

Lighting Stage Performances, the Challenge of Covid-19 Lock Down and the Social Media Solution

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Abstract

Stage lighting exists where there is stage performance. It makes the performers and the entire setting to be visible to the audience, reveals the true forms of both the performers and the set props. It also creates mood and enhance theatrical composition. With the challenge posed by covid-19 pandemic, which had crippled almost all sphere of human endeavour especially in the year 2020, theatre productions were ban alongside other forms of public gathering. Consequently, both performers and Lighting Designers were challenged in their traditional sources of income. The need to surmount the covid-19 challenge has resulted in solo theatrical performances via the social media. This work looks at the efficacy of theatrical performances through Tik-Tok and Instagram as a panacea to the challenge of government's band on public gathering faced by performers and Lighting Designers in the era of covid-19 lock down. Through experimentation and observation it was discovered that the Tik Tok and Instagram social media have created much impact in the staging of theatrical performances with very few (solo, two or three) performers which is in line with COVID 19 protocol and it is recommended that these two social media channels should be used to stage more theatrical performances.

Key Words: Performance, Lighting, Covid-19, Tik-Tok, Instagram.

Introduction:

Theatrical performances before the era of COVID 19 had always been a choice entertainment for many entertainment seekers/lovers in the world. Theatre buildings in different parts of the world were busy with different kinds of shows and some theatre companies had outdoor performances to satisfy the entertainment needs of the society. "The presence of the audience is what sets theatre apart from other forms of entertainment such as film and television." (Wilson 15). Since the early part of the year 2020, the world has been plagued with the COVID 19 pandemic. No continent of the world has been spared this terrible situation. Millions of people have died (the situation was worse before the production of vaccines for the prevention of the pandemic). Even the vaccines which were eventually produced after much research by different pharmaceutical companies, cannot guarantee

complete protection from the virus. The world has been thrown into confusion and panic. As a temporary solution to the transmission of the virus from person to person, different countries came up with various non-pharmaceutical measures including wearing of face mask, more frequent washing of hands, physical distancing and lock down (putting a hold on public gathering and instructing people to stay in-doors for a prescribed period).

The lock down prevented the staging of theatrical performances in theatre buildings all over the world; hence, becoming a stumbling block to theatre practises in different nations of the world. This period of inactivity among theatre practitioners stalled the development of talents and carrier growth in the theatre industry. The situation made theatre practitioners to be restless while waiting endlessly for the various governments to lift the temporary ban on theatrical productions in theatre buildings (which was part of the larger ban on public gathering).

Life was boring for many theatre patrons because they could no longer be entertained by watching theatrical productions which helped them to ease off tension at work places, homes, business and other situations that cause stress. Brockett expatiates on the importance of theatre patrons thus: "One of the most motives for going to the theatre is the desire for entertainment. This implies suspension of personal cares, relaxation of tension and a feeling of well-being, satisfaction and renewal." (20).

There was a serious need for public enlightenment about COVID 19 in different nations of the world, to enhance the prevention of the spread of the virus, which resulted in multiple deaths. In addition to using the conventional media (especially the broadcast media) to disseminate the messages about the pandemic, people also looked for other means through which the message could be disseminated. Of course what came to mind readily was the social media- Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.

Methodology:

The method applied in this work is qualitative analysis, which entails capturing "what people say and do as a product of how they interpret the complexity of their world, to understand events from the view points of the participants. It is the life world of the participants that constitutes the investigative world" (Osuala 171). "This is non-quantifiable; it can only be described. It goes beyond numbers to address non-measurable qualities of a phenomenon" (Andrew-Essien 41-42). In order to get reliable data for this work, the following techniques were used to collect data for this work:

Observation (Participant and non-participant)

Personal Interview

Theoretical Framework:

This paper is anchored on Causal Theory (also known as Cause-and-Effect Theory) which states that:

causation relation that holds between two temporally simultaneous or successive events when the first event (the cause) brings about the other (the effect). According to David Hume, when we say of two types of object or event that “X causes Y” (e.g., fire causes smoke), we mean that (i) Xs are “constantly conjoined” with Ys, (ii) Ys follow Xs and not vice versa, and (iii) there is a “necessary connection” between Xs and Ys such that whenever an X occurs, a Y must follow.

This theory is in tandem with the prevailing situation that the COVID 19 lock down (cause) engendered- that is the intensification of interest in presenting theatrical performances via the Instagram and Tik Tok.

Instagram, Tik Tok and Theatre Practise:

Instagram is a social media platform that is used to send pictures and video messages to friends, family members and others across the world. The platform was cofounded by Michael Krieger Meta and Kevin Systrom (both Americans) and launched on October 6, 2010 (Instagram.com). Many people, especially the youths, use the Instagram Application to share their pictures to family members and friend to update them about their current looks and how they are faring. Some use the App to showcase products and services. According Antoneli, “since its lunch, Instagram has become a popular way to connect with brands, celebrities, thought leaders, friends, family and more.... Instead of words, the platform is built almost entirely around sharing of images and videos.” (1). Antineli further asserts that Instagram has over 1 billion registered accounts and that it was bought by Facebook in 2012. The platform has become an integral part of many people’s daily life- “from small business to big ones, news organizations to cultural institutions... photographers and musicians, and not to mention the cottage industry of influencers that have come in its wake.” (Antoneli 1).

“TIKTOK is one of the most downloaded apps in the world, allowing users to share short video clips in genres like dance, comedy, or education.... (The platform) allows users to share up to 60 seconds of video - either creating their own content, or lip-syncing to popular songs, comedy sketches, or film scenes.” (Tereza 1). TikTok is a social media platform is owned by a technology company known as ByteDance, which was founded and launched by Zhang Yiming in the year, 2012. The company developed news aggregation services and software apps, including TikTok which was “launched in 2017, but only became available worldwide when it merged with fellow Chinese social media service, Musical.ly, in 2018. Musical.ly (itself) was launched in 2014, and allows users to create and share short lip-sync videos.” (Tereza 1).

Because of the potentials of Instagram and TikTok to allow users to lip-sync to popular songs, create comedy sketches, or film scenes and connecting to people, they become veritable platforms for theatrical performances. Although full-scale theatrical productions cannot be recorded and shown on Instagram and TikTok because they were not originally programmed for such productions (unlike Facebook where a full-scale theatrical production, church services and other long duration activities/programmes could be recorded and shown live/replayed), drama sketch, short dance and brief musicals/mime are the types of theatrical performances that are staged on the two social media platforms.

Unlike the theatrical performances that are staged in purpose-built theatre buildings, where the performers and the audience see each other face-to-face and interact with each other, social media platforms (in general) and Instagram and TikTok do not have this feature. On the contrary, all social media platforms (including Instagram and TikTok) are designed for only the audience to see the performers. However, if theatrical performances are staged, using Zoom or Skype as the channel of expression, the normal live theatre experience where the performers and the audience can see and interact with each other, could be replicated.

Theatrical Productions during the COVID 19 Era:

These social media are not entirely new media for theatrical performances. Individuals and groups have been displaying their acting talents on these two social media for fun and some to get followers in order to be paid by the two social media organizations. What is new about this work is that the COVID 19 lock down served as a motivation for messages to be passed across to the public by means of theatrical performances (solo performance, duo, trio and not a large group, to keep to the COVID 19 protocol). The potentials of Instagram and Tik Tok are diverse. Antoneli expatiates on the potentials of Instagram thus:

Like other social media networks, Instagram is what you make of it. For most people, checking Instagram is equal parts voyeurism and self-expression. For the entrepreneurial set, like business owners, brands and influencers, Instagram is an indispensable marketing tool with unmatched reach (1).

Antoneli's assertion about Instagram could also be said of Tik Tok. It is the potentials of the two social media platforms as channels of self-expression and marketing tools that endeared them to some theatre practitioners during the COVID 19 pandemic era, which led to the shutdown of public buildings- including theatre buildings. Two of those theatre performers who used the Instagram and Tik Tok during the pandemic period as social media platforms for self-expression cum theatrical performances are Precious Nwobilor and Gwendolyn Michael. They have done many solo theatrical performances on both Instagram and Tik Tok. While

Precious does it not only for fun, but to earn some money from it and to discuss societal issues, Gwendoline does is mostly for the fun of it.

The two performers used as case study in this work: Precious and Gwendolyn have proven the assertion of Antoneli that Instagram (and indeed any other social media platform) is what you make of it. In an interview with Precious Nwobilor, she said that she started performing on Instagram and TikTok in the year, 2020 (during the COVID-19 lockdown) “for fun and to kill boredom” and she further revealed that she also performed because “artists (do) pay for videos promoting of their songs... business owners pay for advertisements.” When she was asked whether she has been paid before for her performances and by whom? She answered: “An upcoming artist... we keep them confidential.”

In another interview with Gwendolyn Michael, she revealed that:

Someone can only be paid by TikTok when (the person has) from Ten Thousand followers upwards– as content creators... people with fewer **likes** (1000) also have opportunity to cash out (make some money too) using live stream... there are usually gift boxes that the fans send, when the performers are alive and these gift boxes are more like giving someone money which they get through pay pal.... Coins and diamond can also be given by the fans, which the performers can convert to money.

Miss Michael also disclosed that people perform on Instagram and TikTok of their desire to acquire fame and money. She said that she knows of a person that TikTok made to be very famous “and now she is seen as a celebrity just because of TikTok and now (TikTok is) a source of income to her”.

Scene Design and Lighting of Stage performances for Instagram and Tik Tok in the COVID 19 Era:

Any found theatre space could be used to stage theatrical performances on Instagram and on Tik Tok. In order to enhance the aesthetics of the theatrical performances, the scenery and the lighting would have to play major roles. Depending on the particular venue, either natural or artificial lighting could be used. In the case of the two performers that are used as case studies in this work (Gwendolyn and Precious), they did and are still doing both indoor and outdoor (day and night) theatrical performances on both Instagram and Tik Tok.

Where each of them did outdoor production in the day, natural light (reflection from the sun light; not the sun light itself) was used for the lighting of the performance. However, when it was done at night (outdoor) there was need for artificial light. Indoor performances, whether in the day or at night, needed artificial light; hence, artificial light was used for the lighting. They did not necessarily have to theatre lanterns; normal domestic bulbs were deployed. Where there were needs for special lighting, then theatre lanterns were deployed-

LEDs. The major requirements for the lighting instruments to be deployed in the lighting of the show were that they had to facilitate the accomplishment of the key functions of lighting for theatrical productions, which are:

Visibility- The performer(s) and the scenery have to be clearly visible to the viewers. “Apart from artistic considerations, a minimal level of intensity is essential if the performance is to be seen.” (Brockett and Ball 407).

Revelation of form- Sometimes, because of the way the lighting instruments are positioned, some of the performers and stage props appear awkward and flat unintentionally. In such a situation, the intended communication is tampered with; meanings are distorted. In order to have effective stage communication, the lighting instruments must be positioned in such a way that they reveal the true forms of both the performers and the stage properties. In order to solve this lighting problem, Stanley McCandless developed the technique of **Area-Lighting** (in the 1930s). The technique entails dividing the stage into different areas and positioning of lighting instruments from different angles to make provision for comprehensive of each area; thus, lighting of every part of the stage where the performers are expected to move to while performing. In their discourse on lighting area technique, Parker, Wolf and Block assert: “Dividing the acting space into convenient areas and then lighting each area with the same number of lighting instruments provides a balanced illumination” (377).

Creation of Mood- Two of the controllable qualities of light (intensity and colour) are very essential in creating mood during theatrical productions. The intensity of light could either be increased or reduced in order to create either the mood of excitement or tragedy/danger. “Mood and atmosphere are unavoidable features of light; to ignore this is as dangerous as overstating the mood” (Parker, Wolf and Block 360).

Composition- All the things that are done with light- visibility, revelation of form, creating the mood(s) and the light moving from one scene/position to another (thereby taking the attention/focus of the audience from one point to another) constitute composition. In his discourse on functions of stage lighting, Wilson asserts: “By means of focus, light can also create a series of visual compositions on stage. These can vary from turning the stage into one large area to creating small, isolated areas”. (388). Brockett elaborates further: “light can also be used as compositional elements. It can reveal whatever needs emphasis; it can selectively illuminate objects, actors, or areas by focusing attention on them or by obscuring them; it can let the eye see what is important and subordinate what is insignificant.” (578).

When these functions of stage lighting (discussed above) are put into consideration while lighting theatrical performance for the stage or for social media, the overall stage communication would be enhanced and the audience would get the intended message without ambiguity. Lighting performances for social media platforms are not as demanding as lighting

for stage performances because deployment of professional stage lighting equipment is not mandatory. Normal domestic bulbs could be used to light the performances.

Conclusion:

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused major set-backs in different areas of life-economic, religious, health, sports, etc., it also contributed to the creative ingenuity of some people in different spheres of life. The COVID-19 lockdown engendered the intentional presentation of theatrical performances on social media platforms (including Instagram and TikTok), by individual and small groups, in order to ease the boredom that was caused by lockdown and the ban on group gathering. Consequently, some people, in addition to easing boredom, some people gained fame and also make some money from their performances on Instagram and TikTok.

Lighting theatrical performances on Instagram and TikTok is not that demanding, as normal domestic electric bulb could be used to light the performances, as opposed to lighting theatrical performances for the stage. Although professional theatre lighting instruments could be used, when the situation requires their deployment.

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