

## Advancing Theatre For Amelioration Of Social Dysfunctionality: Towards Theatrical Intervention In The Twenty-First Century Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

This study repositions and articulates theatre as an instrument of social intervention in Nigeria, with attention to its capacity to confront social dysfunctionality. The study responds to the insufficient scholarly postulations on theatre as a practical mechanism for social reform and public conscientisation in Nigerian theatre scholarship. The study draws insights from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed that emphasizes the engagement of theatre for social transformation and democratic engagement by breaking down the barrier between performer and audience, transforming passive spectators into active creators. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study is carried out through advancement of methodological principles towards theatre for amelioration of social dysfunctionality in Nigeria. The study establishes that theatre should move from restricted spaces to popular community settings, eliminate barriers between actors and audiences by creating "spect-actors," encourage people to represent and solve their own problems through improvisation and participation, and focus on addressing concrete social realities. The study concludes that theatre possesses substantial capacity to stimulate public awareness, encourage communal responsibility, challenge social abnormalities and promote social reform. Hence, the study contributes to the fields of development communication and theatre-for-development by promoting the use of theatre as a participatory process for social engagement and transformation.

**Keywords:** Theatre for amelioration, Social dysfunctionality, Social intervention, Theatre of the oppressed, Nigerian theatre.

### **1. Introduction**

Theatre remains one of the most enduring cultural institutions in human society because of its capacity to interrogate public life, influence social conduct and stimulate communal consciousness. From primordial times when it evolved from rituals to modern times when it attained full development, it has always played major roles in the life of man. The ancient Greeks placed theatre on the pedestal of religious ritual, involving the entire society as participants and the best brains as



its creators. Theatre in ancient Greece was of such importance that whenever it was in session, it brought all business, politics and even war to a standstill (Hall, 2010; Brockett & Hildy, 2014). It was the intellectual counterpart of that great festival of physical prowess which the Greeks have now bequeathed to the whole world—the Olympic Games.

To the Romans, theatre played a major role in entertaining society, especially those on the upper pedestals of the social strata. Although to the early church, theatre was a devilish institution to be obliterated from society, the same church later adopted (during the medieval period) the Mystery, Miracle and Morality plays, and elevated same to the high level of holy rites. To the Greeks and the Romans, theatre was a vital living experience that probed into some of life's most basic problems with utmost honesty.

Greek tragedy aimed at affecting a catharsis, a purgation of the human soul “through pity and fear” (Aristotle, 1995: 51). In essence, it aimed at showing the diametrical and dialectical nature of the world and tries to ameliorate individual sorrows through the enactment of the greater sorrows of the tragic characters. Greek comedy had the direct function of attacking social and political foibles — evils and errors that could engender social dysfunctionality or disintegration. It was thus a way of bringing society to a state of equilibrium and sanctity.

As a reflection of the totality of human existence, theatre functions as a medium for exploring the meaning of life and the complexities of existence. It operates on both aesthetic and utilitarian planes, fulfilling humanity's desire for artistic beauty while simultaneously stimulating critical and intellectual engagement with the ideas, values, and conditions that shape society. During the peak of the World Wars, Bertolt Brecht employed theatre through his Epic Theatre, using drama as an instrument of social and political consciousness. Likewise, the German Jacobin Theatre utilized trade unions and political associations as platforms for staging plays aimed at enlightening workers about their social realities and collective condition.

In Africa, the East African literary giant, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his partner Ngugi wa Mirri made use of a community theatre, which they formed, organized and directed to develop the Kamiriithu community in Kenya. The theatre sought pragmatic solutions to the problems of the community and provided a forum for the community's leaders to come together to discuss plans for social development. The Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre—a peasant and workers-

controlled organization—got set up. Consequently, laudable projects like adult education, study groups, health education and cultural activities boomed in the community. A big open-air theatre that sits about two thousand people was constructed by communal efforts and plays that reflect the peoples' experiences, grievances, yearnings and aspirations were staged in the theatre (Wa Thiong'o, 1994). These activities forced the Kenyan authorities to respond positively to the needs of the community. It also reduced illiteracy and social crimes within the community (Bjorkman, 1989). Indeed, responsible theatres have at different times always sought to solve society's problems.

This study advances a strategic deployment of modern theatrical interventions as catalysts for the amelioration of social dysfunctionality in twenty-first-century Nigeria. By re-evaluating the intersection of performance, grassroots mobilisation, and structural criticism, this article discusses how participatory theatre models can bridge the gap between marginalisation and civic agency. Ultimate emphasis is placed on moving beyond performance as a passive reflection of trauma. Instead, it positions the stage as an active ideological laboratory—a space to rehearse and implement real-world structural transformation, social integration, and democratic enculturation.

## **2. Conceptualizing Socio-Political Dysfunctionality In Twenty-First-Century Nigeria**

Before theatre is honed for the challenging role of ameliorating social dysfunctionality, there is a need to agree on the presence of dysfunctionality in society and an ability to identify the causative factors. Dysfunctionality implies a deterioration of proper functioning, as of some bodily organ. Social dysfunctionality therefore is a situation when society is not functioning the way it should, when there are various forms of deterioration in society. It connotes a nation in distress, a situation in which Nigeria is in. Social dysfunctionality manifests when a state's institutional designs and decision-making processes are undermined by structural pathologies, institutional corruption, and a severe disconnect from the needs of the populace. In twenty-first-century Nigeria, this condition is further intensified by the politics of displacement and marginalisation embedded within the country's sociopolitical structure.

This environment is characterized by the systemic silencing of the masses by political elites, the suppression of minority nationalities by dominant groups, and the economic exploitation of resource-rich yet impoverished regions. There is no gainsaying the fact, for instance, that Nigeria

in the twenty-first century has been in a mess, politically, socially and most devastating of all, economically. The effects of this mess on citizens are multifarious. Life has lost meaning to many Nigerians. Poverty and hunger, terrorism and banditry, kidnapping and wanton killings rule the nation as mobile skeletons traverse the land in human forms as a result of apprehension. There is what Madeline (1961: 21) refers to as “introgression” (internalized aggression) as many frustrated citizens have turned to aggressive psychopaths.

In a situation like this, when politicians have failed to make life meaningful, and have proved to be greater problems to the nation, rather than solutions to the national problem, when life is losing meaning, when atrophy rules the land, theatre has roles to play in the amelioration of social dysfunctionality. This multifaceted crisis demands a critical medium capable of cutting through institutional stagnation to spark a “change awareness” across variant social platforms. As Igboayaka (2023: 48) observes, “socio-political systems in Nigeria have historically alienated the subaltern classes, creating an urgent imperative for cultural tools that do not merely report dysfunction but actively provoke a critical change awareness among the citizenry”.

The failure of mainstream political and legal institutions to guarantee equitable citizen participation has generated an urgent need for counter-hegemonic cultural practices that offer alternative platforms for democratic engagement. When state apparatuses become instruments of oppression, artistic interventions serve as alternative sites for civic reclamation.

### **3. Functional Theatre Practice And The Rejection Of Escapist Aesthetics**

Functional theatre practice proceeds from the understanding that theatrical expression should engage social realities and contribute meaningfully to public existence rather than retreat into aesthetic insulation, commercial frivolity or ideological indifference. Afolabi (1994) criticizes the abandonment of theatre’s social obligations in favor of mercantile considerations and artistic irresponsibility. He argues that theatre becomes socially functional when it stimulates civic reflection, public dialogue and communal awareness concerning prevailing political, economic and ethical conditions. Historically, theatre has served not merely as diversion but as a mechanism for interrogating human conduct, confronting institutional contradictions and mediating collective anxieties. Whiting (1969) observes that theatre has consistently functioned as a significant social

institution because of its ability to communicate public concerns through communal participation and symbolic representation.

The rejection of escapist aesthetics does not imply hostility towards pleasure, humor or artistic sophistication. Entertainment remains central to theatrical communication because emotional engagement sustains audience participation and facilitates public accessibility. Nevertheless, entertainment detached from ethical reflection risks reducing theatre into spectacle emptied of civic significance. Harvie (2022: 67) therefore warns that neoliberal entertainment industries increasingly convert performance into “consumable distraction rather than public interrogation”. Within contemporary Nigeria, this danger manifests through theatrical productions excessively preoccupied with sensationalism, celebrity culture and commercial attraction while neglecting social engagement and ideological seriousness.

Brockett and Hildy (2014) similarly note that historically enduring theatrical traditions were those capable of combining artistic appeal with communal relevance and moral inquiry. Theatre and ideological purpose consequently remain inseparable. Theatre inevitably communicates assumptions concerning morality, citizenship, authority and social responsibility regardless of whether such communication is explicit or implicit. Contemporary African performance scholarship increasingly rejects claims of artistic neutrality within societies experiencing inequality, violence and institutional instability. Moyo (2023: 118), examining contemporary African protest performance, contends that theatrical practice becomes socially irresponsible when it “normalizes silence in moments demanding public confrontation”. Performance therefore functions as ideological discourse because it shapes public perception concerning justice, exploitation and democratic responsibility.

Commercialization has significantly altered contemporary theatrical practice across many societies, including Nigeria. Increasing dependence upon sponsorship structures, market visibility and profitability frequently pressures theatre towards superficial entertainment capable of attracting immediate consumption rather than sustained reflection. Obafemi (2021: 41) observes that commercial entertainment culture within Nigeria has weakened theatre’s “educative and interventionist mandate” by prioritizing spectacle above ideological commitment.

The question of public accountability, however, remains central to functional theatre practice. Theatre practitioners operate within societies confronting corruption, unemployment, insecurity, social fragmentation and ethical deterioration. Consequently, performance possesses obligations towards communal wellbeing and democratic consciousness. Public accountability within theatre does not require rigid propaganda or doctrinaire ideological conformity. Rather, it requires awareness concerning the social implications of artistic production. Theatre that glorifies greed, celebrates dubious wealth or normalizes exploitation contributes indirectly to moral deterioration and civic disengagement. Okechukwu and Musa (2024: 89) therefore maintain that African theatre must recover “its public pedagogical role within fractured postcolonial societies”. Functional theatre consequently requires ethical seriousness, ideological consciousness and communal relevance.

#### **4. Boal’s Notion Of Theatre And The Idea Of Social Transformation**

Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ remains one of the most influential theatrical frameworks for participatory performance and social transformation. The theory challenges hierarchical distinctions between performers and spectators by proposing theatre as a democratic process of collective engagement. Boal (2008) rejected conventional theatre structures that positioned audiences as passive consumers of dramatic action. He argued, “Theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (Boal, 2008: 98). Hence, he advocates participatory practices through which spectators intervene directly within performance situations and collectively interrogate oppressive social realities.

Boal’s participatory theatre model was substantially influenced by Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of conscientisation. Freire (1970) defines conscientisation as the process through which oppressed populations acquire awareness concerning the structures responsible for their condition and develop the capacity for transformative action. Theatre of the Oppressed operationalizes this pedagogical principle through participatory performance exercises encouraging audiences to analyze social contradictions and rehearse possible interventions. Boal (2002: 141) therefore insists that theatre should function as “rehearsal for reality” through which communities collectively examine oppressive situations before confronting them within public life.

Conscientisation within participatory theatre extends beyond emotional sympathy towards political and ideological awareness. Interventionist performance encourages audiences to recognize



relationships between personal suffering and institutional structures. Through role exchange, improvisation and collective discussion, participants critically examine social conditions rather than merely consuming dramatic narratives. Prentki and Preston (2021: 57) argue that participatory theatre enables communities “to move from silence towards public articulation of shared anxieties and aspirations”. Such performance practices therefore contribute to public engagement by transforming isolated frustrations into collective consciousness.

Spectatorship occupies a central position in Boal’s concept of theatre engagement for social transformation. Conventional theatre structures often reduce audiences to detached observers with limited influence over represented realities. Boal challenges this passivity by introducing the concept of the “spect-actor,” a participant who simultaneously observes and intervenes within performance processes. Spectatorship within participatory theatre consequently becomes active civic engagement rather than passive consumption. Audience members are not to merely shout advice; they are expected to physically step onto the stage, replace the protagonist, and improvise alternative strategies to confront the oppressor. Hence, Boal (2002: 243) notes that “the spect-actor is not passive; he or she is a subject, an actor on equal terms with the other actors”. Through this mechanism, the theatrical space transitions from a site of passive consumption to an active arena for problem solving.

The applicability of this theatre framework to Nigerian socio-political realities remains substantial. Nigeria continues to experience social dysfunctionality, including corruption, unemployment, insecurity, electoral violence, gender inequality and institutional instability, among others. These conditions frequently produce public frustration, political disillusionment and social alienation among citizens excluded from meaningful participation within governance processes. Participatory theatre therefore operates within the concept of theatre for amelioration of social dysfunctionality to provide opportunities for communities to articulate grievances examine oppressive structures and collectively negotiate developmental concerns. Salami and Aina (2024) demonstrate the relevance of participatory and interventionist theatre practices within crisis-ridden communities. Salami and Aina (2024), examining Theatre for Development initiatives addressing environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, establish that participatory performance encouraged local dialogue concerning oil exploitation, ecological destruction and governmental neglect. Similarly, Adeyemi (2023: 93) argues that community-based performance initiatives confronting gender violence and youth unemployment in South-Western Nigeria facilitated “collective reflection and civic engagement”

within marginalized communities. These interventions demonstrate that participatory theatre remains relevant within contemporary Nigerian society because it encourages dialogue, communal participation and public conscientisation concerning persistent social crises.

## **5. Advancing Theatre For Amelioration Of Social Dysfunctionality: Recipes**

Recipes for amelioration consist of the proper use of theatre to achieve specific pragmatic effects. It consists of eschewing irrelevances, sentimentality and bogus materials in the content of plays. It concerns the involvement of the theatre personnel (professionals or amateurs) who have the right focus as to the ends of theatre in the production of plays. It involves a re-orientation of the playwright as to what is relevant to the situation at hand. It also involves audience engineering to the optimum effects.

### ***5.1 The Theatre And The Stage***

The theatre of our dream, in a dysfunctional setting, is not conceived in the western standard of theatre buildings and stage structures. Theatre buildings should conform with the most basic and elementary needs of the base society. In the African setting for instance, theatrical or dramatic activities are set off when certain basic situations abound: (a) Presence of an actor or actors, (b) Dramatic action (not necessarily always based on conflict), (c) An acting area or space, and (d) Presence of an audience.

The actor may be a clown, a dancing masquerade or two ladies fighting over a lover, among others. The dramatic action refers to the antics, movements and gestures used to project what is being communicated. It may be a ritual dance/movement with musical accompaniment or a solemn rite of passage in mime. In Africa, for instance, dramatic action is often more entrenched within the principles of causality than in that of conflict or conflict resolution as common in western conceptions of drama.

The acting area could be a market place, an open-air arena, a motor park that is not in use, a town or village hall, school fields, community playgrounds or the courtyard of residential houses. Theatre in trying times should strive to go to the majority of people in society—the masses, the *hoi polloi*, the wretched of the earth, who are most stricken by the social miasma in which the nation finds herself and whose collective efforts could be geared towards social redemption of the nation.

Theatre should communicate with them; it should assuage their sorrows. It should make them hopeful for a better tomorrow and teach them to work towards same. It should educate them on how to solve some of their prevalent problems, that is, how to survive the trying times.

Communities should be encouraged to have standard community theatres and build local theatre houses that are not too expensive. Properly motivated, such structures could be built with communal efforts. Avenues for social entertainment, relaxation and education is thereby established in such communities in a moment of crisis.

## ***5.2 The Actor And Acting Styles***

In our theatre that is geared towards amelioration of social dysfunctionality, the actors need not to have undergone training in neo-Stanislavski-like schools of drama before they could perform before live audiences. Many successful actors even in the Hollywood Film industry did not train in drama schools. Natural talent, amenability to training, and a sense of adaptability are the qualities that should be watched out for, in potential actors. The actors should be dedicated, committed and responsible performers who believe strongly in the objectives of the dramatic performance. They should have time to attend rehearsals. The Artistic Directors of such productions should be skilled, skillful and committed personalities. It would be their responsibility to identify useful and relevant scripts, correctly interpret same, and be able to manipulate actors to achieve the ultimate aims of the playwright, using the available resources at their disposal. Where necessary, improvisation could be encouraged in acting and speech by the director. It is not compulsory that there be scripts!

A pragmatic theatre that is geared towards solving social problems has to be practical and realistic, though not in the conception of Henrik Ibsen's illusion of reality on stage. Such techniques now would be amorphous. Hinged on imagination, pretense and sentimentality, it engenders docility and mental laziness in the audience. Actors should not act as if they are oblivious of the audience; rather they should see themselves as part of the audience, with roles complementing each other's. You cannot solve a people's problems when you pretend not to see them, as direct discussion with them then becomes an impossibility. The practice in the performance of African orature where members of an audience are free to stop a performer, correct him on stage or supply his chorus parts or refrain (which are often integral elements of the performances) should be encouraged. The theatre should be based integrally on audience participation. It is obvious therefore that some of the theatrical

conventions of Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre and those of other Avant-garde artists will be of more relevance here than the classical Aristotelian concepts of theatre.

### ***5.3 Technical Aspects***

Technical component of the theatre for amelioration relies heavily on improvisation. In a situation where it takes a university graduate's annual basic salary to buy three sets of Fresnel spot lights, where a professor's annual salary cannot buy a standard Dimmer Board, it is more sensible to minimize or totally eschew modern stage lighting. As in the other areas, improvisation should be the watchword here too. Consequently, Matinees should be encouraged, where lighting is minimal or unnecessary. In night performances, improvised lighting equipment like photographers' lamps and locally made lampstands should be used. True, lighting effects would be reduced; but theatre, indeed every functional theatre, must not lose its message, its thematic focus because of an over-reliance on stagecraft or aesthetic reverie. In remote villages where electricity is not available and there is no generator to generate light, gas lamps and other lamps could be used to light the stage.

The same system of improvisation should be used in the area of set construction. Half-sets or representational sets may be used instead of full sets. Imitation props could be used where real ones are expensive. Indeed, props and costumes need not be too elaborate as they have the tendency of diverting attention from the main message of the play to the play's aesthetic elements.

Sound cues and music should be encouraged to a large extent. This is because they ensure liveliness of production. Music entertains, it obliterates boredom, it relieves tension, it encourages audience participation and often serve the psychotherapeutic effect of healing troubled souls in moments of crisis. This should however not be overdone to an extent that it arouses the emotions at the expense of the intellect.

### ***5.4 The Content Of Plays***

For theatre to ameliorate or obliterate social dysfunctionality, the contents of the plays have to address social issues. The thematic foci of plays have to be relevant to prevalent social reality. They have to deal with social problems, not only on the expository level, but also on the level of proffering realistic solutions to the problems so faithfully x-rayed. The theatre has to be functional. It should identify the problems and suggest realistic and infallible ways of solving them or at least reducing

the effects of such problems. Such plays should discuss problems and engender a reasoning attitude. They should go beyond the level of merely calling attention to the social problems—the bane of most of the prevalent radical theatres. They should, together with their audience suggest ways out of the quagmire. Plays need not be abusive or unduly antagonistic; rather, they must treat social problems maturely without provoking senseless riots and chaos. This however does not imply a fear of confrontation, for in the words of Blake (1954: 69), “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.”

If the theatre identifies confrontation as a way of resolving the crisis, then it should co-ordinate such confrontations to achieve the desired objectives. Indeed history is replete with examples of radical and revolutionary theatres that brought progress to their societies by advocating dissent. The German Jacobin theatre is an example. The bourgeois dramas of Denis Diderot and the radical political plays of Marie-Joseph Chénier, such as *Charles IX* staged in 1789 incited social defiance, and eventually, the French Revolution (Hayes, 1999; Maslan, 2005).

Similarly, in Communist Russia, Agit-Prop plays were used effectively by the Russian Communist Party Agency for Agitation and Propaganda, to mobilize support for social defiance of obnoxious rules and rulers (Von Geldern, 1993). The term ‘agitprop’, as Mda (1993: 49) notes, “Originated in 1920 with the formation of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, a section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The function of the department was to give ideological direction to the population through all media of communication, such as radio, the press, film, television, theatre, literature and art.” Agitprop constitutes a variety of theatre that has a strong rallying potential for people to organize and challenge the established system, and can be channeled to communicate an ideology and “can turn agitation into a sloganizing propaganda exercise” (Mda, 1993: 50).

Theatre for amelioration should thus be a theatre of discussion, one which encourages reasoning and honest search for solutions. In societies that are in crisis, there is often the need for political and social conscientisation of the entire populace, to awaken them from a non-critical, apathetic stage to a stage of critical consciousness. This conscientisation, as Byram and Moitse (1985: 81, as cited in Mda, 1993: 44) surmise, “is realized through a process that helps people to identify and understand their problems within the context of a particular social order”. In essence, theatre for amelioration has the function of enabling the people to identify their problems and the possible



solutions to same. Theatre for amelioration is therefore a variety of popular theatre that provides a means of codifying social reality. According to Byram and Moitse (1985: 81, as cited in Mda, 1993: 45), “the codification—the theatrical performance—becomes a mirror through which the people can see themselves, their social situation, and the problems they encounter, in a fresh and stimulating way.” The bulk of the plays should be didactic, teaching strategies of survival in the crisis-ridden society. For example, plays may teach the need to look for and harness other sources of income, instead of relying on salaries alone. Iyorwuese Hagher (1988) shows how the Tivland in Nigeria became the largest producer of oranges in the country. This feat was achieved according to him within a decade between 1972 and 1982, by traditional performers who sang and danced, persuading the Tiv people to take to citric farming.

Theatre may show the importance of such things as education, adult education, voting during elections, payment of taxes, communal development, self-employment and other useful preoccupations. It may warn people against prevalent vices by exposing through performances, the strategies of criminals (fraudsters, prostitutes, ritual killers, drug barons, and so on) so that members of the public do not fall victims to them. Theatre groups should go into the business of acting-out advertisements for good products. In this, there must be honesty and conviction. Artists must not help to advertise poor quality products that may soon lose credibility, or else the acting company will lose credibility together with the product. Children’s theatres should be encouraged, to teach the young at their early, opinion-forming years to be creative, and possibly be introduced to a profession where they could earn a living.

Historical plays should not merely portray a glorious past; they should examine those things the people of the past ages did, that made them attain the glorious status. Most importantly, they must identify the modern ways of achieving that glorious past again. Historical plays must show what the society was before the rains, where and when the rains started to beat the people, and how to get permanent shelters against the agonizing rainstorms. Theatre should be used to re-educate the colonized and jaundiced minds in society. It should teach the right social values. It should check vice and teach the citizens how rather than hail the fraudulent millionaires, tyrants, dictators and other wreckers of society among them they should boo and discourage such criminals.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has established theatre as a potent instrument of social intervention in Nigeria, demonstrating its capacity to confront social dysfunctionality through political education, civic participation, ideological consciousness, and communal engagement. Anchored on Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the study has shown that theatre transcends entertainment and aesthetic representation by functioning as a participatory medium for social transformation and democratic engagement. Through historical analysis, textual evaluation, and socio-cultural interpretation, the research revealed that theatrical practice could stimulate public awareness, challenge oppressive structures, foster communal responsibility, and facilitate social reform. The study therefore advocates a shift from restricted theatrical spaces to popular community settings, the dismantling of barriers between performers and audiences through the creation of "spect-actors," and the adoption of improvisational and people-oriented performance strategies that address concrete social realities. Ultimately, the study contributes to the advancement of development communication and theatre-for-development by reaffirming theatre's relevance as a participatory tool for social engagement, conscientisation, and transformation in contemporary Nigerian society.

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