

THE ROLE OF THEATRE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF DRAMATIC PERFORMANCES ON THE CITY OF GWERU

By

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Abstract

This article examines the perception of the residents of the city of Gweru with regards the usefulness of theatre in social, economic and political spheres. Findings of the study are based on data gathered from 400 participants. In the study, the questionnaire and the interview techniques were used as the main data gathering instruments to collect information from both the literate and non-literate community members. Processing of collected data was both qualitative and quantitative. Results show that dramatic performances play a very important role in shaping community thinking, hence the researcher recommends theatre to be used as a vehicle of communication in matters pertaining to health, culture, politics and economy.

Introduction and Background

Although drama has proved to be a very effective communicative tool, it seems not to be given enough recognition in many African countries (Zinyemba, 1986; Breitinger, 1984). This is evidenced by poor funding by governments and a general poor image of drama in society. Despite this negative image, drama, according to Barber et al (1997) plays a part in the development and reinforcement of human ideas. African drama has an indisputable social function and it is according to Traore (1972), a mirror of African life and it is highly responsible for social change and is also a key agent in disseminating new ideas to society.

Much controversy surrounds the notion of whether the various forms of performance activities found in traditional African society may rightly be considered as drama or theatre. Many scholars assert that theatre or drama exist when a human being pretends for artistic reasons, that he or she is someone else (Little, 1986; Etherton, 1982, and Jones 1976). Drama becomes theatre when performance is done in front of an audience. The argument was perhaps first prompted by Ruth Finnegan who asserted that drama in Africa hardly existed before the arrival of European settlers in the later nineteenth century (Chinyowa, 1998). Africans were regarded as having no tradition of drama or theatre (Kerr, 1995). Many Europeans treated Africa as a 'tabula rasa' with no theatrical tradition. This denigration of African culture led to direct attacks on indigenous performing arts by colonialists. The arrival of the Cecil John Rhodes sponsored Pioneer Column in July 1890 should be regarded as a bad omen for indigenous Zimbabwean theatre. Rhodes and his other European settlers harboured myths

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that led them to regard Africans as 'non-cultured' in great need of a "civilising mission" (Chinyowa, 1998:77). Spurred on by these settler paternalist notions, colonial cultural programmes were introduced in order to make Africans adopt Western values and beliefs. What used to be learnt from traditional games was now replaced by the school classroom, reading books and playing Western games. Children gradually lost touch with indigenous modes of cultural expression and socialisation as they began to identify more and more with Western modernity.

Western Religion was strongly opposed to the continuation of African rituals, ceremonies and other cultural practices, as these were a threat to missionary proselytisation. Missionaries therefore preached, not a modification of African ritual practices, but their uprooting (Zinyemba, 1986). As a result of Western missionary influence, children's dramatic performances were gradually replaced by Bible based passion plays. Ngugi (1986) says it was cultural imperialism by the West, that curbed the free development of the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual ceremonial practices to the African peasantry.

When Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, dramatic performances became known and wide spread in most of the country's provinces. More than one hundred theatre groups were registered with the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT). Most of these groups presented their shows in and around major towns during the week and weekends. They performed in converted assembly halls, community centres, in the yards of bars or at street corners. Some were professionals; others semi-professionals and many were just talented amateurs (Breitinger, 1994).

The aims of some groups were merely commercial, that is, to use theatre as an income generating activity, while others staged their shows to campaign for AIDS prevention, health education, good farming habits or road safety, just to mention a few. In Zimbabwe, the government, through its ministries (Health and Education) and international organisations (WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO) has turned to theatre to launch campaigns to educate the population in both urban and rural areas. AIDS in particular, has been the topic of several campaigns of educative theatre.

However, it is sad to realise that most African governments are the most inhibiting factors in the development of theatre. Theatre groups are not free to express political ideas using drama some there is too much censorship of plays through the legislative arms of the government. It is also worth noting that the Zimbabwean government, does not provide the financial resources necessary for the promotion of drama. Most of the support for the performing arts in Zimbabwe so far comes from the Scandinavian countries through the benevolence of such non-governmental organisations such as Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). These non-governmental organisations help by way of sponsoring workshops for actors and in most cases organising drama festivals at the district, provincial and national levels.

Another background to a poor image of drama in society is that the profession has often been considered useless and unworthy of the attention of a mature adult who should have more important concerns. It has been labelled not merely frivolous but evil. Plato elaborated on the above-mentioned view in his Republic when he dismissed drama from the ideal state, on the grounds that it so often portrayed unworthy sentiments and actions morally detrimental to the members of society (Dorsh, 1965). For these reasons, this study was carried out to examine drama in terms of its role in socio-economic change and political consciousness in Gweru urban communities.

Objectives

The study was directed by the following objectives:

1. To identify and discuss the main concerns of theatre groups in the city of Gweru.
2. To examine the perceptions of community members with regards to the usefulness of theatre in changing people's attitudes and habits.

Methodology

In this study, the population comprised of drama performers, church leaders, political leaders, councillors, teachers, lecturers, nurses, farmers, children, school leavers, industrial workers, lawyers, doctors and non-working members of the Gweru urban communities. The decision to use people from different social classes was based on the fact that the group was large enough to give more representative information on the role of drama in shaping community thinking.

The sample size for the study was four hundred (400) participants. From each of the fifteen (15) suburbs, only twenty (20) respondents were chosen to fill in the questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire five (5) respondents were interviewed from each suburb to get information not covered by the questionnaire. Interviews were conducted for both the literate and semi-literate classes.

The population used in this study was a heterogeneous one consisting of more than ten (10) social groups that have been listed above. The other reason for choosing a mixed population was to get an evaluation of the role of dramatic performances from different sources. If drama is effective, then it must have an impression on most of these people represented by the different classes in the population.

In this study, the population was divided into two (2) broad classes namely the literate and semi-literate community members. Those with a fairly high level of literacy such as teachers, lecturers, doctors, nurses, artisans, policemen and lawyers just to mention a few, constituted the literate group. The semi-literate group was composed of the rest of the members without at least '0' level nor professional training. The literate group filled in the questionnaire that had concepts that an illiterate or semi-literate person could not comprehend. The semi-literate and the illiterate groups constituted the population used for interviews.

The study was conducted in Gweru urban which has both low and high-density suburbs. The suburbs in the city are Mkoba, Mambo, Ascot, Mtapa. Nashville, Senga, Athlone, Harben

Park, Northlea, Gweru East, Southdowns, Riverside, Ivene, Lundi Park and Ridgemont. The reason for choosing these suburbs was that there was a sizeable and mixed population that was ideal for the study.

Procedure

The researcher visited the suburbs and sought help from community leaders to identify those who belonged to the literate social group, so that they could fill in the questionnaire. Selection of interviewees from each suburb was stratified. Again the researcher asked for help from the community leaders to be able to identify people representing the different social groups. The groups that needed representations in the interviews were the following: church leaders, politicians, school children, nurses, drama performers, industrial workers, school leavers, doctors, lawyers and non working members of the community.

Processing of collected data was both qualitative and quantitative. Simple quantitative methods of data processing and analysis were used such as log tables. However, the researcher in most cases would describe in detail the results obtained by the different instruments.

Percentages and frequencies were also used to analyse data. In an effort to process information from statements that required some ranking to be done, ranks 1 to 3 were considered to be indicating a positive attitude. The agree, slightly agree and strongly agree categories were considered to reflect a positive response whereas the categories disagree, slightly disagree and strongly disagree were considered to reflect a negative response. Information collected from both the questionnaires and the interviews was processed qualitatively and quantitatively without use of the computer.

The responses in both the questionnaires and the interviews showed very little differences between communities that are found in high-density suburbs. The same situation prevailed in low-density suburbs. Because of this, the researcher collapsed information from the 15 suburbs into two main categories, high density and low-density suburbs. High-density suburbs in this research were: Ascot, Ivene, Mambo, Mkoba, Mtapa, Northlea and Senga. Low-density suburbs in the study were Athlone, Gweru East, Harben Park, Lundi Park, Nashville, Ridgemont, Riverside and Southdowns.

Results and Discussions

Objective 1 - The main concerns of theatre groups in Gweru.

Data with regards to this objective were presented and discussed as follows:

Table 1 – Drama is sometimes political in nature*N* = 300

Type of community	Agree	Disagree
Low Density	74 (24,7%)	66 (22%)
High Density	90(30%)	70 (23,3%)
Totals	164 (54,7%)	136 (45,3%)

Table 2 - Socio-economic issues are some of the concerns of African theatre.*N* = 300

Type of community	Agree	Disagree
Low Density	134 (44,7%)	5 (1,7%)
High Density	145 (48,3%)	16 (5,3%)
Totals	279 (93%)	21 (7%)

The above figures show that dramatic performances in the city of Gweru deal with political and socio-economic issues. The results in Table 1 show that a total of 164 (54,7%) people out of a sample size of 300 participants agreed that theatre groups visiting suburbs in Gweru dramatise political issues. In Table 2, a total of 279 (93%) agreed on the questionnaire that some of the concerns of theatre groups are social.

All participants (100) who were interviewed agreed that social issues were the main concerns of most theatre groups. The social problems identified were prostitution, corruption, witchcraft, divorce, marriage, religion and cultural decadence. Health themes such as AIDS, S.T.D and Kwashiorkor were also mentioned as concerns of the theatre groups.

The research findings from both the questionnaire and the interviews assert that in Gweru, drama is not just empty entertainment in the City of Gweru.

Objective 2 - Perceptions of community members with regards to the usefulness of theatre

Data for this objective were presented and discussed as follows:

Table 3 - Dramatic performances by theatre groups are very effective in promoting community awareness.

N = 300

Type of Community	Agree	Disagree
High Density	159 (53%)	3 (1%)
Low Density	127 (42,35%)	11 (3,7%)
Totals	286 (95,3%)	14 (4,7%)

An analysis of figure in Table 3 reveals that 286 (95,3%) of the respondents agreed that community theatre groups are very effective in promoting community awareness. In Gweru East, 15 out of 20 participants strongly agreed with the above statement. In Ascot, Athlone, Mambo, Northlea and Senga, there was no one who disagreed with the fact that theatre is an effective tool to change society.

Results of the interviews were similar to those of the questionnaire since 80 out of 100 of those interviewed affirmed that performances in Shona or Ndebele were more effective than those in English. When participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction, from the education they got from performances by theatre groups, that use indigenous languages, the majority indicated that the level of satisfaction was very high. A breakdown of the responses got showed that 255 (85%) of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied by the education they got from performances by indigenous theatre groups. It is interesting to note that respondents from low-density suburbs had people in the very low to slightly low satisfactory category. This means that drama in indigenous languages has a slightly limited effect in changing the thinking of people residing in low-density suburbs.

Conclusion

The findings of the study have shown that theatre plays a very important role in shaping community consciousness. The research clearly exposed to expose the main concerns or themes of dramatic performances in the City of Gweru. Furthermore, the findings of this study have proved that dramatic performances, which use indigenous languages, are very effective in shaping community thinking. Such performances, it has been proved in the study, are more effective than those in English and other foreign languages.

The study findings concur with Culp (1971) and Seda's (1999) views that say drama never exists in a vacuum. It is a part of human affairs. According to these authors, dramatic performances play a part in the development and reinforcement of human ideas and this came to be true in the findings of this study. The research results also agree with Traore's (1972) says African drama has an indisputable social function. He goes further to say drama is a mirror of life and this point was reaffirmed in this study. What was said of Africa (Ibid) is true of the City of Gweru. There is always a close affinity between theatre and society and it is only the African languages that can truly mirror African societies. The research findings also revealed that the use of indigenous languages in drama has been found to be more effective than using foreign European languages particularly in high density suburbs of Gweru.

Recommendations

1. The City of Gweru should use drama as a development tool for political, economic and social conscientization.
2. Actors and actresses need to be trained in order to improve quality of their performances. The Theatre Department at the Midlands State University should be approached with a view to assist in the training of actors.
3. Theatre groups in the City should be funded. The National Arts Council of Zimbabwe and non-governmental organisations should help in this regard. Money is required to transport performers from one community to another, buy props and costumes for use during performances.
4. The Gweru City Council should build more community halls especially in the low-density suburbs.
5. Theatre clubs in Gweru should make an effort to use the two indigenous languages, Shona and Ndebele, to communicate their messages to the people. Plays that are predominantly Shona tend to exclude those who speak Ndebele. There is therefore need for actors to be bilingual.
6. Entrance fees paid by audiences to watch plays in community halls should be reduced to a minimum. Many people fail to watch drama because of the exorbitant fees charged by groups that perform in community halls.

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