

From Convention to Desperate Innovation: The Impact of Covid-19 Lockdown on Live Theatre in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 plagued the world in the first half of the year 2020 and has continued to evolve, prompting one form of lockdown or another across the globe. With an estimated 526 million cases of infection worldwide and over 6.38 million deaths, the Virus became so dreaded to attract government intervention for lockdowns to minimize spread and mass transmission. Limits were placed on all forms of mass gatherings worldwide, including in Nigeria. Lockdown became a threat to all forms of entertainment, particularly live theatre performances. There was the need to devise other avenues to keep the industry alive. Using statistics from around the world, this paper referentially discussed the effects of the Pandemic on live Theatre worldwide and Nigeria in particular. Seven case studies were selected to interrogate the challenges, contingencies, strategic innovations, and marketing alternatives put in place by theatre companies to cope with the Pandemic when freedom of movement and public gathering was restricted. Data was qualitatively analyzed. Findings reveal that digital alternatives became the norm while online streaming and recorded skits became highly patronized. However, it still has not displaced the need for an in-person audience experience.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, theatre management, alternative Theatre, entertainment platforms

INTRODUCTION

The theatre industry has faced daunting challenges since 2020 when the news of the deadly Virus known as COVID-19 broke. Contact-related activities such as entertainment, Theatre, music, and outdoor exhibitions, which had a large crowd following, were more affected until public exhibitions of these performances were suspended. According to the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People's (ASSITEJ) publication of 2020, Joshua Alabi, in the currency of the time observed:

All activities have stopped. All events are cancelled. Artists are helpless, and funds are shut. No support system is available, and we only have to sit, look, go hungry and scamper for safety. The world is dying, and the soil is mourning. How the Virus handicapped The Artists. Only the artist knows. The Theatre is weeping with loneliness. (1)

The Virus was so ferocious in its spread and transmission and deadly in its infection that it was categorized with the Justinian plague of 541, the Black Death of 1347, and the Bubonic plague of 1621. (Kathryn & Paul, p1) These were some of the major plaques that had rampaged the human world throughout history. With an estimated 526 million cases of infection worldwide, and over 6.38 million deaths, COVID-19 is designated a tier 1 pandemic, much like this generation has never seen before by the World Health Organization (WHO). (Domenico & Maurizio, p1). In Nigeria alone, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) statistics show an abundant 256,000 cases with up to 3,143 deaths. It shattered the fabric of our realities as we know it and every form of gathering with human interaction as the world's governments shut down their bases to minimize transmission and mass spread. In some cases, total lockdown or curfew was introduced for many weeks.

The first lockdown occurred in January 2020 in Wuhan, one of China's major cities in the Hubei province, where the World Health Organization (WHO) first discovered the Virus around December 2019. By March of 2020, the Virus had spread to significant parts of the world. Italy declared a nationwide mandatory curfew and became the new epicenter of the Virus in the world. According to Official WHO data, Italy alone recorded 4,444,338 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 128,456 deaths between January 2020 and January 2021. A large percentage of the fatalities occurred amongst the old and elderly. The rest of the world took a cue from Italy's situation and implemented preventive measures. India's entire 1.3 billion population was ushered into a mandatory stay-at-home period on March 24, 2020 (Kochhar, et al, p2), making it the largest imposed curfew during the Pandemic. By mid-April of the same year, about 3.9 billion people, about half of the global population, were undergoing one form of lockdown.

METHODOLOGY

In the absence of a comprehensive database of active theatre companies in Nigeria, a purposive non-probability sampling method was utilized for this study. Efforts were made to sample case studies from each state of Nigeria, however, only six states had active theatre companies that functioned during COVID-19 which represented the north, south, east and west of Nigeria. This paper adopted a mixed empirical approach for data gathering through observation, one-on-one interviews using sampled questions, consultation of archival materials and relevant literature. Data obtained were analyzed using qualitative methods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The lockdown restrictions made certain that many performing arts festivals were cancelled around the world, including the much-anticipated 2020 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which according to Maddy Roberts, experienced cancellation for the first time in 60 years. The 2020 edition of the Hong Kong Arts Festival and Oerol Festival in the Netherlands were also cancelled. Festivals typically have extensive infrastructure requirements, from stages to tents and catering. The supply chain connects to many other industries, generating significant economic benefits for organizers, artists, and the host cities. According to an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publication, the list of festivals that have been cancelled worldwide due to the pandemic crisis is astounding, ranging from world-renowned international film, music, religious and design festivals, and carnivals to more local events celebrating local traditions. (16). For instance, it is estimated that Austin, Texas's South by Southwest (SXSW) - an annual conglomeration of parallel film, interactive media, and music festivals and conferences - postponement resulted in a loss of income of almost USD 4.3 million. Also, when the festival returned, due to the severe cutbacks in income and earnings caused by the crisis, festival attendees who typically pay for food and drink, transportation, and entrance for ticketed events may no longer have the same capability in the future.

The world-famous Broadway Theatre, which is a beacon to all theatre companies and practitioners worldwide, with it being a platform for about 10,000 artists and artists, was closed around March of the year 2020 due to the Virus. Charlotte St. Martin, the president of the Broadway League, in a Spectrum publication, lamented:

There are 97,000 jobs attached to Broadway for both the people we employ or cause to be employed. So, all of those people are affected, whether it be their rent, their health insurance, or the food they put on their table. (1)

This could be said to be the case for all major theatre companies worldwide. The Sydney Opera House was closed for 15 months; all West End Theatre companies were also forced to shut down for more than a year. According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) survey, pulling data from 20 countries worldwide that collectively account for 61% of the global economy, it is estimated that substantial job losses in the cultural and creative industries were registered very quickly during the Pandemic. This ranges from a high of 55% decline in the Philippines to a low of 13% fall in New Zealand, which happens to have fewer cases of the virus outbreak in the world, with just four thousand cases and twenty-seven Deaths. (21)

Other studies also provide further evidence of how badly workers in the Theatre, cultural and creative industries have been affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic across the world. For instance, Mercosur et al observed that

across South and Central America, between July and September 2020, 55% of cultural and creative industries workers are estimated to have experienced a decrease in income of more than 80% (1). In analyzing the American creative industry, Richard and Michael assert that “we estimate losses of 2.7 million jobs and more than \$150 billion in sales of goods and services for creative industries nationwide, representing nearly a third of all jobs in those industries and 9% of annual sales”. (3). He observed further that the fine and performing arts industries would be hit hardest and suffer estimated losses of almost 1.4 million jobs and \$42.5 billion in sales. It is to be noted that these estimated losses represent 50% of all jobs in those industries and more than a quarter of all lost sales nationwide (4).

Nigeria’s Covid-19 Challenges

Nigeria unavoidably adopted the precautions recommended by international health organizations. The Nigerian presidential task force approved and enforced a phase 1 total lockdown on March 25, 2020, that lasted till the end of May. Phase 2 adopted staggered measures, which involved only the senior management staff of organizations reporting for duty. The two months of total lockdown jolted the entertainment community; it was terrifying to imagine that drama, music, exhibitions, and sports lovers could not visit the venues designed to see these events live.

The first lockdown in Nigeria saw the complete shutdown of all major industries in Nigeria, especially the entertainment and hospitality sector, with many theatre outfits, both government and privately owned, cinemas, events venues, clubhouses, lounges, hotels, restaurants, etc., closing their doors indefinitely. Popular performance venues like Awolowo Way, Quilox, Ikeja, Freedom Park, Muson Centre, Eko Hotel, Terra Kulture, the National Theatre, Cubana, Hard Rock Café, and the various councils for arts and culture nationwide went on a compulsory holiday.

For the Arojah Royal Theatre, one of the leading commercial theatre companies with a base in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, the lockdown produced a devastating effect that affected the company. The theatre company annually produces a drama series around International Women’s Day, a Corporate Social Responsibility event they have engaged in since 2011. The company organized a technical run on March 10 to fine-tune the production that was supposed to run from the 27th to the 30th of the same month. The lockdown came into effect on the 25th, halting all plans and efforts to stage the production. “It is unfortunate that we spent nearly four million Naira on a production, yet we could not earn even one naira because the production did not happen,” says Jerry Adesewo, the creative director of Arojah. He mentioned that the loss of freedom of movement disrupted all plans for their 2020/2021 theatre series.

All the way in Jos, a North Central City in Nigeria, The Jos Repertory Theatre had just finished its 14th Jos International Festival of Theatre 2020 on March 14, 2020, and the National lockdown commenced a week later. Jude Oteh, the Artistic Director, stated; “At the festival, we had thought that the lockdown threats from the government were a joke, but we were proved wrong a week later. No one saw it coming”. The lockdown caused all major companies to close, including those sponsoring the festival. The expected funds from sponsors could not be received because businesses suddenly shut down. The sudden loss of revenue stream meant the company had to dig into its emergency surplus account to settle all ensuing expenditures, but that proved unsustainable in the face of prolonged lockdown restrictions. Oteh stated that

We had thought that the lockdown would last for maybe a maximum of three months, so we resorted to our surplus to pay our full-time staff of 6. During the 6th month, we realized that the lockdown would be a long one, so we started to find other things to do with our time.

The theatre company had to let go of all company staff by December 20, following the path of countless organizations worldwide. Three staff members decided to stay, but salaries had to be cut by 50%, pending a project substantial enough to sustain the remaining crew. The company has remained comatose but was desperately working to return to full capacity.

Lagos was perhaps the most affected, as far as the lockdown in Nigeria was concerned because of the high number of entertainment hotspots offering theatrical activities, like the, Freedom Park, Muson Centre, Eko Hotel,

Terra Kulture, the National Theatre, etc. Center Stage Productions, a live theatre and film-producing company domiciled in Lagos, was commissioned for two major productions at the beginning of 2020. The first production, *Adefolahan the Musical*, was staged at Muson Centre in February 2020. The other production, named “ACACIA” (Achieving Control of Asthma for Children in Africa), had to be unavoidably cancelled. The performance was an applied theatre project titled *In Control* and was Sponsored by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) United Kingdom, and produced in collaboration with Lagos State University College of Medicine (LASUCOM)

According to Sola Fosudo, the CEO/Creative Director, the project was meant to commence in April, but it had to be put on hold following the lockdown announcement in March. The plan was to take the play to about fifteen Secondary Schools in Lagos State, including selected local government councils, but the COVID 19 lockdown aborted the project. In his words, ‘We were simply not able to do any business during the lockdown’.

Kiniso Concepts, a travelling/repertory theatre company, had just returned to Lagos after a countrywide tour of the play *Talk and Do*, which was an advocacy on social ills. The play premiered at the 2020 edition of the Lagos Theatre Festival and had managed to stage the production in Abuja, with a plan to produce it in two other states but was forced to return to Lagos amidst a total lockdown. The company also planned an international trip to Berlin in May to be part of the Fratz International Festival and then to Düsseldorf, Germany, in June 2020. Joshua Alabi, the company’s creative director, asserts that; “2020 was a year we had a lot planned, and we were looking forward to continuing the tour after a short period, but we did not know the lockdown was going to last for that long.” Just like JRT, and many other Nigerian companies, they didn’t envision that a total lockdown could last as long as it did in Nigeria.

Alabi also revealed that some major revenue from their Abuja performance was delayed by their sponsors, as they too were forced to close for business. The company went into debt trying to support the artists and other staff members during the lockdown by giving resources and accommodating them on the studio grounds. Still, with no revenue coming in, the outfit had to let go of some of its artists and half of the administrative. The company still operates at half capacity since the lockdown, with temporary or contract staff employed to fill in the vacuum when putting up production.

Malete Mask Theatre, a private theatre company domiciled in Ilorin Kwara state, shut down all operations entirely due to the lockdown. With little to no resources, the company had to let go of all staff members, numbering about 25 people, and slipped into hibernation, awaiting favourable circumstances. According to the Project Manager, ‘It (MMT) went on lockdown too. But we used it as a period to rest and prepare for post-lockdown’.

Ikon Afrikaana Theatre, a privately-owned theatre based in Calabar, Cross River state, cancelled all its scheduled performances and would have shut down completely were it not for the proximity of some members of staff and artists to the studio grounds. Even though no performance was scheduled for the near future, the company was able to continue rehearsals just to keep the spirit of the artists together.

Perhaps there was a silver lining in the case of continued business in the Nigerian theatre space, as a handful of companies, through sheer luck and earlier investment, were able to power through the murky water the industry was thrown into. Crown Troupe of Africa, domiciled in Bariga, Lagos state, provided such lining. At the announcement of the Lockdown, the company was able to ensure continued activities through the Crown Arts Factory, a fully resident studio and rehearsal space. Most of the artists working in the company are residents in the factory, including the artistic director. This, of course makes it relatively possible for the company to come together and continue rehearsal in the safety of the factory grounds.

More than thirty institutional Theatres present in Nigeria were closed since their domicile University institutions also shut down for the compulsory holiday. The dominant response to the survey conducted for this paper concludes that 80% of all institutional theatres resorted to online interactions by making students send in recorded solo performances in their workshops and practical courses, while lectures progressed via Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp groups, Google Meet, or Zoom

Strategic Innovation and Contingencies

After months of lockdown, theatre managers worldwide were forced to develop innovations as to how their theatres could re-open to the public. This is important so that some level of business can resume, and money can be made, taking into cognizance the safety of their artists, workforce, and patrons alike. One such innovation is the idea to replace in-person performances with virtual art experiences. This was done through the use of online tools, which provide an opportunity for managers and their artists to reach many audience members in the comfort of their homes. This helped in creating a new form of live theatre and entertainment because, as Costola asserted, “the concept of being live and being present are being deconstructed and made more complicated than simply ‘we are in the same place at the same time.’ ... The notion of ‘liveness’ does not dictate the thing itself, but it’s how you experience it.” (1)

It is crucial to see Costola’s point from another perspective. This means that since we have always thought of Theatre as a space for live performance, one must reconsider the definition so as to create a new form of Theatre. Orchestras, bands, instrumentalists, and other musical artists utilized alternative spaces like Zoom, Hulu, Facebook, Instagram Live, and other web-based platforms to hold performances, live concerts, and shows streamed to millions worldwide. This validates Costola’s assertion that; “As devastating as the pandemic is for a lot of people individually and for the industry, it can also be an opportunity to rethink theatre.” (1).

The Nigerian theatre industry was not left behind in the race to keep Theatre alive in people’s minds and hopefully encourage more people to want to watch theatre productions when the lockdown is over. Jude Oteh emphasizes that his company started to learn how to use Zoom for online performances when the emergency surplus account ran out due to the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown. He expresses that;

It was during the 6th month that we realized that the lockdown was going to be a long one... some artists had used the online portal for meetings, so we needed to find out how it could effectively be used for performances. We went through this learning process until December 2020. The learning process came from a “challenge gift” from one of our donors.

This learning process he mentioned brought to the surface a critical factor that was hitherto lacking in theatre management, especially in the ways we do theatre in Nigeria, which is the technical know-how or lack of skill and knowledge needed in today’s technology-driven world. This vacuum in knowledge was felt heavily by managers, artists, and even the potential online audience at the advent of COVID-19 in Nigeria. While virtual platforms have been one of the most widely adopted adaptations for arts organizations and artists, they come with some severe limitations. For example, many artists and arts organizations had to purchase new equipment and systems; workers had to learn various new skills such as video and sound editing, camera, and equipment rigging. Also, managers who had dealt predominantly with live audiences had to learn now how to monetize their offerings in a virtual environment. As aptly put by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) quoted earlier, even though the distribution of free digitally mediated cultural content cannot be sustained over time, there is still a need to address the industry's lack of digital skills and expand access to the internet outside of major cities.

At the same time, especially in a country like Nigeria, it is not guaranteed that audiences will be able to fully adapt to a virtual environment without a seamless central payment medium, high-speed internet facilities, and regular power supply, which are essential resources that digital platforms rely on to function. Therefore, reaching a large number of people to guarantee enough profits poses a challenge in the Nigerian space. No doubt, if high-speed internet connectivity is achieved, the opportunity for online theatre options will be a goldmine for producers, particularly with the rate of internet user penetration, which in 2021, according to statistica.com stands at 108 million or 51.44% of Nigeria’s population and is projected to reach 59.92% by 2026.

Jos Repertory Theatre, utilizing Zoom, live-streamed their subsequent performances or streamed pre-recorded plays to their online audience, which proved to be cheaper business-wise. The company packaged and produced a virtual performance of Zulu Sofolas *Wedlock of the Gods* and *The Engagement* by Sefi Atta. Access to the virtual performance of *wedlock of the gods*, created on March 21, 2021, was granted for 2,500 Naira, paid via a virtual financial technology payment platform called Flutterwave. The online audience turnout for the play

is currently 947 views on YouTube.

Crown Troupe came up with the *Real-tual* performance platform, their version of hybrid performance. The company sets up a lowkey performance for just a few people. It then distributes the performance virtually, using platforms like Zoom, Instagram and Facebook Live as a medium.

Kiniso Koncepts decided to organize and attend training programs and workshops where they can train artists in several skills, like leadership and management, digital marketing and advertising, content and copywriting, and other workshops. According to the creative director, the company also dabbled into media by creating a series of short films and media content re-adapted from stage plays previously performed. This move was in a quest to digitize theatre stories and distribute them via YouTube and other social media platforms. The company created the *Home Theatre Series*, a 25-episode series that borders on varied thematic issues like social justice, corruption, persons living with disabilities, accountability, the Nigerian prisons System, rape and assaults, genital mutilations, and child marriage, amongst others. Some of the videos pulled as many as two thousand views on YouTube and over fifty thousand views on Facebook.

The company also experimented with what has come to be known as *Telephone Whispers*, which was an attempt to give their pre-pandemic lockdown audience members a treat. The idea was to dig into the company's database and put a telephone call to random numbers, asking if they could spare five minutes to listen to a piece of poetry, a monologue, or even a play excerpt. The aim was to reach their patrons unconventionally and mitigate the lockdown depression by putting a smile on their faces. Although this innovation could not be sustained for long due to the high cost of Airtime, with every available income diverted somewhere else, the company was still able to, according to the creative director, for a short while during the lockdown live up to its maxim of "Telling stories, Connecting People, and Inspiring Greatness".

Arojah Royal Theatre in Abuja also took to Zoom to hold what was termed 'play readings and interactive sessions during the lockdown, just to keep their audience engaged. This innovation takes the traditional play reading sessions a step further by getting their online audience involved in the interactive session with the playwrights and authors, where the plot, thematic structures, and other issues drawn up by the play are discussed with the attending playwright/author.

As a result of the lockdown restrictions, which warrant half capacity for any public gathering, the Arojah Royal Theatre company created a hybrid performance of the play "*What the Hunter saw*" written by Makinde Adeniran in October of 2021. The play was executed on three different platforms: the Command Performance, the Public Show, and Virtual access via Zoom or Youtube. The online access ticket was capped at 4 dollars, 3 euros, and its equivalent in other currencies. This provided more profit, sponsorships, and wider coverage for the Theatre Company. According to the producer, Jerry Adesewo, there were over 50 people that turned in virtually for the performance.

Another theatre company resident at the Terra Kulture, BAP Productions, Lagos, kept their audience engaged by streaming recordings of their plays on their Youtube channel every Sunday until the gradual easing of the lockdown restrictions. The stream witnessed over a thousand viewers tuning to the youtube channel to watch the play, *Fela*. According to Joseph Umoibom, as cited in Frank Eleanys Bussines Day Article, utilizing the company's Youtube channel bridged the physical gap between the company and its patrons, as "the company was in the middle of productions when the lockdown was announced, which saw the show's cancellation and tickets fees being refunded." (2).

Although many scholars and critics alike have argued about the effectiveness of online theatre experience against the traditional form of theatre-making, Jerry Adesewo, in an interview, opined that there is and should be no basis for comparison between the two modes of theatre presentation. The two are instead complementary. He explains further that all productions at the Arojah Theatre pre-COVID only cater to an Abuja audience, but the dynamics of their patrons have changed significantly post-COVID, with their hybrid digital/online productions pulling in the audience outside of Abuja and even outside of Nigeria.

Digital technologies are gradually recreating the spaces in which people usually encounter Theatre and the arts

in general. New digital content and platforms have become the virtual venues for the new normal when fending off isolation, even though it does not replace in-person experience. A study in the UK by the Policy and Evidence Centre for the Creative Industries suggests arts and culture have become an even more integral part of most of our daily lives during confinement thanks to the initiative of many artists to move a bulk of their content to digital platforms. Festivals of plays, Art festivals, and large-scale theatre productions can now be planned and executed successfully despite the restrictions of movements. An example is the 36-hour non-stop theatre experience that will showcase performances, workshops, webinars, art documentaries, and other related works from around the world, organized by the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA). The festival is Tagged; “Together we go on,” a clarion call to artists who survived the Pandemic.

Much like the Arojah Royal Theatre, other theatre production companies put together a performance and then embed a donation link in the bio of the video broadcasted during the live stream for voluntary donations from the viewers. This eventually became a secondary source of revenue for the theatre outfit and the artist in question. Some virtual platforms enable private performances for more access control, making it easier for theatre managers and artists to sell tickets and generate revenue for their concerts by activating premium subscriptions. It also allowed the managers to continue to serve their patrons.

With the post-pandemic online performance tradition gaining ground and total lockdown gradually easing up in Nigeria, different production houses moved to incorporate virtual live streaming to go alongside their command or live performances. This becomes an added profit-making revenue, bringing in extra cash at particularly no cost from the management and producers. It also comes with the added benefit of getting content to reach a more comprehensive network of people, most times crossing international and continental borders, as people can tune in to enjoy a theatrical offering anywhere.

Another laudable innovation brought into the Nigerian theatre space is the drive-in Theatre, an option to physicalise the theatre experience. A drive-in theatre is a cinematic structure with a large outdoor theatre performance or movie show in a large parking lot. Uzondu observed that Before the Pandemic, drive-in theatre performances had been relatively rare across the world (95), with the term only common in the movie cinema industry and amongst the hospitality industry, that is, drive-in restaurant or drive-through car-wash service. The considerable strain on the theatre and creative industry caused by the novel COVID-19 has seen a boom in its utilization and attendance in countries like the U.K., U.S., Spain, and France, with Nigeria finally joining the league.

The drive-in theatre experience was first used in Nigeria in July of 2020, at the parking lot of the Sheraton Hotel, Abuja, by the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), offering a series of dance and music performances, and ended with Ola Rotimi’s *GRIP AM*, directed by Agozie Ugwu, the creative director for Mozaic Productions. In line with COVID experience and compliance with government regulations on social distancing and ensuring a risk-free environment, the drive-in Theatre and cinema screening was accessed by a selected few with no more than 50 vehicles spaced two meters apart. A radio frequency was also created strictly for the production, which transmitted the production’s audio into all cars present, as long as their radio was tuned into the frequency dial.

Runsewe, the Director-General of the National Council Of Arts And Culture (NCAC) asserts that following the strictures and economic strangulations facing the entertainment sector, it was necessary to throw a challenge to theatre stakeholders that could represent government admonition. He also notes that with numerous events cancelled and the Nigerian arts and cultural industry amongst the most severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic, from another perspective though, COVID-19 is like rain, and it provides us with the chance to think creatively and develop fresh ideas, like the virtual cultural tour and this (the drive-in theatre), which act as a “treatment and raincoat for the Pandemic”. The audience enjoys the communal leisure experience from the comfort and safety of their vehicles. Considering that a car contains an individual, friends, or family, driven-in is no doubt a boxed-in, isolated unit, it still provides a community of outdoor entertainment to patrons, as does a theatre venue.

Jerry Adesewo also opines that the drive-in theatre has become an excellent stop-gap and addition to continuing business in the time of the Pandemic and the new normal. As cited in Gregory Nwakunor’s article, he contends that:

desperate times require desperate measures.... so I would say Nigeria is ripe for it.. If we had not done it with *Grip Am*, one would have thought it impossible. But with what Mozaic Production did in Abuja, I believe Nigeria is ripe for it. (1)

As perceived in Nigeria and around the world, Theatre is an intangible human experience. Despite the removal of freedom of movement and gatherings, humanity will continue to crave, hence the adaptation of the Drive-In experience. Around the world, theatre financiers are also commissioning new scripts created explicitly for outdoor spaces. This is an attempt to keep marketing theatre to enthusiastic audiences and keep the business running. Mark Loewenstern, writing for Barron's Magazine, commented about Adam Szymkowicz's *The Parking Lot*, an upbeat two-person play about a couple publicly evaluating their relationship, recently produced by Majestic Repertory Theatre in Las Vegas and Iowa's Mirror Box Theatre, where audiences watch from their cars while tuning in to a local FM station to hear the already microphoned actors. (1).

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

The lockdown set in motion varying forms of creative collaborations between Nigerian theatre outfits and international bodies to advance drama and theatre in Nigeria. This supports Dipti Bramhandkar's assertion that "A silver lining of the pandemic is the ability to collaborate across boundaries, time zones and cultures in a seamless way" (1). Whether it is a training workshop for artists, an online theatre festival, or just a straight-up performance for entertainment purposes, the lockdown opened up the Nigerian theatre space to foreign partnerships.

The Arojah Royal Theater company collaborated with Ulster University in Northern Ireland to produce the 'Nigeria-Northern Ireland cultural exchange workshop, where a series of seminars and workshops on theatre and theatre management was organized for an online audience. This attracted, according to Adesewo, artists and theatre practitioners across the globe.

Kiniso Concepts was able to secure a space with Luxury Academy, London, where they participated in a month-long training on Leadership and management, engaging staff members still present at the studio. The company also collaborated with Theatre O.N, an outfit in Berlin, for a research laboratory section as part of the bigger Fratz International Festival. They performed the play *Skin Tone*, a play addressing the issue of colourism, racism, and discrimination. Kiniso Kincepts was also involved with Junges Schauspiel, an English-speaking government theatre in Düsseldorf, Germany, for a production collaboration.

Crown Troupe of Africa as a company was part of the cast of an intercontinental production titled *The Art of Facing Fear*, which was a play presented live by an international cast ensemble featuring artists from three different continents. It was produced by Os Satyros, a Brazilian experimental theatre company, in collaboration with other international production houses.

In a collaborative trans-continental virtual production of *Long-Distance Affair*, Crown Troupe also collaborated with Juggerknot Theatre Company, Mumbai, India, and PopUP Theatrics', USA/Romania. Scripted and designed to be performed virtually, it involves 18 theatre artists from six cities around the world — Mumbai/India, Portland/USA, Mexico City/Mexico, Lagos/Nigeria, Beirut/Lebanon, and Los Angeles/USA.

The Jos Repertory Theatre also teamed up with an international partner, New Swan Shakespeare Theatre, at the "All the World's a Stage" theatre festival, organized by the University of California, Irvine. The collaboration produced a performance of excerpts from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and other excerpts in Yoruba, Ibo, Pidgin, and Hausa to an online audience.

Rethinking Audience Engagement

Audience engagement and interaction has become a critical factor that needs a lot of adjustment since the advent of COVID. With World Governments gradually easing the lockdown after months of total curfew and businesses opening up, including theatre facilities, albeit at half capacity, audience engagement now became another hurdle to cross. Since the Virus is spread by contact with infected surfaces and bodily fluids, theatre managers have to

develop ways to limit, if not remove, the chances of their patrons and staff members getting infected with the Virus. Apart from social distancing and limiting the number of people in an auditorium at a particular time, in response to COVID-19, Nigerian theatres have adopted several safety innovations to ensure audience and staff well-being.

Contactless ticketing is now common, with personalized barcodes sent via email for scanning at the venue, reducing the handling of cash or paper tickets. Patrons undergo compulsory temperature checks using devices like the Thermometer Gun to detect potential symptoms. Hand sanitizer stands are positioned throughout theatre spaces for easy access. Other measures include mandatory facemask use, designated entry and exit points to manage foot traffic, and pre-ordered refreshments to reduce human interaction. Furthermore, theatres emphasize regular cleaning and sanitization of the auditorium after each performance, ensuring a safe environment for both staff and audiences. These practices represent how Nigerian theatre has adapted to operate safely during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

COVID was, and still is, a challenge to the entire world, with many countries still looking for a way out. Theatre Managers and showrunners must create innovative ways to keep their outfits running and keep all artists and crewmembers busy. Even with the government's intervention and palliative distribution, artists still need to develop ways to support themselves. With the aid of technology and other innovative creations, theatre managers have devised ways to reach their patrons and ensure continued business.

With the scramble to go digital, and the struggle faced by the Nigerian theatre industry, an important lesson that theatre managers must learn, and this cuts across all respondents, is the idea of preparation. While the Nigerian theatre industry is crucial for cultural expression and storytelling, it must adapt to the evolving world of digital and hybrid performances. Creative solutions that incorporate virtual platforms, augmented reality, and online collaborations will ensure that theatre remains accessible and relevant, even without the traditional physical settings. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a wake-up call for the Nigerian performing arts sector, revealing the vulnerabilities of theatre reliant solely on physical spaces. While theatre is vital, it must now embrace alternative and creative approaches to thrive in the modern era, and by embracing these innovations, the industry can expand its reach and continue to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

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