

Reflecting on *All for Peace*, a Community Theatre Experience in Akungba

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Abstract

This work documents and reflects on the community theatre production titled All for Peace, staged at the palace of the Alale of Akungba and the Multi-Purpose Hall of Adekunle Ajasin University on July 17 and 18 2024 respectively. This paper is inspired by Helen Cahill's cautionary note to applied theatre practitioners about the danger of complicity in the marginalisation in applied theatre practice and scholarship. The warning borders on the justification of applied theatre's specific contribution to attaining social change. Practitioners' failure to intentionally document and evaluate the contributions constitutes the main concern of this piece. This essay deploys Taiwo Afolabi's "ethical questioning" as a springboard to interrogate the project. Afolabi avers that the art of questioning requires reflection: before, in, and after the action. Consequently, documentation and reflection on the dramatic content and contexts are undertaken. The result is a template for documenting and evaluating a dramatic production.

Keywords: Applied theatre, social change, documentation, reflections, ethical questioning.

Introduction

One of the most rewarding tasks after a community theatre project is looking back to reflect on the project's theme, goal, and actualisation. First, approaching this discourse from the purview of critical pedagogy draws attention to reflection as the transformative process that links thought with action. Reflection is thus aimed at fostering critical consciousness to challenge oppression, power structures, and social inequalities. Using Taiwo Afolabi's (2021) "ethical questioning" as a springboard, this paper launches into the discourse to interrogate the applied theatre project. Ethical questioning is a systematic process that involves reflection before, during ("in"), and after ("on") action to amplify resistance and strengthen decolonisation in the research process or in applied theatre practice. Afolabi avers that ethical questioning takes on the canons of reflexivity, praxis, and social justice as anchors to turn ethics into a political act. Afolabi (2021) cites Gearty and Coghlan (2018) to posit further that, "The art of questioning requires reflection: whether reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action or the action researcher's first-, second- or third-person inquiry modes, the purpose is to examine processes, thinking, patterns and practices" (p. 104).

The act of questioning, in Afolabi's opinion, can result in the discovery of new knowledge, or a realization or reaffirmation of existing knowledge.

Thus, this paper is a reflection on the Department of Performing Arts' applied theatre intervention in *All for Peace*, its 2024 community theatre production. This effort therefore reflects on and documents this production in alignment with Helen Cahill's (2018) charge that, "the applied drama field must take responsibility for ensuring that it does not inadvertently participate in its own marginalisation by failing to engage in the substantial work of charting its contribution to social and personal change" (p. 173). Indeed, practitioners must avoid the guilt of being complicit in their own marginalisation by failing to document their own contribution to positive change in society.

Setting the Stage: Synopsis and Performance Profile

It is very challenging when the goal of an applied theatre intervention carries the urgency of speaking truth to sensitive socio-political issues that impinge on the quality of human existence. This reflection is an attempt to document the community theatre production of *All for Peace*. It focuses on the Department of Performing Arts' applied theatre intervention in *All for Peace*, its 2024 community theatre production and also offers an opportunity for self-evaluation. The production of *All for Peace* serves as the practical component of PFA 206 (Theatre for Development I: Community Theatre), a 200-level course that I have been teaching consistently for years in the department. *All for Peace* is also the department's entry in the 2024 Komuniti Project of Thespian Family Theatre and Productions which involved 8 other universities. So, I taught the course and also coordinated and coached the Adekunle Ajasin University community theatre team for the competition. The play was directed by Zechariah Akinmoladun and stage-managed by Chikodiri Ukpa, under my supervision.

All for Peace tells the tragic story of Peace Afolabi, a final-year student of Adekunle Ajasin University who lives alongside others in a decrepit private students' hostel owned and managed by Ogunlowo, a native of Akungba. The hostel, a poorly constructed facility that had been converted from a private home for commercial purposes, is very close to a canal. Apart from its unsafe location, the environmental health situation of the house and the neighbourhood calls for concern, as there is no proper

way of disposing of waste in the whole area and the canal functions simultaneously as a sewage and a refuse dump site. To make matters worse, the students within the neighbourhood also show little regard for keeping their surroundings clean. Meanwhile, Ogunlowo, the landlord, continues to indiscriminately hike the house rent without paying due attention to the structural defects and proper maintenance of the building, leaving the students continue to live in filth.

Eventually, the much-abused environment fights back and claims the lives of Precious and other residents in a cholera outbreak. Compounding the tragedy, a devastating flood takes its toll by sweeping Peace and the Landlord's daughter away after a heavy downpour. After these disasters, students, indigenes, parents, university management and all other stakeholders were forced to come together to find solutions to the environmental and attitudinal problems. In the remaining section, I used the triad framework of ethical questioning, 'before-in-on' to reflect on the process.

Reflection as a Facilitator

My role as the project facilitator offered me the opportunity to create space for critical engagement and identify the kind of participation the project required to evoke imagination. Right from the beginning, when I introduced the course and the Thespian "Komuniti Project" to the students in the classroom, I knew some of the problems we would be analysing with the drama were far beyond the reach of the university and the entire town of Akungba. But I also knew that we could use our drama to sensitize the powers that be about the environmental problem in Akungba. However, besides the big problems that demand government attention, there are some much smaller problems that merely require communal interest and determination to solve, such as personal and environmental hygiene. From the classroom stage where we first discussed one of the most debilitating problems in the neighbourhoods of Akungba where the students live, we went on to discuss the community research strategy to adopt, and finally opted for the migrant approach. The community research stage and the rehearsals were as challenging as they were engaging till the last day of production as I had to contend with many self-referential questions. How would the people receive our drama, especially on the issue of the poor hostel facilities that have sprung up in every nook and cranny of Akungba? Did the students-cum-participants understand the whole essence of using drama to effect social change? Would the drama have any impact in their lives? I was more concerned about using the drama to

effect a positive change in the students' lives and those of the indigenes of Akungba. Cahill (2018) posits that a collective, creative and critical engagement through drama can help participants create and explore the imaginary, within which change becomes permissible and possible (p. 174). In the same vein, her experience as a facilitator and teacher, which has also helped her function as an "instigator and a key witness to change" may have led her to believe that learning through drama may not necessarily be transformative. It is therefore instructive to keep an open and receptive mind regarding applied theatre engagement and social change. Social transformation or development, when it finally arrives, does not consist merely in physical changes or infrastructural improvement. It also entails the renewal and reinvention of the human mind as well as the resolve of a group of people to change their destiny and that of their community for the better. When such a change arrives, it announces its own arrival with a force that can neither be ignored nor resisted. In such an instance, the least that can be done to assert the social relevance and impact of applied theatre is to faithfully document the process of such interventions and the transformation attained.

This piece is an intentional step taken to reiterate Cahill's warning to practitioners and facilitators on the need to keep records of applied theatre projects and promote their contributions to development in society. It is therefore necessary to claim and assert the eventual transformative power of applied theatre, especially where applicable, and this should be of great concern to practitioners.

Thematic and Contextual Exploration

All for Peace is the product of a community theatre initiative designed to address environmental problems in the Akungba community. The drama was staged by the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, in collaboration with Thespian Family Theatre and Productions. The 2024 community theatre production offered a veritable platform to explore environmental health issues in the context of development and participation. Specifically, the production positioned itself as a model of applied theatre with an intense gaze on attaining developmental goals through its content, context and a predominant methodology of participation.

At the end of the production, which took place at the palace of the Alale of Akungba and at the Multi-Purpose Hall of Adekunle Ajasin University, the play emerged as the product of three distinct

contexts. These three contexts manifest in three modes: educational, social and competitive. In the first instance, the play and its production emerged from the Community Theatre class. The course teaches the art of using drama and theatre to interrogate social problems and offer viable solutions to human problems. The overarching intention is to expose students to how theatre can be used to critically analyse societal challenges. By the end of the production, students should be able to perceive theatre as a potent tool of social change.

Secondly, through this play, which addresses the themes of environmental health and sustainability, the question is asked whether the students were able to articulate their objective reality of being actively among the “marginalised” whose predicament is in focus. It is pertinent to note that they were not just examining the issue as laypeople, but have already been exposed to the Freirean and Boalian pedagogies of the oppressed. They also understand Brecht’s appeal to the audience to emotionally detach themselves from the character and the actor on stage. They must reflect on the action on stage and internalise it with their own reality accordingly. For the students, the production is a praxis — a crucible where theory meets practice, and drama meets reality.

The students were wearing two caps: student-facilitators on the one hand, and community member-participants on the other hand, because they live in the same community and face the same environmental challenges being addressed. The environmental issues at stake were (and remain) life-threatening, and the students were (and still are) affected as much as the other residents of Akungba. Renting out private hostel facilities is a ‘thriving’ business in Akungba, and this is because more than 85% of Adekunle Ajasin University students live off-campus. The community research revealed that most private hostels in Akungba are substandard, as private homes are indiscriminately and crudely converted into student hostels. Many of these hostels are very close to a canal that is perpetually clogged with waste, refuse, and weeds. The canal has been turned into a sewage system that meanders through and around the town. By engaging in this production, the residents are also seeking solutions to their collective social and environmental problems. The third context presents *All for Peace* as the outcome of the collaboration between the Performing Arts Department of AAUA and Ayo Jaiyesimi’s Thespian Family Theatre and Productions, a community-based theatre organisation in Lagos. The 2024 Community Conversation focused on the environment to achieve a

better, more sustainable future for all by 2030. The programme was specifically designed to align with one of the seventeen United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which is Environmental Sustainability. The conversation was projected through stage performances, workshops, and competitions, which helped to drive home awareness and social change. To make this real, Thespian Family Theatre and Productions sourced and provided moderate funding for the production. They contacted 14 universities, of which 9 responded, thereby making it competitive. Prizes were to be awarded to the best schools at the end of the competition.

So, the Department of Performing Arts at Adekunle Ajasin University was officially invited to participate in Thespian Family Theatre's *2024/2025 Conversations* on the platform of The Komuniti, where they mobilized and enlightened the public on pressing social issues. The Play engaged the Akungba community --indigenes, students and other stakeholders on environmental issues. Specifically, the focus was on SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, as it relates to the residents of Akungba.

All for Peace, Adekunle Ajasin University's entry for the maiden edition of *2024/2025 Conversations*, was brought to the doorstep of the Akungba community to address environmental issues they had hitherto not paid attention to. The Performing Arts students of Adekunle Ajasin University drew on their traumatic encounter with history to address the theme of environmental sustainability which was midwifed by Thespian Family Theatre. They keyed into the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The drama underscores the need for Adekunle Ajasin University students and the host community of Akungba to take full ownership of their environment and make it a decent habitable place to live.

Students-Centred Engagement

Looking back at the production as an integral part of PFA 206 (Theatre for Development I: Community Theatre) and generally at our theatre curriculum in the Department of Performing Arts, it would be correct to conclude that it sufficiently furnished and exposed students to the art and techniques of using theatre as a tool to transform their community. Students involved were tutored and deeply engaged in the theory and practice of community theatre. The students were directly confronted with the reality of their lived experience through community research and the analysis of the problems on stage, as well as through post-performance audience interaction. It was realized that solutions to social problems do not necessarily

come through dramatisation alone, as Cahill warned. The King (Alale) of Akungba, who was in attendance at the post-performance interaction, promised to reach out to a member of the House of Representatives to assist in providing a refuse disposal van and to make provision for a dump site, which the community does not have at the moment. The chiefs also promised to sensitize landlords in Akungba to build and maintain standard and decent student hostels. It is, however, sad to learn of the king's death, the Alale of Akungba, a few months after the programme. The implication of this loss is that if there was a chance of acquiring a refuse disposal van and a dump site as promised, the untimely death of the king implied a major setback that would require a relaunch of the applied theatre intervention.

It needs to be on record that Thespian Family Theatre left no stone unturned in ensuring high standards and fairness. The Thespian Family sent delegates, all the way from Lagos, to all participating universities across different cities in Nigeria to observe their preparations and ensure they demonstrated proper etiquette. Beyond that, they insisted on detailed documentation for the entire production. The documentation included the post-performance script, attendance records, photographs, video recordings of the performance and rehearsals, production brochure, advocacy flyers, banners, posters and other items.

Eventually, when the results were announced, Adekunle Ajasin University's *All for Peace* production stood out as the best among the other universities' entries, winning prizes in the following categories: Overall Winner, Best in Advocacy, and Best Coach. However, winning the prizes does not imply that there were no gaps or challenges during the production. One might reasonably assume that being the overall winner indicates the intervention's overall efficacy, however, I do not think so. At the initial stage, the 200 level students were nonchalant about the community theatre project and their attitude did portend an imminent failure of project. What I did was to engage some serious senior students who expressed their desire and enthusiasm to be part of the project even though they would not earn any credit for the course. I admitted them into the production and gave them responsibilities. Upon seeing this, a vast majority of the class felt challenged. They buckled up and began to show interest. Eventually, they were all fully immersed in the project and took full ownership of production.

While reflecting on the transformation we were trying to achieve, I identified two tiers of transformation that should be scaled. The first is the physical transformation of our environment, which includes the availability and timely maintenance of infrastructure. It is the evidence of the other level of transformation that has already taken place in the minds of visionary leaders. That explains why the physical type of transformation does not and cannot activate itself. It is only activated in the minds of visionary leaders. This group is largely composed of the responsive and responsible government of the day. Such government functionaries are responsible for providing social amenities, promptly attending to natural and human disasters, and dredging and maintaining canals and other waterways. The second level of transformation also engage practitioners and facilitators, who serve as intermediaries between the marginalised people and the government as well as funding agencies. Transformation first takes place in people's minds before it manifests physically. It is only after people have been mentally and psychologically transformed that they can begin to manifest tangible evidence of that transformation. That is, after they must have driven the dream of change beyond the limits of their imagination and available resources, which is indeed a rare feat.

Conclusion: Reflection on the Project

Looking back at the production of *All for Peace*, one is prompted to ask whether this line of thought applies to these particular students who served as both facilitators and residents. Did they sufficiently undergo the process of inner transformation that would inspire a physical manifestation of transformation as desired in the drama? Did the student-facilitators actually reflect on the environmental problems confronting the residents of Akungba? Did the participants reflect on and believe in the possibility of using theatre to analyse and effect social change, either directly or remotely? Did the student-facilitators engage in ethical questioning before, during or after the applied theatre project as proposed by Taiwo Afolabi? It is pertinent to note at this point that Afolabi's Ethical questioning intersects with Cahill's theory of change and evolution, and with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Afolabi describes ethical questioning as a systematic process of asking critical-praxis-oriented questions with ethical implications to understand or challenge the

system in which one is operating (p.100). From ethical questioning, Afolabi leads us to reflexivity, praxis, and social justice.

At the heart of reflexivity, according to Afolabi (2021), is questioning which underscores knowing “what to ask, when to ask, who to ask and how to ask ...” (p.101). Reflexivity also provides the opportunity to examine one’s beliefs, biases and practices during research or applied theatre process and to reflect on how these may influence the research (Johnson and Duberley 2003; Winter 1989). This is just one of the intersections in which the notion of reflexivity as espoused by Afolabi (2021), Johnson and Duberley (2003) and Winter (1989) echoes Freire’s (2000) thought that liberation can only be attained through praxis, that is, reflection and action. “True reflection”, in Freire’s (p. 48) words, “leads to action”. This action, if taken, will “constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become an object of critical reflection” (p. 48). I find it difficult to claim that the students/facilitators underwent any ethical questioning that would lead them to reflect on any part of the production process. While it is to be expected that the residents of Akungba should desire a decent environment with potable water, good accommodation, electricity, refuse disposal van, dump site, and a well-maintained canal that would not pose a health hazard and death threat to the people, it is also imperative to ask if the residents were ready to own their environment and keep it clean and decent. If they do not own the environment, then they cannot protect it from health and other environmental hazards. Even if the government of the day provided all the basic social amenities the people lack, it would not matter if the people failed to take full ownership of the amenities, facilities and the environment. For the records, *All for Peace* rehearsals took place at the Open Air Theatre which belongs to the Department of Performing Arts and by extension, the students of the department. Other rehearsals hold there too. A semester after the production of *All for Peace*, I visited the Open Air Theatre and repeatedly checked the cleanliness of the place, only to discover the students had yet to claim ownership of the venue for their daily rehearsals. It was obvious to me that the students did not show any sign that they had absorbed the core message of the need to maintain good health and basic environmental hygiene. My position on this is that, for as long as the students who doubled as facilitators and residents refuse to walk their talk by taking full ownership of their own Open Air Theatre which functions as their studio, their rehearsal ground, even after the community theatre production of *All for Peace*, no claim of transformation can be ascribed to them or their past efforts.

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