

THE AUDIENCE AND THE SOLO ACTOR: A REVIEW OF AUDIENCE-ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED BY SOLO PERFORMERS.

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Introduction

Theatre is generally an interaction between the actor and the audience. However, different kinds of theater require different levels or degrees of actor-audience relationship. Abdullahi Abubakar is absolutely right in his view that:

As common as this definition is to all theatre, including ritual performances, the function of these key groups vary, depending on the context and objective of the theatre. (2009)

No other live performer can claim to appreciate the audience better than a solo actor on a solitary stage. A study of how solo performers connect with or engage their audience is very important. As John Howard Lawson reminds us:

The audience is the ultimate necessity which gives the playwright's work its purpose and meaning. The laws by which the dramatist creates his product are determined by the use to which the product is to be put. The purpose of drama is communication; the audience plays not a passive, but an active part in the life of a play. (1960:299)

In support of Lawson's assertion which applies to drama in general, one would add that the greatest sense of involvement and commitment is expected from those who have paid to watch a solo performance. This paper will attempt a critical review of some of the successful techniques that solo performers have employed as strategies of engaging and captivating their audiences.

THE SOLOIST AND THE AUDIENCE

In discussing the symbiotic relationship between the soloist and his audience, Rob Sullivan observed that the actor has both the ability to push his audience beyond their limits while at the same time holding them in his hands and comforting them.

According to Sullivan, "...this symbiotic relationship between them creates the chance for the actor to connect with his audience on the most immediate and visceral basis... it takes a soloist with such ability to fill the space with energy and draw people in." (Rob Sullivan as cited in Kearns 1997:44)

A typical example of this can be drawn from the researchers' experience:

While performing the Prime Minister's Son in Ado Girls Secondary School, Ontisha, in

2001, the audience were so moved by my enactment of Prime Minister's Son's helpless state that they forgot they were in a theatre and started dropping naira bills as I walked through their midst with tears dropping from my eyes.

At that point in the audience's expression of empathy when they had become so emotionally involved as to begin to drop naira bills, they had transcended their roles as mere spectators and become active participants or if you like, the solo performer's partner in his effort to realize his performance.

Michael Kearns in his book *Getting Your Solo Act Together* also sees the audience as the solo actor's partner. For him, the audience should contribute "half of the actor's dialogue". He recognizes also the soloist's power to transform his audience at will. For Kearns, it is only at such points of transformation that the audience changes from its passive state to the active type. He considers the truly creative audience required for a solo performance. Thus, he maintains that the ability of the soloist to relate to his audience as a cast in his show will help a great deal not just in fostering audience activity, but also in getting them actively engrossed in the solo performance encounter.

The researcher however objects to Kearns point of view on the issue of audience contributing half of the actor's dialogue. The intention is not to turn the audience into actors in the real sense of the word, but to make them a kind of active audience that can inspire him to greater success on stage.

Kearns study also provided for us a good illustration from his own solo performance in which he as a priest, perceived his audience as his congregation.

According to Kearns, (1997:47):

I played a catholic priest and the audience became the congregation. The confessional aspect of the monologue was heightened by the presence of my parishioners.

This kind of partnership he believes is exactly what creates the needed dramatic tension and intensity between the soloist and his audience.

For Kearns, the soloist serves as a sponge for the audience's emotional baggage. Thus he posits:

Even when a soloist creates dialogue on stage between two characters, the audience takes on a more demanding challenge. For one thing, as the performer no matter how skilled you are at voices and mannerisms you are forcing them to employ their imagination in a heightened way. The audience is required to listen more intently and possibly take sides. [1997:48]

as reiterated by Kearns, all solo performances are extremely interactive in a way because every solo “potentially pushes the audience to respond more demonstratively than they might otherwise” (1997:48).

Kearns, in the above passage appears to contradict his earlier argument that solo actor’s engagement of his audience qualifies them to acquire full status as stage actors or dramatic characters in their own rights, rather, he has properly located the solo performer’s audiences as characters created by the soloist actions and inactions. It is the solo performer’s utterances or actions that propel his audience to become the conscious creative participants he desires them to be.

He warns, however, that the soloist can only accomplish his task of carrying his audience along with him if he lives up to his responsibility to them. According to Kearns, (1997:49):

Responsibility to the audience is the key. Like any relationship, it’s give and take; it requires work, patient, concentration, unselfishness, and, yes, love.

Like Kearns, several other minimalist and soloists have studied the uniqueness of the solo performance audience. Other scholars and artistes whose findings or works will be reviewed in this study include Lubar Deborah (2007), John Cairney (2001), Jo Bonney (2000) and Glenn Alterman (2005) to mention but a few.

Deborah like Kearns, teaches us that the solo performer’s audience is not just seating and watching. He shares Michael Kearns view that such performances demand a lot from the audience. According to Deborah (2007:4)

Bearing witness in a solo performance is not standing still or just seating and watching. It actually requires copious energy from within and without. Thinking of “bearing” as in “carrying”, “supporting” or even “birthing” –bearing truth, bearing possibilities and breath taking destructiveness.

Unlike Deborah who contributed a short but weighty comment on the subject, John Carney has done very extensive work on the level of audience involvement in solo presentations. In his book *Solo Performers An International Registry 1970-2000*, Cairney closes his brief commentary on Iam McKellen by explaining how McKellen engages his audience and even turns some of them into volunteer actors in his solo performance of Williams Shakespeare, entitled *Acting Shakespeare*.

According to Cairney (2001:131):

McKellen involves his audience physically as well as mentally and he had volunteers up on stage being armies and dead bodies at will.....The involvement with audience in this way could not help but add to the pleasing totality of the whole theatrical evening. It was soon forgotten that the house was watching one man and a

chair giving a lecture on Shakespearean acting. It was a master-class in every sense of that phrase.

As a scholar, one's inquisitive mind is inclined to wonder whether McKellen did not go to the extreme by inviting people in his audience to the stage as volunteers. If we may use the legal phrase, one would like to know who granted him the *locus standi* to assign members of his audience full-fledged roles on stage. No one doubts the fact that solo performers more than any other class of actors have the greatest need to connect to their audience, but there must be a limit to actor-audience interaction.

Cairney's interest in studying the role of the audience in mono-dramatic presentations arises from his observation that audience contributions in the realization of such plays are generally underrated. While I share Cairney's view that it is wrong to underrate the audience, we must stress here that it is equally wrong to overrate their contribution towards the realization of the actor's role.

Unlike Deborah, Cairney draws concrete examples from past productions to buttress his arguments on the significance of the audience. For example, in his review of *Miss Margarida's Way* a solo play by Robert Althede, Cairney discusses how the solo actress, Estalle Parsons turns her audience into antagonists while she retains the part of the protagonist. Cairney notes that:

Miss Margarida is a spinster school teacher taking her class (the audience) in the eight grades and deliberately insulting them to provoke responses and replies from them. This is the actress as protagonist and the audience as antagonist in the primitive theatrical exchange. There is risk here because there is no possibility of rehearsals. The only action is their reaction. Her tirade is intended to unsettle their expectations yet they must never forget that they are at a play and have paid to get in. the performance trades a very delicate part here.[2001;141]

Beyond presenting practical examples of audience involvement in specific solo plays, Cairney also explains why the audiences for solo plays are more creative and imaginative than the audience for the conventional plays. According to Cairney (2001:193-194):

In the Solo, the audience does not have the distraction of other entrances and exits, or the comfort of the crowd scene to let their mind wander. All they have got is one person up there and they have to make the most of him. Solo theatre is theatre stripped to its bones, one person talking directly to others, with nothing or no one getting between them, it is theatre in your face with no holds barred, non tangential and totally uncompromising, demanding complete trust and attention on both sides....it is only in solo performance that the audience feels a heightened sense of relationship with the actor.

The above passages clearly explain why the audience in a solo performance context has a unique role to play and an exceptional relationship with the actor quite unlike in the conventional theatre where the audience serve often as wire rods or antennas in the theatre.

From Cairney's Explication, we gather that:

It is in this relationship to his audience that the solo player is unique. The actor in the one-person play addresses his audience not as a passive auditor to his play but as active co-performer with him in the dramatic exercise that involves them both.....the soloist speaks to them directly as character to character, much as he would involve a fellow player on the stage. He does not keep them at a remove, a listening entity in the dark, but actively draws them into his own action so that they become part of the performance itself. This is the audience as actors.

(John Cairney, 2001:4)

In referring to the audience as co-performers or as actors, John Cairney is not in any way suggesting that members of the audience should start seeing themselves as full-fledged actors. We must not forget also that the audience can be intensely engaged with the action on stage physically and psychologically without exaggerated body movements or deep verbal utterances. As the saying goes "there is action even in inaction".

WINNING THE AUDIENCE

Cairney also laid a lot of emphasis on the need for the solo actor to win or take his audience along. Without the audience on your side, it may be difficult to achieve an outward dramatic conflict in a solo play. In the passages below, he explains how winning the audience fosters the realization of such dramatic conflicts:

If the solo actor engages his audience correctly, the ensuing dialogue between them opens up every avenue for conflict and choice and all other requirements of the conventional ensemble drama.

(Cairney, 2001:4)

Even the non-verbal dialogue or body statements which the soloist makes can help to establish dramatic conflict. The ability to take your audience along with you in a solo context is what makes the performance a mutual effort in the first place. Without engaging their interest and attention, it will be hard for any solo actor to command their

respect, without their respect, the solo venture becomes a wasted effort. According to Cairney, the solo actor's greatest desire... "is for the audience to accept the reality of the artistic exchange". (2001:112)

The audience and the Solo Actor: A review of Audience-Engagement

In fact, whatever it takes to make the audience accept your performance should not be compromised except what contradicts or challenges the basic rules of the theatre. This

explains why Cairney considers being in charge the ultimate test of acting. His finest example of a soloist who mastered the art of taking control of his audience is Dan Leno (1860-1904).

As gathered from Cairney, (2001:112)

Leno was at his best on his own talking to an audience, it was this aspect of his work that gave him his place among the great soloists. Like them, he had an extra-ordinary rapport with the house, and seemed more to work with-them rather than to them. So intense was his audience relationship that he worked more and more with them... he preferred to react to the impulse he felt from the house and go on from there, just as all the great soloists have done after a certain stage. Leno was a master at this high exchange between performer and audience, using inter-reaction as his only punctuation....

From the above, we can see that winning the audience on your side is one of the surest techniques of guaranteeing the audience involvement and creativity. No one better than Margarel Bruce has captured in words how best a solo actor can stimulate audience involvement and creative energy. See her description of a perfect audience – actor rapport from the experience by a famous Canadian soloist below:

She comes right downstage as it were man to man with the house. The effect is like an exchange of confidence. She lays her self wide open and naturally everyone responds. There is an astonishing absence of barrier between actress and audience.

(as cited in Cairney 2001:114)

Her honest, true to live, unpretentious approach to the audience made it possible for them to respond to her utterances and actions with great ease. According to Cairney

This “audience-ease” is a prime quality of good soloist. The personality it imbues cannot only fill the stage; it spreads out to include the audience, and in Ruth Draper’s sense, brings them up on to the stage beside you....

AUDIENCE IN BONNEY’S ANTHOLOGY OF SOLO PLAYS

In the preface to *Extreme Exposure*, his Anthology of solo Performance texts from the twentieth century, Jo Bonney made the following crucial comment about the role of the audience in a solo play:

More than any other form of live performance, the solo show expects and demands the active involvement of the people in the audience. They are watched as they watch, they are directly addressed, their energy resonates

with that of the lone artist, and their presence in the room can trigger not only new levels of performance but, more interestingly, new materials.

(Jo Bonney: 2003: xiii)

Ruth Drapper (Listed in Bonney's Anthology) is among the notable American solo performers of the past who enjoyed the inventive and creative power of her audience. According to Drapper, the secret of great solo acting is:

To bring the audience up onto the stage and into the scene with you. It is they who must give you even more than you give them in the way of imagination and creative power.

(as cited in Bonney 2000:xiii)

In their introduction to Drapper, David Kaplan and Patricia Norcia (2000:18) explained how Drapper employed her audience as her main strategy for creating new lines in her performance:

She could shorten or lengthen a sketch in performance. With an alert, responsive audience, new lines would spontaneously be spoken. These new lines, she held, came not from her but from the character's reaction to a stimulating audience. The surface on which she wrote was her audience, for without an audience to respond, the character of Ruth Drapper did not, could not, exist.

Drapper is one of the earliest soloists who showed great appreciation for audience intelligence and involvement because it is through her reaction to such stimulating audiences that she was able to reach the height of her solo dramatic flight.

One of the grand objectives of a solo performance is to change the audience and you can't change people without making impact on them, without electrifying their minds and touching their souls.

Whoopi Goldberg (also listed in Bonney's Anthology) is another great soloist and stand up comedienne who always dialogued with her audience. Her comments below explain how her audience influences her solo performance:

A lot of the strength in my work is reactive. I've got these characters and how they behave on a given night depends on a lot of things: The audience, the kind of day I've had, the mood I'm in. that's why I like to go out into the audience when I do the wino, because I want to know as much as anyone out there wants to know, what is going to happen.

(As quoted by Fred Zollo 2000:210)

From our discussions so far, we have seen how the audience actively participates in a one-man show and how the one-man show is inspired by the audience reaction and response, it is not usually very easy for a lone ranger to get his audience consciously and actively involved in the performance, it requires enormous creative power and theatrical ingenuity for him to be in command and control of his

audience. Before analyzing our finding and drawing a conclusion, let us focus a little attention on Glenn Alterman, another respected soloists and minimalist who has shown considerable interest on this subject.

In his book, *Creating Your Own Monologue*, he argues that it is the solo actor's ability to enact a deep felt feeling or a message that deeply concerns him that stimulates the atmosphere for the audiences creative and passionate involvement. *For any solo play to succeed, the audience should have some sense of why the writer took the time to create it in the first place....one of the main reasons to create your own monologue should be a need to express something that deeply concerns you. It may be a burning issue or some events in your past that you need to personally resolve.*

For Alterman, nothing else but the soloist's passionate enactment of such disturbing issues can instantly create the justification for audience involvement and empathy for the solitary player on stage. Alterman sees his audience as significant characters that must play outstanding roles.

According to Alterman (2005:19):

'I believe the audience is a major player in my work. I often tell them, "I can do nothing without you" I always include the audience. I don't feel like I'm more intelligent than my audience. I feel like we are doing it together. They're holding out an end of the tight rope, and I am at the other end. If they believe it, I believe it, if they don't believe it, I don't believe it...' What I get from an audience is a tremendous feeling of acceptance.

Alterman also listed improvisation as his chief strategy for ensuring and securing his dynamic audience, thus he declares: "The secret of successful improvisational work is to not put any restrictions on yourself but leave yourself open to any impulses, physical or verbal".

It is Alterman's openness to impulsive words and signals from his audience that enkindles or stimulates his fantastic spontaneous - utterances and reactions. On his own part, he uses humor and narrative as his extra strategy for strengthening his connection with his audience.

In the words of Alterman

"I use humor/narratives as a way of dealing with the situation and reaching my audience. In my pieces, I cleverly manage to get people laughing about butt-plugs and spanking, etc. This lets people relax, see the fun and joy in our bodies and desires.

Alterman uses humor to get his audience relaxed, his humor makes the members of his audience relax and feel safe with him and then he takes them along on his solo theatrical journey, as they travel along with him, they suddenly cease to be passive on-lookers: they become active participants by regaining consciousness of the fact

that they have the power of speech and capability to assist the solo actor in his theatrical journey.

Lessons for Theatre Artistes and Scholars

In this study, we have clearly highlighted the delicate nature of the actor-audience interaction in the non-conventional theatre context of solo performance. Findings from the study have also revealed that more than in any other form of live performance, it is in solo drama that we encounter the extremely alert and responsive audience. Other lessons which we have learnt from this study are outlined below:

- (1) How the audience contribute through active participation to the soloist's realization of dialogue, mood, action, music, songs, story line and dramatic intensity.
- (2) Why the audience for a solo performance must be active one or why they are perceived as some kind of character created by the soloist's actions, re-actions and utterances.
- (3) Why the soloist treats his audience as partner and not passive auditors or receptive elements. One of the objectives of going solo is to have a direct encounter with an audience. Without a vibrant audience, such encounter will lack theatrical intensity.
- (4) The techniques or devices of the solo actor that stimulates spontaneous and will-full involvement of his audience in his performance.

Some of these techniques are:

- (a) **Emotionally deep and intense story line:** Alterman for example, teaches us that solo performers can use emotionally deep storyline and creative ingenuity to stimulate creative and passionate involvement of the audience. This was the major technique that the researcher employed in the realisation of his solo play *The Prime Minister's Son*
- (b) **Audience control mechanism:** This helps to ensure that the audience reaction which can lead to distraction or interruption of a vital moment in a scene is kept under check. Speechless movement of the lips is a technique that can make the audience feel that they are missing a vital aspect of the story.
- (c) **Audience-ease attitude:** if the solo actor cannot device a way to make his audience feel relaxed and at ease the tension in the audience can destroy the entire performance. Humor and gags are some of the techniques for accomplishing this. However, it is important to note that a solo actor who employs humor as a strategy of achieving audience-ease must naturally be witty. He or she must understand that creating laughter requires timing. All comedians according to Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found, "require great mobility of countenance and commands of dialect" (1992:100).

- (d) **Improvisation:** Improvisation in this context is instantly applicable during a phase in the creation of a particular role. This must not be confused with improvisation as a process or method of actor training.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the basic reasons why soloists desire active involvement of the audience are: (1) The solitary nature of their performance, which makes the audience the only possible handle with which the solo performance can be driven. (2) Without the audience, it will be difficult to achieve an externalised dramatic conflict in a solo play. In solo performances like that of Ruth Drapper, for example where the actor distances himself from the audience completely, dramatic conflict can hardly be externalized.

As we have ascertained from this study, **audience-as-antagonist techniques** is one of the strategies through which the soloist can equally achieve out-ward dramatic conflict in his performance. To appropriate this technique, however, does not grant us the license to abuse our audience or put them through unnecessary torture and strain. Perhaps the enormous psychological and intellectual demands of this art on both the actor and the audience is one of the major reasons why many artistes and theatre goers do not calmour for this form of theatre in our country, instead, they prefer to subscribe to the art of the stand-up comedians that relaxes their minds, unlike the abhorred solo dramatic art that does not only tasks their minds, but also poses a strenuous challenge and demand on their sense of imagination.

Audiences of stand-up comedy as we well know, go to the theatre strictly for the purpose of relaxation, and to free their minds from stress. For them acts like solo drama that stimulates imagination in a heightened way must be avoided. This explains why our educational institutions remain the only quarters where the intellectual and artistic aesthetics of solo drama has continued to receive a warm welcome. More research and practical experiments in this sub-genre of theatre is needed to guarantee its rapid growth and survival as an art form.

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