

CYBERTECH-THEATRE: A PATHWAY FOR DIGITAL THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study shadows the place of digital technologies in Theatre for Development projects especially the use of visual spaces to projecting the community –based issues and add values to the people’s lives. The study traces the origin of digital technologies in Theatre for Development, examines their current state, and proposes ways forward. It applies Cybertch Theatre theory as a framework for facilitating the incorporation of new technologies into community based theatre as a way of enhancing digital convergence and cultural preservations through collective role-play, thereby enabling audience to become active participants. The study reveals that the new technology in Tfd provides new tool and a blend with the traditional and cultural approaches to addressing community issues. It concludes that the approach breaks geographical barriers and fosters change in host communities. Furthermore, the study maintains that artist pr4sents people with 'true' state of affairs in their environment with the intention of provoking critical and emotional responses. This has remained an enduring characteristic of theatre and media arts.

Introduction

The expansion of theatre through the ages incorporated various forms of art, and opened up vistas in theatre studies. And it became integrated into theatre and increased the theatre scholarships; expand the frontiers both in study and in practice. The advancement of technology, drama and theatre moved beyond the stage to screen and to the virtual (online).

The virtual or the digital theatre becomes those theatre performances created and performed in an online platforms. Because they are merging trends in theatre for development practices, they are still in experimental forms; performing through various simulators, using voices, graphics’, sounds and recorded scenarios to entertain the audience. Their common factor is foregrounding in various ways the nation and nature of ‘live’ and the audience participation. The animations and simulators in an online platform are seen as a major breakthrough in virtual theatre practice. In the early staged of this development, avatars were used as characters. They synched them into the actor’s gestures and movements and synchronized their speeches in line with the text or the script. These avatars are constructed and manipulated (using remotes to control the characters.) by their creators to impersonate the real characters. Don Juan once observes, “ ... we parted textually together, ludically, online playing ... without writing a play performing oversees and others, imagined and real and unreal, met and unmet, gender-bearing and free association” (5).

Thus, the zeal, the hunger and the enthusiasm to shift from the old to accommodate the new become imperative. Practitioners began to sort for approaches to improve their arts. The move tends moving from the usual to the unusual especially in the area of production, presentation and performance by acquiring the needed technological education and instruments. Consequently, the idea of theatre performances staged physically but distributed or presented simultaneously on stage and online (virtually), the Cybertch- Theatre. The Cybertech-Theatre which was designed for digital medium using the camera, the encoder, the live streaming application and the social networks to transmit becomes the way for a new Theatre for Development. The people’s theatre that is, devoid of avatars or animations.

An Overview of Digital Performances or Internet Theatres

The digital theatre began in the late 90 and early 2000 with performances on MUDs (multi-User-Dungeon), or using avatars to graphics to create character in a visual space. Super machine in form of text world by using codes to. By the middle of the 2020, it has gain massive attention and expansion. The lines between the theatre games, avatars, second life changes tremendously to including the presence-presence to presence –absent (the physical presence of the audience in a performance venue and the physical absence of the audience in the place of the performance but present in an online space).

Interestingly is the Hamnet Players of Stuart which started like an online theatre group using animations and simulation, a kind of synchronized actions created by using chat channels online? This saw to the beginning of online theatre groups after the (MUDs multi-User-Dungeon) and MOOs (Mud Object Oriented.) Their performances fall within the range of second life, lacking in flesh and blood. Adaraduiss and Sodovan Torok, (Real

names: Judith Adele and Lain McCracken) the Avatar Repertory theatre (ART) are like another group but inform of a touring theatre troupe in a virtual world. Their live performance includes controlling the avatars in second life, animations. They later settled for Theatre the Visual, but still using the iconic representation and presentation of characters.

These developmental progression continue by around 2012, when new dimensions and improvements surfaced with the likes of Even Brigitte Hosea, (a professor of moving image), who was created with the term, 'Expanded Animator and Performance Drawing' mounted the stage to improve on the existing performances by adding manipulated videos, project-live videos- feedback (an interactive technology). She tried bringing the lifeless into modern pictures. According to her, "I am interested also in how the movement we make, our gestures, and actions- leads us to construct over identity... how we perform our gender identity." (8). Her two notable works include: *Erasure* (2018) and *Holes* (2021). She used herself as a case study to add direct contact of human to the virtual world by using video projections to make the performance more believable.

Don Juan, Donna Haraway, Tony Santi, Kim Filntoff, Christiana Papagiannouli are the leading scholars and facilitators of the Immersive Interactive Virtual Theatre that was called theatre for the first time (Etheatre project). They maintained that the cyber world is place for "commentary and transmission to the anonymous audience." (4). A 'meta-stage' where people different roles such as interaction and adventures. Their Virtual Theatre, Forum Mediated Theatre, Process Drama Forum were all developed to address the anomalies they found in the cause of the projects especially the 'real' and the 'unreal' roles of the online groups. Most of them took out time to question the boundaries between space and spatial experience. They believe that cyber adaptations, cyber ethno-theatre are emerging trends, a move away from the old traditional methods of the online performances.

The late twentieth century saw the emergence of Heidi Harrington- Johnson, Tasso Stevens, Marshal McLuhan and whit McLaughlin. They came with full determination to reform and re-position the Virtual Theatre by mirroring the past to arrive at the present through experimental. Their action gave rooms to the first online theatre companies: Interactive Theatre Production Company (LONEY). They shared the productions online via a computer-networked interface and mobile phones networks. The experiments by Marshal McLuhan and involved social media platforms such as face book, footages of streaming videos. He centered on face book as the major distributing platform to reach the audience. This face book as a distributing platform was later adopted by the Cybertech-Theatre as its own distributing platform because of its popularity and easy operational modes.

The Cyborg Theatre by Gianniachi and Kozel, Cyber Drama by Murray Digital Theatre by Christodoulou, and Cyberformance by Jamieson Varley are to make up for the lapses discovered in the existing virtual performances. Their major contribution is the magnifying the audience presence and participations in various media through the aid of technology in an online community. These last groups of scholars see it as mix-media, a mixture ha occurs in a digital space or digital environments that incorporate the live elements as part of the raw material for the projects. According to Varley, "live performances that utilize internet technologies to bring remote performances together" (38). The remote performance was highly contested against by Cybertech-theatre. Interesting to say that in 'Sustaining Theatre for Development in a Pandemic...', Anthony Nnalue contested the idea of remote player and the adverse effects of it on the theatre especially Theatre for Development and the resultant need to move from stage to screen, according to him, "Theatre for Development which characterized by communal participation needs to re-strategize in medium of broadcast and audience participation to achieve a global dimension" (56). He goes on to project an example of a theatre that can flush in a pandemic using a Cybertch-Theatre project as an example. The study recommends that technology is the new way to solving most theatre problems and should be applied where the need arises. Which we shall see in the subsequent chapter

The Deconstruction of Cybertech-Theatre

Cybertech-Theatre was coined in 2022 by Anthony Nnalue to bridge the gap between stage performances, internet related performances and to accommodate collective play-making (through improvisation) where the actors and the audience are active participants in flesh and blood onstage and on a mediated platform. This is a way of changing the ideology methods of practice of internet related theatre to accommodate theatre for development projects. Cybertch Theatre becomes a change element to bridging the production and performances gaps. According to Nnalue, "It breezes across boarder of active audience participation, socialization, empowering, educating and concientization ...and for communal and societal change (46). It is a Theatre for Developmental purpose that exist both online and on stage and runs simultaneously by incorporating immediate and cybernetic audience.

The Cybertch-Theatre is a theatre with specific intention, otherness, simultaneously presented on stage and on the screen (media mediated space) with a view of reaching a wider audience. It is found upon the concept of 'live'. Live in Cybertech-Theatre becomes the flow of actions from the physical stage to the digital enabled platform in a networked connected computer or applications.

According to Nnalue:

Cybeertch-theatre is a theatre for development that gears towards societal developmental, behavioral changes, community participation, community transformation, through interactivity, using streaming technologies for the community and by the community for their own developmental needs (76).

Chatting the Pathway for a Theatre for Development and Cybertech-Theatre: Example of Selected Projects

The pathway provided a total theatre both in terms of the audience, the performance, the props, the actors, the scenery, the script, music, light, gesture, time, space, costume, the emotions, and the interactivity. They are performances on a live stage using human bodies as materials, transmitted to an online platform. That is, the-play-the-technology-the-virtual-world as one performance happening in real-time both online and on stage

The Nise Orphanage Home Project

This project was an experimental project by the students of Theatre Arts, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam to ascertain the place of digital technology in child's learning and growth. Orphanage was selected because of its specialty in terms of the children and as on target audience.

The Orphanage Home in a Glance

The home is situated along Nise Agulu road housing about 54 (fifty four children) both boys and girls. Their age ranges from 3- 12 years, those between the ages of 6-12 years were selected out of the 53 children and they were a total 24 children for the project. The rest of the children were grouped and taught some artistic skills such as dramas, dances, acting and singing that were later used as raw material for experimental. The impact assessments were on both those who have acquired some artistic skill and those who are part and parcel of the experimental.

STEP 2 The Team Arrives Nise

The team arrived Nise in Awka South Local Government area for the Theatre in Education project and went straight to meet with the management of the establishment. Having gotten the approval, they move into action. The technical group started with the familiarization or introduction of the equipment. First was the camera body parts, the operational devices, like the off and on buttons, different camera shots, angles of the camera, etc. this process was in form of trial and errors. The rehearsal was as a result of the outcome of the data gathered and the team decision to inculcate skills into the children for a better individual and society. The left after the data collection returned on the 3rd of February, 2024 for the main work and trainings. They fixed their trainings during the break period and two times, morning and evening on Saturdays so as to offer the best with the little time they have. They train or rehearsed some components of a camera; (1) **The Camera box**-holds and protects the sensitive film from lights apart from the light entering through the lens. (2). **Film** –the captured is recorded on the film, in a form of light –sensitive strip usually wound on a spool, either manually or automatically, as successive pictures are taken (3). **The Light Control**- consisting of an aperture or diaphragm and a shutter which are adjustable responsible for converting lights into electronic signals (4). **The Lens**- it is like the eye of the camera and it focuses the light rays from the subject onto the film, creating and forming the image, which are usually adjustable (5). **The Viewing System**- it is where the photographer looks through to view a scene which may be separated from the lens system. (6). **The Battery Compartment**- this is usually at the bottom of the camera, it houses the camera power house. (7). **The Camera Connector**- this where the USB cords are connected for transfer or download of files. Their methods were participatory actions, each student repeating the action with the camera while other observe. And it continued turn by turn. This lasted for few days and they switched over to film editing. As a result of the age brackets of the children, the editing class was not centered on the elementary aspect of editing which is on the assembly, formatting and exporting. The assembly is to capture the content first and then convert into a format that it can be viewed. Through trials and errors the children were able to acquire the some technical skills.

The Improvisation

The script was the dance and the drama performance of the children between the ages below 6 years. We divided them into two groups, dance and drama groups. Both performed separately. Their performances were on traditional African dance steps and traditional African performance styles using the folkloric elements. Their costumes and make-ups are designed to pass the hidden messages of the project.

Cybernetic Appraisal of the Performance

The performance was an improvised drama skit and dances movements in a flexible plot and dialogue. The drama was built around the narrator while the dance was built around the choral leader. The narrator intersects both in aesthetics and in temporal linking the missing links using his body and voice modulation to transform into different characters. The dances on the other hand, showcase the traditional African dance steps accompanied with ululations in way to motivate the dances for actions. Their aesthetic organization built around a holistic art gives more comprehension and discernment to the project especially the production.

The dances, the dramas as culturally situated phenomenon unfolds as a participatory action developed by the children and for the children liberating from their ignorance to knowledge. The dances were consolidated efforts for a peaceful leaving amongst the children on the premises that let the kite perch and let the eagle too. The peaceful existence is absolute and punishable should any one fails to abide by the law.

On the other side of the coin, the technical aspect, the cameras were used to capture the dance movements by the children and redistributes to the audience using the video streaming platforms. The multiple camera platforms used an encoder to broadcast. A mixer or a switcher is provided to accept signals from the different cameras and transmits immediately to the waiting online audience. This provides a freeway for selection of broad cast so as to maximize the creativity of the performance and the technical skill of the use of camera. The creativity is manifested in the simultaneous role plays and displays by the camera.

The Herdsmen Advocacy Project

We choose Anam Herdsmen Project as influential and motivating factor to this research because of its provisions for experimenting with technologies and its participatory approach which is the core criteria for a TfD project. The workshop process opens rooms for interaction and meetings with actors and the audience.

The Herdsmen Advocacy Project (HAP) shall be critically and thematically analyzed to see how this new approach has been able to change the face of TfD especially its audience reception and participation. This is to say, the influence of the workshop/ experiment on the people of Anam, and the strengths of this research to scholarships. The strengths shall be tailored to mean that which qualified the experiment for further practice while its weakness is be highlighted for improvement especially the challenges ahead of a would be practitioner(s).

Process of the Workshop:

(1) Planning:

This project as an experiment on virtual reality and Theatre for Development, brought scholars, researchers and TfD practitioners together for dialectic diffusion of knowledge and ideas in the field of theatre and community development. The facilitators are Theatre for Development scholars from different Universities in the South East region of the country. Dr. Ikechukwu Erojikwe is from the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Vincent Nnamele is a PhD student of University of Calabar. Then the researcher, Anthony Nnalue is a doctoral student of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Cletus Ezeneto of Bengin Digital Konzept Lagos served as the Director of Photography and the streaming artist. On the other side of the collaboration are the host communities and the participants in the project the communities of Aboegbu, Mmiata, Iyiora Anam, and Ebenebe. The project was like every other TfD project but with unique features oftaking the performance to the people through streaming the performance. The objectives are to educate, and to conscentizing the communities on the need for dialogue and mutual existence between them and the Fulani herdsmen and to test efficacy of the technology in reaching out to more people.

(2) Research Meetings with Stakeholders in the Communities

On the 30th of December 2018, we moved into the village of Aboegbu. Our point of first visit was on the house of the Chairman Development Council. We announced our arrival and our intention to the community to him and he welcomed us and promises to support our mission with the best he has. Prior to the meetings, we contacted the President Generals of Ifite-Anam. The president general suggested that we meet with the Igwe of Ifite-Anam who the central Igwe for the Ifite Anam zone is who over sees the affairs of the zone. There was difficulty in reaching the Igwe so sent our message to him through the President General who is always available in the towns. It was also not easy to reach the leaders of the Development Councils of the communities involved. Virtually most of them leave in the farm settlements and had issues with their phones. We usually reach them through sending message to them through people who must have come from their farm settlement to the village or through women who came to market on the market day. Through the messengers, we asked for their attention in the village. The leader of Aboegbu got our messages and responded by sending acknowledgement across to his deputy. But that of Iyiora Anam came by himself. The Deputy Chairman of Aboegbu development council advised that we meet with other members of the council to avoid local politics or resentments.

Finally, the meeting was held at Abogbu Community Town Hall on 10th Dec, 2018



Plate 1: Meeting with Stakeholders of Aboegbu Community (2019).

The following day, we organized a meeting of the entire Development Council as was suggested by the Chairman of the council. We also extended the meeting to the neighboring village of Iyiora Anam. So this becomes the second meeting in the series of meetings was with Aboegbu and Iyiorah Anam development councils. Most times, these meetings start with the usual opening prayers and followed by the breaking of kola-nut and local drinks served. There is usually introduction of the facilitators. After this process, the reason for the visit comes up to the hearing of the community leaders. The researcher inculcates to the community the reason for the gathering. Then moves further to inform the community of what to expect of the facilitators and what the facilitators expects of the community. These meetings usually took place at night. The reason was because that majority of these villagers are farmers who leave in farm settlements and hardly have time in the day.



Plate 2: Interactive Session with Aboegbu Development Council

According to the data collection and analysis, the above stated issues have been confronting the communities of Anam and they will be happy if something is done to save the situation. For them, the flood comes annually and forces them to harvest their crops before maturity. For electricity, they have not known anything like electricity so they were not so much concerned with electricity. For incessant cult killing and reprisal attacks by the cult groups in the village they prayed the government to come and intervene. But the most devastating and more agonizing is the herdsmen attack. These attacks come with a lot of pains and emotional meltdown because each time it comes; it introduces fear into the community and cause people to stay away from the farm for a long time pending when the fear must have subsided. This condition, subjects them to economic hardship and unnecessary traumas. They volunteered to support any venture to ameliorate the suffering these situations have caused them.

At this background, we opted out for the rural folks' opinions and possibly look into the Elites opinion in our subsequent research. Herdsmen attack and flood were chosen as most devastating and that which needs urgent attention. The research team initially agreed to merge the two most urgent problems but along the line, discovered that the project may not do justice to both in a single outing and decided to drop flooding and go for herdsmen attacks.

The herdsmen problem needs urgent and broader attention because of the herdsmen attack that has become so rampant in the eight communities of Anam. For instance, in Ezi-Anam, there were cases of attacks and counter attacks. In Ivite- Anam, the herdsmen were killed and their cows butchered. In the course of our research, it was observed that there were numerous records of killings and clashes by both the community and the Fulani Herdsmen in the past. But this current year, the information gathered was that some community members were paid some money as marching ground fee from the Herdsmen and led them into the communities at night. These Fulani Herdsmen when they arrived, they saw abundant food for their livestock and went back and invited more herdsmen.

The data gathered shows that since the arrival of these set of herdsmen, they have not gone a month without a clash with either the cows or the herdsmen themselves.



Plate 3: Group Photo of the Town Union's leaders and the Researchers (2009).

The Cybertech Theatre Angel in the Project

The video opens in a folkloric form with the screen as the destination point of the video content. The researcher who doubles as the narrator is pictured on the screen introducing him and why they have been assembled. He refreshes their mind on the Herdsmen Advocacy Project and that what they are about to see is the dramatic enactment of the problems inherent in the community and the possible solutions. He however, seeks their consent to perform. The request was granted by the entire community through the Vice Chairman Development Council. Immediately the camera moves to group of performers, musical group dancing and singing their way to the performance venue. The music and the performers warm the audience up by acknowledging them and invite them to join in the performance. As the music fades, and the elders seated, the camera pans to the narrator. Here, the screen becomes the unifying element of the performance. The change or the switch of camera from scene to scene reflects the shift in thought and emotions.

The camera moves to group of drummers and dancers dancing into the performance venue. As the music and dance ceased, the camera focuses on the narrator who introduces, refreshes their minds and builds up suspense. At this point, the camera employs different angel and shots to heathen the effects and audio visual quality of the performance. Since the performance technique is folkloric, makes way for flexibility angels through cameras flow from scene to scene uninterrupted underpinning the effects of herdsmen, the need for a solution. The video streaming at this point becomes a mirror for the community to view access their problems.

The transferring of beams of light through the stage to screen surface to create picture was converted to "filmed sequence" in a beam projected to the screen. More so, the reality of the character representing the elders of the community and as well bearing their real names in the people's local dialect puts the audience at ease in understanding the whole scenario. That is, they can easily understand the arguments and the decisions of the performance in line with what is applicable in the communities. Thus, strengthening their curiosity and permits distance based communication in the TfD. this is mostly exemplified in the performance when one of the characters called on the Elders I who am other name is Okpala to summarize their discussions so far, the Okpala of the community thought he was called upon to speak.

Furthermore, camera remains on the elders to make out the maximum effect of the discussions. The community agreed not to take laws into their hand and decided to send delegates to the government to notify them of their predicament. They appointed members from each of the communities as delegates and challenged them to channel their problems to the government. The meeting with the government yielded a positive result because it draws the attention of the leaders of the herdsmen to the situation in Anam. Part of the resolution in the meeting with the government was that: leaders of the herdsmen were asked to withdraw every activity of the herdsmen in the regions of Anam and its environs. And that they should be a joint be committee of the herdsmen and the leaders of Anam to ensure that there is no crisis in the area.

The camera returns to the village square with the drummers leading in the delegates to the village hall. Immediately they are settled, the camera focuses on the narrator who is also the spokesperson for the delegates. The narrator

told the community what the outcome. The community thanked them for a job well-done. They constituted a security outfit that will watch over the communities to avoid unnecessary attacks by the herdsmen. The community turns into jubilations and celebrations.

The streaming platform becomes an avenue for cultural archiving of societal conditions and situations of the communities. In this sense, antiquity can access the when the need arises. Then Tfd is liberated from the four walls of the stage to the screen and thus expand its frontiers for wider reception.

The Future Prospects of Cybertech-Theatre

This theatre offers immersive potentials for revenue generations, since money-making is considered as an aspect of life, and life itself is theatre. These potentials are manifest through the monetization of the online and the streamed theatre. Monetization provides multifaceted opportunities for revenue generations. This study examines the subscription model that is most frequently used by creator and streamers and how these models provide platforms for running businesses efficiently, profitably, and more successfully. It is worthy of note that for any monetization in Cybertech-Theatre to be effective, it requires an encoder. This encoder facilitates immediate returns while offering ensuring audience receives quality product. The discussion of these revenue-generation methods is intended to enable would-be practitioners to appreciate and adopt the method most suitable for their needs.

From the foregoing, it is established that Cybertech-Theatre which uses video or live streaming, is a very powerful, influential means of distributing a community based interest while proffering solutions to issues affecting the people. Through viewing, and sharing, audiences engage directly and indirectly in enlightenment and advocacy concerning societal problems. The practitioners of this form of theatre should, in the process of digitalization, adhere strictly to the celebratory nature, style, and culture of the people, thereby opening their eyes to issues confronting them.

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