the community, and the university community.



Plate 3: Improved Dance Rehearsal before the Performance

### Step Six: The Performance (popularly called) "the Last Rehearsal"

In Tfd practice, the Performance is said to be the Last Rehearsal because the process of a performance never really ends. This is because there is always a follow-up for Monitoring and Evaluation to ascertain the outcome and the impacts of the process on the lives of the people who are said to own the process. The facilitators, in collaboration with the members of the community, structured a scenario and equally wrote the play in performance. This supports Brecht (2014) view on 'popular theatre': "Our

conception of "popular" refers to the people, who are not only involved in the process of development but are eventually taking it over, forcing it, deciding it" (p. 5).

The community concluded on the problems that were most severe to them and actively participated in creating and analyzing the narrative in the rehearsals before the last rehearsal. The last rehearsal took place on the premises of Community Primary School, Itchi-Agu. This event got the attention of the entire community, starting from the Igwe, his cabinet members, old men and women,

youths and children. The last rehearsal, just like the preceding ones, opened with the dance of the people, performed by them in their colourful costumes. Immediately after the opening came the egara performer who, undeterred by his age and other handicaps, enacted his art with so much gait, mastery and dexterity. He eloquently told the tales of the community, some of their dead heroes, the Igwe, the facilitating team and the university community.

After his performance, a four-scene drama presentation quickly followed. The drama x-rayed the precarious water situation of the community, as well as suggested ways the situation could be ameliorated. The native narrator, through his mastery and skillfulness, created an organic link for each of the scenes. His role also largely encouraged a lot of audience participation as well as lauded the "stylized, innovative, skilful and creative" nature of art (Omeje, 2019, p. 115).



Plate 4: A Scene from the Performance

**Step Seven: Post-Performance Discussion**

Post-Performance Discussion usually takes place after a performance. It is an interactive session with the host community, which is held immediately after the performance, to entertain their questions, address their worries and collectively proffer solutions to their problems. This session at the Itchi-Agu event also created an opportunity for the community to show gratitude to the team of facilitators. Some sections of the community, represented by their leaders, equally thanked the team and promised to adopt all that they learnt from the performance. The Igwe thanked the team for their choice of his community for the workshop and promised to solicit assistance from his people, both at home and abroad, to mobilize and sink a borehole in the community. He also promised that his people would comply with the outcome of the water project.

To further express his gratitude, the Igwe decided to form a six-person committee to mobilize action towards the sinking of a new borehole in the community. The job of the committee would include monitoring and safeguarding their water sources against any form of misuse or mismanagement, as well as ensuring that the borehole project was initiated. The

members of the committee included two women and four men who were selected to represent the six villages that make up Itchi-Agu.

**Follow Up**

About three months after the Tfd water project, the facilitating team from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka sent a three-person monitoring team to Itchi-Agu community to ascertain the extent of the impact of the workshop. Upon interaction with many members of the community, the team was satisfied by the feedback they got, as it was clear that the impact of the workshop had not waned. Many persons from the community now boil their water before drinking, and plans were also on the way towards sinking a borehole in the community, as promised by the Igwe.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been able to demonstrate that the Applied Theatre form is an authentic tool for interventionist theatre projects, especially in rural African communities. Through performances, the people of Itchi-Agu in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State became co-catalysts for change, as they were able to put into visual discourse the problems of their age-long precarious

water situation. The paper has also been able to establish that the Homestead and the Transfer of Theatre (ToT) methods are useful approaches to interventionist theatre projects given that both conform to the bottom-up approach that it proposes. Lastly, the paper, submits that

the primary focus of interventionist theatre is essentially to raise the consciousness of target communities towards a better understanding of themselves and the challenges which confront them and their society based on their lived experiences.

## References

- Abah, O.S.(1977). *Performing Life: Case Studies in the Practice of Theatre for Development*. Zaria:Bright Publishers.
- Abah, O. S, (2004). Of Skills Training and Change in Theatre for Development. In J. Okwori (Ed.) *CommunityTheatre: An Introductory Coursebook*(pp.31-), Zaria: Tamza Publishers.
- Abah, O. S. (2005). *Methodological Conversations in Researching Citizenship Drama and Participatory Learning and Action in Encountering Citizenship*.Zaria: Tamza Publishers.
- Ahura, T. (1990). Popular and Participatory Theatre for Conscientization: The Question of Methodology'. *The Practice of Community Theatre in Nigeria, Jos, SONTA (Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists)*.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. (Trans.) Charles A. & Bride, M. New York: Urizen Press.
- Brecht, B. (2014). *Brecht on theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Byam, D. (1999). *Community in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa*.Connecticut: Bergin Press.

- Cash, J. 'Augusto Boal' <<https://theatrelinks.com/augusto-boal/>> Accessed 14 December 2018.
- Chinyowa, K. (2005) *Manifestations of Play as Aesthetic in African Theatre for Development*, [Doctoral dissertation, Queensland: Griffith University] Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, School of Vocational, Technology and Arts Education.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Trans.) Rames, M. B. London: Continuum Press.
- Hagher, I. H. (Ed.) (1990). *The Practice of Community Theatre in Nigeria*. Jos:SONTA Press.
- Illah, E., J. &Warritary, B. (2004). *Child Rights Theatre for Development Manual: A Workbook for Practitioners and Students*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan & UNICEF Press.
- Irobi, E. (2006) African Youth, Performance and the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: Theatre of Necessity. In Banham, M., Gibbs J. &Osofisan, F. (Eds.), *African Theatre Youth*. (pp.31-34). Oxford: African Academy Press
- Kavanag, R. M., (2004) Approaching Theatre Work with Children in Zimbabwe 'Share What You Have. In Haedick, S.C. &Nelhaus T. (Eds.), *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban-Based Performance*. (pp. 166-188). University of Michigan Press.
- Kershaw, B. (1994). *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge.
- Omeje, O.V. (2019). Theatre as Entrepreneurship: Hope for Nigeria in Economic Diversification, In Nwabueze, E. (Ed.), *Ikenga: International Journal of Institute of African Studies*. (Vol. 20:1, pp. 114-122). Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.

Okeke, A. et al. (2018). The Efficacy of Interventionist Theatre in the Development of Rural Communities: The Example of Itchi Community Theatre Project, In Nwabueze, E. (Ed.), *Ikoru: Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. (Vol. 11:1, pp. 344- 351). Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.

Okwori, J. Z. (2004) (Ed.), *Community Theatre: An Introductory Coursebook*. Zaria: Tamza Publishers.