

Of Place and Displaced: Mobility and Space in the Performance of Crises¹

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Abstract

The post-postcolonial African State is characterized by crises of various dimensions. At the roots of these crises are poor leadership and mismanagement of the responsibility of governance by the ruling elites. This ultimately deepens the poverty level of the people and reduces individual and institutional capacity to respond to emergencies (Lawal 2007; Edebor 2014; Fagbadebo & Dorasamy 2021). In Nigeria, millions of people are displaced every year owing to terrorism, ethno-religious conflicts, flooding, oil and gas pipeline explosions, political violence, land disputes and inter-communal clashes. The displaced are usually sheltered at temporary locations and designated IDP Camps away from their ancestral homes. In recent times, theatre is being taken to displaced persons in Nigeria to address their identity crisis as well as emotional, health, and socio-economic concerns (Nwadigwe 2007; Afolabi 2020). These displaced audiences are mobile and immobile at the same time. Using recent theatrical experiences from the Nigerian context, this study examines the dynamics of venue, space, and mobility in applied theatre performances.

Introduction

Theatre performance since antiquity has always been adapted to space. Performance venues in that regard have been amenable to changes in environmental, social, cultural and technological trends in human civilizations. Carlson (1989: 12) argues that theatre space and architecture usually assume

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dynamic transformations and semiotic connotations as society and cultures transit from one epoch to the other. Indeed, theatrical experience in various contexts and traditions is defined by cultural definitions and adaptations of space. Nwadigwe (2007: 65) in an earlier study affirms that “the site of the performance is largely a cultural expression defining the physical surroundings and conditions in which the audience and performers interact”.

Therefore, space remains a critical factor in the engagement and analysis of performance relationship. Aston and Savona (1991: 114-5) maintain that “the shape of the playing space” in terms of its spatial dimensions and configurations, will “define, shape and construct the meaning” of the performance because they “govern relations between performers on the stage, and performer-spectator interactions”.

However, the twentieth century theatre with its popular and avant-gardist revolts has radically re-defined the perception of space in performance traditions. In the new concepts of performance space and venue, theatre was no longer rigidly conceived as a place where people go to see a performance; rather theatre became, and is still becoming, any space where performance and audience can be in relation; in essence, theatre abandons its traditional venue in search of audiences.

The reality of taking theatre to the people highlights two issues in performance analysis: first it reverses the mobility feature in theatre audience relationship. Audiences that hitherto had been moving to theatre venues became immobile while theatre productions assumed greater mobility towards the direction of its target audiences. Another impact of the mobility role reversal is that theatre began to shed its technical wealth and trappings, reducing the theatrical apparatuses to essentials to facilitate the transit of theatre as it goes in search of audiences, particularly in applied, context-specific performance. In a related study, Mackey and Whybrow (2007: 1) contend that in “context-specific work”, theatre often “seems to point to an engagement – reminiscent of the concerns of applied performance – not only with ‘certain sites’ but also with a mobilization of activity involving the users of these sites”.

The foregoing alludes to an unconventional scenario where theatre goes to the people and adapts its form to spatial, cultural and environmental conditions prevalent in each setting. But this unconventionality becomes complicated when theatre producers are faced with migrant populations whose “residence” or “tenancy” is temporary. Such migrant communities are often displaced and lay no claim to place or space as permanent features in their daily existence. The peculiarity of creating theatre for migrant populations in Nigeria has been explored and documented by scholars. In one of such analyses, Mackey and Whybrow (2007: 11) observe that: “Charles Nwadigwe also introduces instances of drama in search of an appropriate place to perform” hence, while “drawing on the case of a nomadic population of migrant fishermen in Nigeria, he analyses

attempts to utilise theatre techniques to introduce the imperative of adopting safe fishing practices". Similarly, the implication of space, mobility and technical production in another context-specific performance for migrants is equally the focus of this research study. Creating a performance for displaced persons whose physical spaces are not fixed is usually a challenging experience that is relatively under-researched by theatre scholars; but this is a knowledge gap that the present study hopes to fill.

The Problem in Context

Migrant populations and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) constitute a significant challenge to planning and development. The challenge is multifaceted in nature, affecting the social, economic, cultural, political and health systems of the communities involved. On the one hand, IDPs and migrants are often accused of disturbing the peace and cohesion of host communities, polluting the environment, and engaging in criminal activities. On the other hand, migrants and IDPs are perceived as victims of socio-cultural dislocation, leadership failure, economic deprivation, infectious diseases and various forms of abuse and exploitation.

However, while the negative effects of IDPs and migrants in the host communities are frequently highlighted and addressed through administrative planning, funding and security arrangements, the problems being faced by the migrants and IDPs are not often publicized or prioritized. For political reasons, most governments cover up the maltreatment, oppression, abuse, neglect and inadequacies faced by IDPs and migrants in various camps. Furthermore, corrupt practices have remained pervasive among officials and security personnel assigned to oversee the welfare and safety of IDPs and migrants.

In Nigeria for instance, IDPs fleeing from the attacks of the Boko Haram terrorist group in the Northeast region have been victims of sexual exploitation. According to Inwalomhe (2021) in *The Guardian* newspapers, there are serious concerns "over rape and sexual exploitation of women and girls displaced by the conflict with Boko Haram who are in need of water and food". Inwalomhe further specified that these abuses were being suffered by Nigerian "women and girls living in many internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Bornu, Yobe, Adamawa states, Chad, Niger Republic and Cameroun". Cases of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), rape, prostitution and sex-for-food scandals have been reported in these camps. The diversion of funds and supplies meant for the IDPs by corrupt officials have continued to recur. In all these, the voices of the IDPs are rarely heard as the officials suppress such complaints and shield the victims away from the press and civil society groups.

Over the years, the mass media have been used to publicize the problems associated with IDPs. But the conventional media have been unable to address the actual needs and pains of IDPs who are often deprived, itinerant and lacking

access to media channels. In recent years, the theatre has been adopted as an interventionist strategy to address the challenges faced by IDPs in Nigeria. The relative success of such theatre projects underscores the importance of theatre as didactic and more effective tool to reach target audiences.

However, despite the achievements recorded, these theatre projects have continued to face artistic, technical and managerial challenges arising from the unavailability and optimal use of performance space, the high mobility of target audiences and changes in the policies that govern the management of IDP camps. The project of taking theatre to displaced persons occupying flexible and fluctuating spaces at temporary places became a challenge not only to theatre organizations but the arts of performance itself. Yet theatre scholars have not adequately focused significant research efforts in that direction.

Methods

The field data collection for this study began in 2017 but the study was concluded in 2019. There was no external funding support for the study except the personal resources of the researcher. This contributed to the length of time it took to conclude the study owing to the distance, insecurity, unpredictability and other logistics that characterize the study sites. The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges posed by the factor of mobility and the impacts of space and venues in the theatre productions created and presented to audiences in the selected IDP camps. The results of the study were expected to help improve professional practice in the areas of interventionist theatre for migrant populations, site-specific performance and Theatre for Development (TfD) and allied Applied Theatre projects. The research results would equally strengthen policies for dealing with the challenges posed by IDPs, migration and emergency situations through the engagement of drama and theatre as part of the management strategies employed by state and non-state actors.

The study adopted the Participant Observation approach in collecting relevant data from the field. The data were collected from the productions held at IDP camps in the study sites. This is augmented by data obtained through oral interviews and other relevant documented sources. Data analysis was descriptive and interpretative, geared towards arriving at denotative and connotative meanings of collected data.

Study samples were taken purposively from two IDP camps from Northern and Southern Nigeria respectively. While the samples from the north were victims of Boko Haram terrorist attacks, the samples drawn from the south were victims of flood disaster. Both sample categories therefore differ in political, environmental, cultural and religious experiences and these differences provide a sampling balance and equally presented suitable contexts for comparative analysis of the various data collected. The field studies for the data collection were conducted

between June 2017 and November 2018 while the first draft of the research report was completed in March 2019.

Study Sites and Project Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with a population of over 180 million people. It has a land mass of about 923,763 square kilometres with about 853km coastline that runs through seven States in the south bordering the Atlantic Ocean (Ingiabuna and Uzobo 2016: 80). The country has rich equatorial rainforests in the east as well as savanna grasslands and arid zones in the north towards the Sahel region.

While parts of the north suffer desert encroachments, the south experiences erosions and perennial flooding when the ocean, several rivers, creeks and tributaries overflow their banks particularly during the rainy season. These ecological challenges are aggravated by poor political leadership leading to disasters and conflicts that displace many people annually. Anambra State, located in the east and lying at the banks of the great River Niger experiences frequent flooding which destroys farmlands of agrarian communities as well as houses and other livelihoods leading to IDPs. In 2018, one of the IDP camps for flood victims was located at Aguleri, near the banks of River Anambra which flows into the River Niger.

Nigeria is still experiencing terrorist attacks especially in the northern region. The Boko Haram terrorist group, ISWAP, marauding bandits, insurgents and militant herdsmen have been active in the northeast region for over a decade. The Boko Haram sect attacks defenceless civilians, killing people, kidnapping women and young men, burning houses, farmlands, schools, worship centres and government infrastructure while sacking entire populations in the area. This has created a massive displacement of people in the region. Consequently, the government set up IDP camps in different towns in the northeast region, some of them are in Maiduguri and surrounding towns within Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States.

In 2017, based on media reports about the problems and inadequacies faced by the IDPs, a civil society group, Community Health Education Network (CHEN) engaged some theatre troupes to carry out health education campaigns among the IDPs. The focus of the health educational intervention was on sanitation and hygiene, sexually transmitted infections, family planning, and malaria. Two IDP camps, the Bakassi IDP Camp in Maiduguri (north) as well as the Otuocha IDP camp in Aguleri (south) were selected for the pilot project which provided data for this study. While the theatre project was funded by CHEN and her partners as part of their support for IDPs, this research that followed, studied and documented the theatre project activities as part of field data collection was not funded.

The Productions

The plays were mostly improvised skits presented in the vernacular of the local community concerned. Thematically, the plays focused on typical health challenges encountered in IDP camps such as sanitation and hygiene, malaria, gender and reproductive health, social relations, marital fidelity, gender and sexually transmitted infections. The performances were laced with a variety of comic bits to elicit laughter and provide some psychological balm for the audience in view of their traumatic experiences. The productions adopted two approaches: theatre to the people and theatre with the people. While the former was presented by the visiting theatre practitioners, the latter involved a mixture of the theatre practitioners and local volunteers in the IDP camps. The performances were held with the permission of camp officials' medical personnel, security and emergency management officers.

The performances were held in the afternoon hours after lunch. At the end of each presentation, an interactive session was held to discuss the issues raised in the drama. The performance venues were in the vicinity of the IDP camps. Spaces were adapted from the various corners in the camp premises where audiences could view the performance with minimal distraction or obstruction.

The space took a circular formation with the audience standing or sitting around the performance space while the performers played to a theatre-in-the-round setting. Back stage space was created in a nearby corner behind the audience for changing costumes, make-up and storage of props. The performances were simple, flexible and expanded or shrank according to the number of spectators and their enthusiasm, as children and the youth surged forward towards the dramatic actions. This created a dynamic actor-audience relationship. Rehearsals were also held around the campgrounds to ensure that volunteers remain accessible to master their roles before production dates.

The plays were developed around the themes of community healthcare, gender and reproductive health, family and personal hygiene. The dramatic scenarios were fluid and centred on issues. The narratives adopted a linear development of the plots and sometimes used allegorical characters to drive home the messages. The presentations used relevant props, minimal costumes, make-up and set pieces. They were spiced with music, song, dance and local storytelling techniques to captivate the audience. While the theatre practitioners handled the performance presentations, the civil society group (CHEN) made up of health workers moderated the post-performance interactive sessions, to highlight key issues and answer questions from participants.

However, the adaptation to available venue and space remained a significant challenge. In some of the productions at the selected IDP camps, the cast and crew discovered on arrival that the designated performance space had been taken over by camp officials for other uses. At the Bakassi IDP camp in Maiduguri for

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example, the spaces were sometimes taken over by the officials who used them to set up more temporary shelters to accommodate new IDPs arriving from more communities that had been sacked by the insurgents. At Otuocha IDP camp in Aguleri, some of the performance arenas were sometimes taken over by the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) who used the venues to store food and other supplies meant for distribution to the IDPs.

The sudden changes in venue and spaces often affected the smooth presentation of the performances. The backstage area had to be relocated for proximity. Furthermore, the volunteer actors needed a reorientation to get acquainted with their new entrances, exits and stage geography. In some situations, the new performance space required clearing or sanitation which often disrupted production schedules.

On the factor of mobility, the target audience was often mobile or transitory as they tried to meet their daily needs or link up with friends and relatives outside the camp site. New IDPs arrive from time to time while some old occupants vacate the camps. Consequently, the problem of continuity arose in the productions which were programmed in sequence to reflect cause and effects; behaviour-infection-aftermath relationships. New IDPs could miss some of the skits earlier presented while those that left the camp would miss the subsequent ones. Hence, the message and meanings in the skits may not be fully grasped by some of the target audience.

Furthermore, a significant section of the IDPs were sometimes moved to other camps either to separate women from men in line with strict Islamic tenets as witnessed in the Maiduguri camp or to provide alternative and better shelter for the inmates as exemplified in the Otuocha experience. In both camps sampled in this study, IDPs have been moved frequently at short notice to provide better accommodation when the facilities in the camps became overstretched as more victims arrived and got registered. The performance troupe in many cases discovered that members of their cast and other volunteer assistants have been moved to other locations without prior notice. This disorganized the production programme as new cast had to be introduced, rehearsed and tutored to master their roles.

Discussion

Popular interventionist theatre is often mobile, issue-based, goal-oriented and malleable in form and structure. The performance is frequently context-specific and site-specific in approach. Francisca Nwadike (2018: 38) observed that “site-specific performance is a globalized theatrical approach that responds to the local and unique challenges of venue, funding, and audience attitudes”. This kind of production demands “the creation and organization of all elements of theatre: performance, audience, venue and performers in a ‘new’ dimension quite unusual or unconventional to the theatre culture of the environment or community”

(Nwadigwe, C. 2008: 56). Furthermore, such productions reflect and underscore “what it means to be mobile”, hence it is “well placed to investigate how we understand and experience our mobility” (Wilkie 2012: 203). However, practical experience overtime shows that attention was frequently focused on the instruction and function while the technical aspects were overlooked or de-emphasized. The text, acting and performance presentation were largely improvisational; hence, there was the tendency to erroneously regard the playmaking and production process as simple and less rigorous.

Mobility is a common feature of popular interventionist theatre. This feature has been intensified by the demands of a globalized world in which change and adaptation have become essential factors. Indeed, Schmidt and Aghoro (2017: 1) have argued that:

In many ways, mobility has always been essential for drama and theater... Performance, in general, is ‘on the move’ and difficult to get a hold of... But the range of possibilities and experiences of mobility has dramatically changed and expanded in the recent past. A multicultural and global world in which information, capital as well as cultural work move, at least for the most part, freely and without consideration for national borders, has triggered a widespread and increasing fascination for all aspects of mobility and processes related to mobility.

In the same vein, Wilkie (2012: 203) had explained that concepts such as “locatedness, sense of place, emplacement and the local in relation to the global” are ideas which this form of theatre draws from.

Refugees and IDPs are essentially a mobile population. However, doing theatre for and with a mobile population is quite tasking. The experiences at the IDP camps in Nigeria during the health education theatre campaign indicate that space and venue are critical to the entire process. Langley (1980: 53) affirms that “it is not always understood that the theatre itself, the performance place, is an integral element of the art. Change the place of performance and the performance itself also changes”. The IDP productions illustrate the central position of space planning when working with migrants and transit audiences. In their displaced conditions, the IDPs depend on the camp, its features, utilities and provisions for survival in their new “place”. To change the conditions and lives of the IDPs, theatre must symbolically and physically change its space to identify with them because as Lefebvre (1991: 190). puts it, “to change life, we must first change space”.

Whenever disaster and violent conflicts occur, people are displaced. The primary concern of governments and humanitarian agencies is usually to provide for basic material needs of the displaced persons. This tendency often overlooks the psychological needs of the victims. The primary objective of the IDP performances was to enlighten the camp inmates on health issues common with their peculiar

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and crowded environment. The performances faced critical challenges of space and mobility and these factors, from field observations, had some effect on the productions and their reflections of the psychophysical wellbeing of the traumatized victims.

In the context of the IDP productions, it is pertinent to establish a logical link between the performance process and style and the audience impact. Bennett (1997) had postulated a “Theory of Production and Reception” which examined the dynamics of audience reception of theatrical performances. Bennett’s thesis argues that the way a performance is packaged and presented is directly related to its audience reception and impact. This view is in line with the contentions of Langley (1980) and Balme (1999) which discuss the relationship between performance place and audience reception. These studies underscore the influence of the theatre venue on the efficacy of a play performance. Similarly, Teasdale *et al* (2021) observed that the three factors of identification, causal attribution and moral approval which come into play in the audience engagement with drama are intricately connected with the production content while the content is also shaped by the presentation mode and environment.

Therefore, in engaging with the space and mobility challenges and variables, the production team of the IDP performances did not lose focus on the intended impact of the productions on the audience. Hence, the visceral link between process and effect was maintained. Although the IDP performances were basically aimed at health education for the inmates, the productions also provided robust entertainment which released some psychological balm to the traumatized audience. The performances provided avenues for the victims to smile and laugh (a phenomenon that was rare in those camps) and this was equally beneficial to the mental health of the audience members.

From a professional standpoint, theatre practitioners routinely encounter challenges peculiar to each production. The ultimate question is whether the theatre experience was effective and beneficial to the audience. This question appears to have been answered in the affirmative by the audience during the post-performance discussion where the spokespersons requested for such theatrical performances to be regular at the IDP camps.

However, the attitudes of officials and policy thrust of the Nigerian government agencies regarding emergency management and catering for IDPs reflect the lack of inclusion of drama and theatre as essential resources in dealing with the challenges of mobility and displacement. The constraints of space and venue experienced in the Nigerian IDP performances were mostly created by administrative decisions, government policy and ignorance of camp officials who exhibit little or no regard for drama as a functional resource in emergency management, mobility and psychosocial rehabilitation.

Performance in this context is a medium for enlightenment and relaxation. In dramatizing the health crises inherent in the victims’ present experience, the

theatre practitioners also had to manage the physical crises in the IDP camp environments to have a meaningful performance. Essentially, though these victims were physically displaced, they were able to symbolically manage their emotional trauma. Hence, the unsettled and fluctuating nature of the performance space and venue in the IDP camps is a metaphor for the unstable life of the inmates. Beyond this semiotic interpretation, the prevalent conditions of mobility and immobility, both for the performers and camp inmates, required management, adjustment and adaptation to thrive.

Conclusion

The use of space and venue remains an intractable challenge to theatre people working in IDP camps and performing for mobile audiences. Theatre is primarily any space where performers and audience meet. Hatlen (1987: 359) explains that if theatre is to be functional, then it should first be seen as a performative art rather than a building with furnishing and gadgets, arguing further that “theatre is not architecture or set design but players before an audience”. As exemplified in the IDP camp productions, the performance venue as Charles Nwadigwe earlier observed “affects every department of the production and thus shapes the theatre experience by the simple fact that it provides the spaces where all production elements meet and interact” (Nwadigwe, C. 2005: 248). In the negotiation for solutions to crisis situations in Africa, theatre needs to be included in the programmes. In Nigeria, this ideal is yet to be recognized and adopted by policy makers and emergency management authorities. Hence, they complicate and aggravate the problems faced by theatre practitioners seeking to use their medium to intervene in crisis situations. Many of the government and non-governmental agencies consider drama and theatrical activities as fringe entertainment and a luxury that can only be enjoyed by people who are comfortable at home rather than victims of natural disasters and violent conflicts sheltered at IDP camps. A change of attitude and inclusion of theatrical activities in the emergency management policies and programmes is required in Africa. The IDPs and migrant populations are traumatized; hence their psychosocial needs are as important as the physical needs of food, clothing and shelter.

As noted by Idoko (2002), interventionist theatre taken to target populations in their peculiar environments and living conditions is often eclectic in form and content. Applied theatre practitioners that work with and for mobile and migrant audiences thus require more creativity. Charles Nwadigwe (2007: 74) explains that “the concept of ‘applied’ suggests a readiness by theatre practitioners to adapt to conditions already prevailing at performance sites with a view to achieving optimal impact”. The theatre workshop experiences at the sample IDP camps in Nigeria highlight that since mobility is a constant feature of the displaced, the theatre personnel need to be adaptive and adopt proactive performance

approaches and imaginative production planning to deal with the unexpected situations concerning space, venue, volunteer cast and field assistants, which are often unpredictable in context-specific performance.

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