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Psychology as a Factor in Play Directing

Rasheed Abiodun Musa*

Introduction

Theatre is a multi-functional art form that documents, explores and presents life through the re-creation of the materials of the past, the moulding of the present and the artistic dramatization of the future. Be it professional or academic theatre, the essence of any dramatic or theatrical experience is the aesthetic success of such performance. Interestingly, the importance of the theatre director in the art of directing cannot be over-emphasized if aesthetic experience is contemplated.

This essay examines the behavioural pattern of the theatre director in the art of directing with emphasis on his personality, state of mind, power of perception and imagination in his dealings with the performers, designers and the audience who are equally important in the creative process. While arousing great consciousness in the mind of the theatre directors, this paper intends to open up a fertile ground for experimental research on the mental behaviour of the workers in the theatre profession especially the theatre director.

Conceptualising Psychology and Directing

Psychology is a science of the mind. It existed in various forms long before scholars begin to postulate on the relevance of the discipline to man and his unpredictable environment and developmental process. Zimbardo (1985:6) traced the historical evolution of psychology to Wilhelm Wundt's formal experimental psychology which was established in 1879 and developed shortly by William James at the Harvard University. Ever since then, psychologists have been battling theoretically, practically and experimentally to solve the riddles surrounding man's behaviour and

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complex state of mind which are often responsible for the end product of most of his acceptable and unacceptable, rational and irrational, normal and abnormal behaviours.

Akinboye (1996:1) defines psychology as “the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes of human and sub-human organisms.” Drawing heavily on African modes of living, Akinboye debunked the Eurocentric notion that Africans have no specific behavioural and mental processes. His submission is basically premised on the non-formal means of education peculiar to the African man through a research on normal and abnormal behaviours.

Zimbardo (1985:6) extends the theoretical environment of psychology to include:

... a way of thinking broadly about how living creatures cope with each other. It is a behavioural science at the intersection of philosophy, biology, sociology, physiology and cultural anthropology.

Elaborating on the multi-disciplinary nature of psychology through its relationships with key subjects in the science and the humanities, he says that the psychologists are primarily concerned with conducting research and the ability to:

... describe, explain, predict, and control behaviour. For the applied psychologist, there is a fifth goal - to improve the quality of human life. These five goals form the foundation of the psychological enterprise (Zimbardo 1985:7).

Critically speaking, if a girl who is gentle like the dove and another one who is wicked and arrogant like the hyena are from the same parents, the psychologists have a duty to describe to us the difference in their attitudinal behaviours. They must also explain the rationale for the seemingly unrelated behaviours of the two girls and hopefully too, their behaviours must be predicted while effort will be made to control the behaviour of the wicked and the arrogant girl all in an effort to make life a meaningful place for her to live. All cases of mental disorders are also within the precinct of the psychologists to investigate. The theatre director must also be a psychologist who must be able to describe and control the attitudinal behaviours of his performers, designers and that of his audience.

Having defined psychology, directing on the other hand is basically an art of the theatre, which involves the organisation, management, interpretation, coordination, presentation, and the manipulation of human and material resources towards the sole purpose of creating a cohesive artistic experience for the audience. Directing is beyond the façade of getting players together or telling them their exits and entrances, it is a noble art whose artist must be versatile in all the arts of the theatre.

Cohen (1988:145) defines directing as:

An art whose product is the most ambiguous, perhaps the most mysterious in the theatre. The direction of a play is not visible like scenery or costume and unlike the actor's voice or the sound designer's score, it cannot be directly heard or sensed. And yet direction underlies everything we see and hear in the theatre. Utterly absorbed by the final theatrical experience, direction animates and defines that experience.

In the view of Dean and Carra (1965:vii) directing is also "an art in which, just as other arts, certain principles could be both perceived and taught." It is not an easy task to train the theatre director but directing principles can help the theatre director to create imaginatively through constant experimentation. It must be stated here too that the theatre director is a passive audience whose laughter must not be too hilarious in the theatre when he is watching his own performance although his emotional attachment to his theatrical performances must be serious since his state of mind cannot be detached from his artistic creations. He must be experimenting constantly and make use of old directing conventions which are useful to his theatrical directions. He must also be radical in dealing with some outdated conventions which are antithetical to his directions so as to be able to cope with the ever-rising challenges of play directing.

The Theatre Director and the Psychology of his Personality

The artist and essentially, the theatre director's works can be influenced by the type of school he attended, the exposure of his peer group, nature of his culture, type of his religion, tradition, politics and the various aesthetic experience he has had. At some point, he becomes an individual whose creative works through the art of directing can be influenced through normal behaviours while directing such as communicating, demonstrating,

observing, mediating, teaching, experimenting, listening, collaborating, perceiving and motivating his performers and designers. The theatre director can also imbibe some abnormal behaviours such as dictatorship, arrogance, subjectivity, bossiness, bluffness, aggressiveness, snobbishness, rashness, eccentricity and vindictiveness. Normal directorial behaviour at the level of the personality of the theatre director can lead to good performance and abnormal directorial behaviour can lead to bad performance although to say that a play is good or bad is a matter for individual aesthetic judgement which could lead tenuous argument.

The normal and abnormal behaviours can meet at a point of convergence because there are other nuances and minor prejudices that often affect the theatre director negatively or positively. Such behaviours are: anxiety, depression, weakness of 'will' and determination, physical fitness, psychological and emotional stress, consciousness and unconsciousness, low and high temperament, low and high intelligent quotient and so on. Play selection, financial capacity of the producer; audience demand, the performers and the attitude of the designers also make the confluence of the normal and abnormal behaviours of the theatre director inevitable. It is not unlikely to see a listening theatre director to take some directorial decisions dictatorially and at the level of aesthetic attachment, it is also not unlikely to see an objective theatre director in the directing process to be emotionally subjective. His subjectivity at the level of aesthetic attachment is positive because the theatre director must be emotionally and psychologically subjective to his theatrical directions. On the contrary, if he is too socially subjective when dealing with his performers, they will not be motivated and this attitude may have a negative impression on him and his works. Again, a theatre director who is noted to be mediating and teaching his performers can become arrogant and aggressive if he is convinced that the performers he is working with are non-conformists.

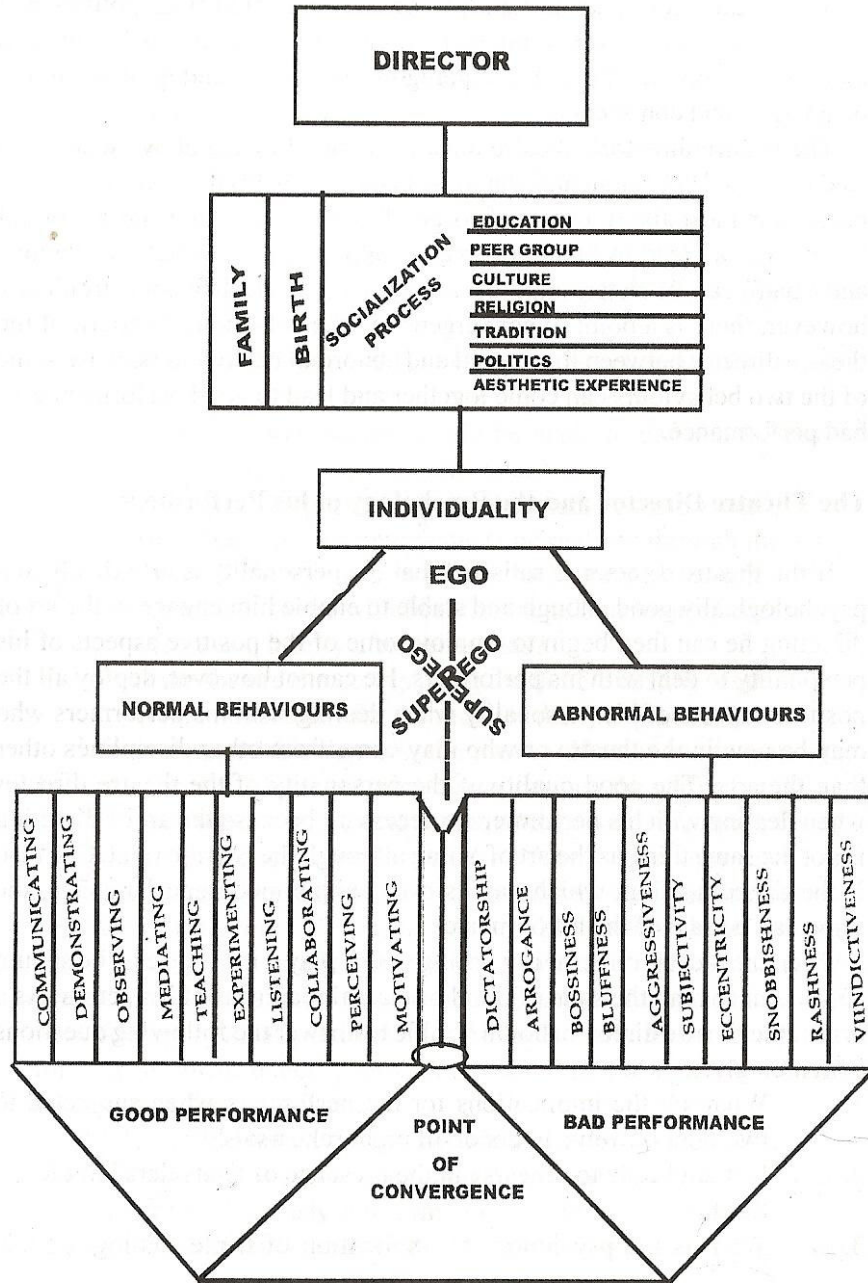
The theatre director's psychological, emotional, intellectual, artistic, creative, imaginative and aesthetic state of mind and his socio-cultural, traditional and political behaviours must be good because the theatre director's thinking, feeling, action and perception in his creative enterprise can turn and change the face of his theatre for the better or mar it. He should be ready to learn if there is a sweeping criticism against his works and attitude. He must also be doing new things in the theatre and if he is being praised for producing an excellent performance, he must be experimenting constantly. At rehearsals, he should be a master co-ordinator,

showing and teaching by doing. When exercising, he should not detach himself from the physical exercises as that too can be used to motivate his performers and himself both physically and mentally.

As a researcher, the theatre director is ever curious and conscious and must be willing to know the state of mind of the human resources he is working with. When dealing with traditional and culturally-based play texts he should stretch out his antenna to study the socio-cultural idiosyncrasy of the people on whom the script is about and the general setting before the play is staged. His interpretative stimuli must be great so that he will be able to pass across the playwright's intentions to the audience. All these attributes are necessary and important to the personality of the theatre director in the art of directing. A thorough understanding of the psychology of directing will help the theatre director to present good theatre products to his audience.

The diagram below is the summary of the behavioural pattern of the theatre director which is arrived at through surveys, interviews and observations at rehearsals. Psychological experiment is not ruled out in the future to ascertain the validity of these behaviours so as to give our diagram a scientific leverage.

Diagrammatic Representation of the Behavioural Pattern of the Theatre Director



To analyse the overleaf diagram, the director is seen as an entity created by his family through birth and influenced through the socialization process such as: education, peer group, culture, religion, tradition, politics and aesthetic experience. At a point, he is an individual worried by his ego and consciously too; he allows his superego to be the watchdog of his moral behaviours and conscience.

The theatre director's theatre must be dictated by the above which can lead to normal behaviour and abnormal behaviour in his theatre. The normal behaviour most likely can lead to good performance and the abnormal behaviour can lead to bad performance although the aesthetic of "good" and "bad" can be determined by numerous theatrical factors. Ironically however, there is a point of convergence in the behavioural pattern of the theatre director between the normal and abnormal behaviour because some of the two behaviours can come together and lead to good performance or, bad performance.

The Theatre Director and the Psychology of his Performers

If the theatre director is satisfied that his personality is artistically and psychologically good enough and stable to enable him engage in the art of directing he can then begin to employ some of the positive aspects of his personality to deal with his performers. He cannot however, deploy all the positive aspects of his personality when dealing with his performers who may be new in the theatre or who may come from other disciplines other than the arts. The good quality of the personality of the theatre director when dealing with his performers is necessary because the art of directing is not the same thing as the art of acting although the two are related so also is the dance medium which has its own unique mode and language, the same can be said of the art of music.

When the theatre director is working with a play with large cast he should endeavour to read the state of mind or mental readiness of his actors. As a priest, the theatre director should be able to answer the following questions convincingly:

1. What are the implications for the performers when subjected to two hours, twelve hours or all night rehearsals?
2. Is it advisable to rehearse in the presence of "outsiders" in the theatre?
3. What is the psychological implication of triple casting, double

- casting and type casting on the performers?
4. How best can the director cope with the in-house skirmishes during rehearsals?
 5. How can the actors with poor theatre voice be helped to develop if such artists have other theatrical potentials?
 6. How best can the actor's voice be preserved?
 7. Since the theatre director can give series of interpretation to different plays, how best can the same set of actors give different interpretation to the theatre director's directorial instructions?
 8. How best can the actors be made to learn their lines?
 9. How best should actors' complaints be handled during and after rehearsals?
 10. What motivating strategy will help the actors and the designers to grow?
 11. How will non-theatre people be made to develop interest in the theatre and even to take lead roles?
 12. How best can punctuality at rehearsals be maintained?
 13. How best can stage movements be realised through the actors?
 14. How will the theatre director control his libidinal emotion, especially when he is faced with beautiful angels in inviting dresses shortly before and briefly after rehearsals?
 15. If the theatre director is using the double casting method how will actors be selected for the night of the first production?

To understand his dancers, the theatre director has to note that it is better to dance when the morning dew is cooling the surface of the earth or shortly when the sun is about to set rather than when the sun is penetrating man's body unconcernedly. He owes it a duty to also know that to dance, one needs a lot of energy and he must be a dove when working out slow yet "rhythmic movements" of the body if he has no choreographer. Of importance to him is also the need to know that some dancers are good actors and it will be artistically rewarding to make female dancers to stamp their feet energetically, athletically and artistically as male dancers while turning the male dancers into female dancers through a choreographic metaphor of feminine dance.

While dealing with his singers and musicians, the theatre directors must note that fear and anxiety, shouting and screaming will hinder the singers from singing melodiously and harmoniously although it will be to his artistic ingenuity if he can understand the problems facing his singers and musicians

and know how to proffer solutions to them. The theatre director should avoid personality disorder because:

A noteworthy condition of this sort is that of the person with a chronic antisocial reaction to life, who has no real loyalties to any person, group or standard of honour and does not profit much from experience, punishment or medical treatment. He is likely to be emotionally immature and irresponsible and may show lack of judgement; however... there are individuals who have an inadequate response to the demands of life, showing inadaptability, ineptness and lack of physical and emotional stamina (Gillis 1980:216-127).

To avoid personality disorder; the theatre director must be emotionally and psychologically stable. This way his creative imagination shall facilitate good theatre aesthetics. In his creative process, he must also know that depression can be controlled through good medical and physical care. Although it is advisable for the theatre director to develop good emotional habits that can help him to overcome some of the personality disorders which are inevitable in our social and biological systems.

The Theatre Director and the Psychology of his Designers

The theatre director is at the apex of the production crew. Other designers in the theatre must obey and work with him. However, Ododo (1999:56) says that:

of all the responsibilities the director has in the theatre, the technical aspect assumes some level of importance to the extent that certain artistic decisions are dependent on the state of available technical equipment and stage designs.

The above is a testimony to the relevance of 'technical equipment and stage designs' in the theatre which the theatre director must discuss with the technical crew so as to give him the opportunity of knowing how to manage the technical equipment available to his theatrical conception. All the technical requirements of the production must also be exhaustively discussed between the theatre director and the technical crew.

The educational background and experience of the technical director will also go a long way to determine the output of the work of the technical

director as it relates to the theatrical production. Where there are conflicts of interests on some aspects of the technical requirements, the director while trying to resolve them must ensure that his artistic vision is not distorted. His relationship with his technical team should be mutual.

The costumier, make-up artist, the property man and business crew also have various roles to play in ensuring the total success of any dramatic production. It is artistically advisable for the theatre director to learn through his numerous designers in the course of creating his own theatre. He should know how best to handle the overbearing theatre designers and should know how to negotiate for his producer if he is given the chance to do so.

The Theatre Director's Audience and his Society

The members of the audience are the final consumers of all theatrical performances and they should have high value for their money. This has made it mandatory for the theatre director to research into the demands of his audience so that he will be able to provide the necessary supply. The aesthetic taste of the majority of his audience must be searched for, located and satisfied accordingly. He can however be restricted if he is directing a sponsored or commissioned play - here, he has no choice other than to take instructions from the financier of such productions. If the choice of the majority of his audience is tragic drama he must be ready to produce tragic plays and experiment with various known and unknown tragedies in the theatre world. If his audience members are however often swayed by comic plays, he must not be tired to experiment with such forms.

It is interesting to note that each time the society is bedevilled with obnoxious and anti-people policies or confronted with hydra-headed dictators, the society drifts. Man is socially, psychologically, culturally, educationally and politically disillusioned and turns into a mere mechanical compliance, unable to think, unable to grow yet acting like a demented caricature tramped inside a muddy swamp. Scholars of life and letter and the theatre directors then have duties to perform to stem the tide of oppression, dehumanisation and exploitation. They need to engender collective spirit. They should aid the indefatigable spirit of the masses because drama is capable of changing human mind for him to realise himself and his state of being, development is thus envisaged.

The theatre director also has a responsible role to play in the survival of his society. His theatre must preach unity and equity in a heterogeneous

society such as ours. He should take the theatre to the community, to the market, and essentially to the street in urban centres so that man's reasoning faculty can be re-awakened and changed for the better. The theatre director should reason beyond command performances because he has a duty to perform in the interest of the larger society. He must strive to convince his society that there are lessons to learn from heroic figures. All these are, however, not to make him forget the entertainment function of drama.

Conclusion

Lewin Groff is unsparing when he emphasised categorically that "Directing is something we do and seldom talk about..." (cited in Darcanted 1980:5). Our discussion from the beginning of this essay is geared towards the proper understanding of the behavioural pattern of the theatre director in the artistic enterprise of the art of directing. The thorough understanding of his personality, state of mind and mental alertness will help him to conceptualise, picturise and create very imaginatively. He should know the limits of his directorial power even if he is assumed to be flawless and he should shield the toga of individuality while considering the socialization process of his actors, designers and the audience. All these variables will help the theatre director to come to terms with the reality of the creative process in the art of directing.

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