

Special Issue: Applied Theatre in Africa: Borders, Boundaries, and New Frontiers **An Editorial**

Taiwo Afolabi and Olusola John

Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre, University of Regina, Canada

Abstract

This editorial provides historical context and an overview of the Special Issue that emerged from a Pan-African Applied Theatre conference titled Applied Theatre in Africa: Borders, Boundaries, and New Frontiers. This post-conference publication brings together selected papers presented at the conference that explore histories, interventions, and ethics in applied theatre practice in Africa.

Positionality

To begin, as editors, we would like to clarify our positionality.

Taiwo Afolabi (TA): As an artist-researcher with a background in applied theatre and the founding editor of the *Journal of Creative Arts and Social Enterprise*, it is only natural to focus this first Special Issue of JCASE on Applied Theatre. My Canada Research Chair program in Socially Engaged Theatre engages Applied Theatre as part of the creative arts because it relies on a collaborative creative process (such as devising, writing, acting, directing, facilitating, and designing) to achieve aesthetic and social impact.

Olusola John (OJ): As a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Socially Engaged, University of Regina, one of the organizers of the Applied Theatre conference, I find co-editing this Special Issue a significant historical and scholarly experience. I am gratified to see some of the papers presented at the conference published in this collection.

TA and OJ: As graduates of the University of Jos (Nigeria), where we first encountered Theatre for Development and Community Theatre, we are pleased to serve as conference co-convenor and conference lead (TA), and conference manager (OJ). This Special Issue seeks to document and celebrate the various strides made across the region, from the establishment of multiple programs in tertiary institutions to the organization of festivals, conferences, and partnerships that continue to drive change in different communities; Africa's applied theatre scene is thriving.

Introduction: Context and Content

The Special Issue is an outcome of the International Conference of Pan-African Applied Theatre, held at Benue State University (BSU, Nigeria) in February 2025¹. It was a partnership between

¹ The International Conference of Pan-African Applied Theatre, which held at Benue State University (BSU, Nigeria) in partnership with the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre, University of Regina (Canada), in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London (the UK) in February 2025 was convened by Professors Tor Iorapuu and Taiwo Afolabi. The conference was a joint effort of different scholars across the country. Special appreciation to the organising committee: Professor Steve Oga Abah, Professor Tor Iorapu, Prof. Taiwo Afolabi, Professor Victor Dugga, Professor Dennis Teghtegh, Dr. Sola John, Professor Selina Busby, Professor Aondowase Boh, Professor Don Saa-Aondo Iorngurum, Dr Zack Wade, Dr. Abel Ibebe, Dr. Ter-Adoka, Dr. Ihidero Victor, Dr. Millicent Ahupa, Dr. Ola Ifatimehin, Dr. Sylvanus Dangoji, Dr. Lilian Ioryisa, Late

BSU, the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre at the University of Regina (Canada), and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama at the University of London (the United Kingdom). This international conference was envisioned as a mosaic, a space for applied theatre scholars, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and students, established and emerging, to engage and raise questions that will impact and shape the future of the field in the region and globally. Through this critical gathering and its dialogues, organisers and participants braided and wove experiences and ideas to push the field's boundaries. The goal was to break down ideological and physical barriers and open new frontiers. We heard from researchers and practitioners from seven African countries (Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa, Cameroon, Kenya, Ghana and Guinea-Bissau) and four non-African countries (Canada, Germany, England and Scotland, and the United States) to create new networks, strengthen existing connections, and advance the discourses of applied theatre in the region and beyond. The conference also invited ideas that challenged singular narratives of applied theatre as a means of doing good. It offered new possibilities while simultaneously recognising the foundations and roots that have brought the field to this moment in Africa. The Special Issue features contributions from those interested in publishing their conference papers. The special issue comprises nine papers from the Pan-African conference that explore the history and experiences of how theatre drives social change in Nigeria and Cameroon. In writing the editorial, the editors reject imposing a single framework; rather, key ideas critical to the ecology of the practice vis-à-vis interventions, ethics, and histories are identified, as articulated in the featured articles. These three broad thematic strokes (histories, interventions, and ethics) provide a lens for better understanding shared approaches and debates in African applied theatre, a field deeply tied to community empowerment and the legacies of Theatre for Development (TfD). It recognises theatre's transformative potential while acknowledging its limitations.

As part of the conference's intentions, the Special Issue aims to push the boundaries of applied theatre practice in Africa by weaving together diverse experiences and questioning old assumptions. The Issue seeks to provoke queries, such as: What does it mean to reprioritize and globally disseminate applied theatre methods and practices in socially engaged settings in Africa? What would a new vision of applied theatre look like in Africa as we emphasize Pan-African solidarity and local agency, while continuing a tradition of grassroots theatre activism and critically examining colonial-era paradigms? While we cannot claim this Issue achieves all these goals, it offers a slice of new frontiers for socially engaged theatre on the continent. The themes of this edition are outlined below.

Histories and Horizons: Legacies of Theatre for Development (TfD) and New Frontiers

Learning from the past: The first central theme, histories, situates the current applied theatre practices within the larger trajectory of Theatre for Development and Popular Theatre movements in Africa. In the two keynotes, "Theatre for Development: Reflections on a Pedagogy in Flux" and "A Phenomenological Investigation into the Revitalisation of Theatre for Development", TfD icons, Professor Steve Abah and Professor Iyorkwuese Hagher, respectively, traced the history of TfD practice on the continent in order to locate the future. Both veterans have published extensively in the field of TfD (Hagher 1990; Abah 1997). The African continent is home to 54

Professor Idoko, and Dr. Marcellinus Aseun. We acknowledge the Canada Research Chair in Socially Engaged Theatre for the funding support in working on this Special Issue and the Conference.

countries, each with its own socio-political context. Africa has a complex and unique history, challenges, and opportunities expressed in diverse ways. Within that range of expression is performance (theatre, songs, and dances). What's now known as Applied Theatre goes by different names, such as Theatre for Development, Community Theatre, and Theatre for Education. Numerous Theatre for Development (TfD) practitioners and scholars from the Global North have travelled to the region to share their own work and practices. Scholars (such as Christopher Balme and Abdul Karim Hakib 2023) have observed that, different African countries have also produced their own icons in the field of TfD and popular theatre, including Jenkeri Zakari Okwori, Bode Sowande, Oga Steve Abah and Iyorkwuese Hagher (Nigeria), late Ndumbe Eyoh (Cameroon), Opia Kumah (Ghana), Rose Mbowa (Uganda), Zakes Mda (South Africa), Penina Mlama (Tanzania), Mapopa Mtonga (Zambia), Dickson Mwanza (Zambia), Christopher Kamlongera (Malawi), and Stephen Chifunyise (Zimbabwe). We also recognise the contributions of non-African scholars who made significant investments in the field of applied theatre on the African continent. Such individuals include Michael Etherton, Ross Kidd, and Eckhard Bretinger

This historical lens matters because today's applied theatre rests on decades of experimentation, activism, and institution-building. Nenrotmwa Gotep Miri and Hussaini Tsaku's "Theatre for Development or Socially Engaged Theatre? In Search of a Viable Nomenclature" invites readers to consider the history and realities of naming applied theatre practice. Invoking history should not be about nostalgia or uncritical celebration. Rather, it should provide a foundation for questioning and innovating. For instance, as we look to the future, it is important to note that the field is still male-dominated, mostly Anglophone-centric, and that some regions are more visible than others. Thus, there's a need to critically consider representation from diverse perspectives. The theme focuses on Pan-African perspectives and the future, while also exploring the complexity between continuity and change. A key question running through the Issue is: *what are the new frontiers for applied theatre in Africa today?* The two keynotes presented by two icons of TfD in the country echo a provocative prompt from the conference: Might now be the time to redefine and recontextualise applied theatre and its role in Africa?

Interventions: Theatre as Participatory Social Action

Applied theatre as a tool for change/social good: Another recurring theme is the idea of theatre as intervention – a deliberate, participatory tool to address societal challenges. The papers under this theme demonstrate how performances can catalyse dialogue and action in areas addressed in these submissions. Theatre is not mere entertainment; it is deployed as a form of social action that engages directly with community issues. The papers emphasise the interventions' approaches and their distinct featured project, highlighting their unique contributions to the global discourse on applied theatre. Olagoke Ifatimehin's article "Participation in Development and Sustainability reflects on lessons learnt while using participation in applied theatre projects in Mubi and Kano. Similarly, Emmanuel Iroh's "Promoting Healthy Living and Safety Environment through Community Theatre" shares culture-specific and locally relevant ideas from the Eke Nibo community.

Opportunities and possibilities from the grassroots: Taken together, the interventions in this issue offer applied theatre in Africa as both hopeful and clear-eyed about change. The articles show some promises of applied theatre in mobilising communities, a testament to how interactive performances can energise collective problem-solving. Emmanuel Uzoh and Kemi Owadara's

“The Transformative Power of Applied Theatre in Africa” and Abayomi Adegbamigbe’s “Documentation and Reflections on All for Peace” reflect on community theatre experience from different communities. Lasting change is hard-won as it requires long-term commitment, resources, and structural support beyond the theatre event itself. Therefore, community-based theatre interventions emerge as powerful catalysts for social improvement, yet not a quick fix. Projects rooted in local participation can build on Africa’s rich TfD tradition of “theatre-for-social-good,” while adapting it to contemporary needs. This needs to be emphasised.

Ethics: Navigating Power and Cultural Contexts

Centring ethical practice: Intertwined with intervention is a strong focus on ethics— how practitioners navigate questions of power, representation, and responsibility when using theatre for social change. Working in communities demands cultural sensitivity and humility to avoid reproducing the very inequalities the work seeks to challenge. Contributors emphasise that ethics is not an add-on in applied theatre, but an integral part of every stage of a project, from planning to performance to post-project evaluation. The peculiarities of each project’s ethical challenges and methods of navigation should be outlined to tease out the lessons from each project. TfD projects in practice in Nigeria (whether research, storytelling, or performance) and across Africa at large need to challenge the double standard around ethics, power dynamics, and reflexivity. In “Navigating Ethical Issues in Communicating Sensitive Messages in Northern Nigeria”, Olusola John, Iheanacho Iweha, and Sadiya Abubakar reflect on the ethics of engaging with conservative communities and how to navigate ethical dilemmas. Alasombo Nyigchuo’s “Applied Drama and Community Engagement for Climate Action in Cameroon” shared insights into how this sensitive project was implemented in Cameroon.

Finally, this Special Issue concludes with an applied theatre play script by Abayomi Adegbamigbe, an award-winning playwright and practitioner in Nigeria. The play is the result of an award-winning university-community applied theatre project focused on health and climate sustainability.

Conclusion

Rethinking practice on the continent through the lenses of interventions, ethics, and histories is anticipated to give a nuanced picture of both the challenges and opportunities facing applied theatre in Africa. The tension between continuity and change emerges as a productive force. Readers should be inspired by the successes of earlier TfD works, yet remain determined to innovate beyond old models. African applied theatre is well poised to transcend old boundaries and create new spaces for hope and change. This Special Issue invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike to rethink applied theatre practice on the continent, to celebrate its rich history, rigorously interrogate its methods, and courageously explore new frontiers in the pursuit of community empowerment.

While Africa has seen several non-governmental and non-profit organisations use various forms of TfD to educate and communicate their agendas, there is often less significant local input. The continent continues to face many challenges in this field. The articles curated in this special issue aim to celebrate the various strides made across the region, from the establishment of multiple programs in tertiary institutions to the organisation of festivals, conferences, and partnerships that continue to drive change in different communities; Africa’s applied theatre scene is thriving. We

hope the articles can inspire and welcome new frontiers with hope and a critical lens. And reiterate questions that could shape the future of the applied theatre field in the region.

Finally, as a new journal, we would like to offer some context for this Special Issue, as some contributors requested that the editors address the editorial process for practical reasons within their institutions. During the conference, participants raised critical issues facing the field, such as brain drain caused by publishing in international journals, with scholars unable to access these publications because they are behind paywalls. Other issues include funding shortages, imbalanced power dynamics in international partnerships, and the Global North-Global South scholarship divide. In putting the Issue together, we considered these concerns, which led us to publish it in an open-access journal. Further, the editors allowed each contributor to use their institution's preferred citation style rather than requiring a single citation style. The writing and editing process was tedious, as the Issue was an opportunity to mentor scholars in writing and learning together. Unfortunately, some contributors dropped out along the way due to time constraints and the rigorous editorial process. Each paper underwent double-blind peer review and professional copyediting. The *Journal of Creative Arts and Social Enterprise* (jcase) is owned by Emissary Publishing House and published online in partnership with the University of Regina. The journal is managed through the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform hosted at the University of Regina, Canada.

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