

## **APPLIED THEATRE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: THE IFITTE UNIZIK BUS STAND EXPERIENCE**

**Emmanuel Iroh, Ph.D**

Department of Theatre & Film Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

[irohemmaogbo@gmail.com](mailto:irohemmaogbo@gmail.com); 08037047033

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### **Abstract**

*Minor issues if unresolved are like a time bomb waiting to explode into uncontrollable dimension. The experiment which used Applied Theatre as conflict resolution strategy exposed some students' angst against the Driver's Welfare Association, operators of the Ifitte Unizik Bus Stand. The work is hinged on the postulation of Peter Brook's Theory of Empty Space and the theatrical practice of Brazilian's Augusto Boal who took theatrical performances to the people. The drama production succeeded in presenting the issues in a seamless and unobstructive manner. The post performance dialogue with the audience focused on the themes of the performance. The revelations from the analyses of the scenarios during the post production discussions show that drama is effective as a conflict resolution strategy. During a follow-through session, the researcher observed that most of the issues raised during the performance have been attended to; most especially, the researcher was gladly informed that the University authority had concluded an agreement with a philanthropist for a total reconstruction of the park which has been completed before this report was concluded.*

**Keywords:** Applied Theatre, Conflict Resolution, Post Performance Discussion.

### **Introduction**

Conventional theatre is straight-jacketed and not easily amenable to change because of its numerous conventions. It is constantly failing to meet the needs of emerging problems in society with its rigid and stringent traditions. Again, it stifles or muffles audience participation during a theatrical production, even as it has consistently denied practitioners the opportunity for alternative solutions as society grapples or is confronted with complex problems. Hence creativity may be the only solution to these problems. The Applied Theatre form which, not only allows theatre practitioners the chance of taking theatrical performances to the audience, also permits members of the audience to be part of that very important decision making process that will affect their lives as spec-actors.

Applied Theatre is an alternative theatre. The disenchantment with the rigid nature of conventional theatre led practitioners in the search for an alternative theatre where the audience will not be caged but have the opportunity of contributing to what is happening on stage. This was expressly stated by David Shepherd in his foreword to the book, *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*:

I'd become dissatisfied with the mainstream, hard ticket tradition of theatre, and thought that a cabaret format would better serve most Americans. I wanted plays to relate to ordinary people, not just about those wealthy enough to afford tickets. I wanted the audience to move around, eat and smoke and have some say about what was on stage (xvii).

His dream gave birth to the "Compass Theatre", a brand of Applied Theatre in America, that uses improvisations and interactive dramatic presentations to educate, entertain and inform the populace. One major characteristics of Applied Theatre is that it brings theatre to the people and gives them the opportunity to partake in the theme being explored. Buttressing the importance of the Applied Theatre, Adam Blatner opines that:

Over the past fifty years, beside the mainstream tradition of scripted and rehearsed theatre, interactive and improvisational drama methods have been used in education, business, and therapy and for social action, recreation, community building and personal empowerment (xx).

Peter O'Connor and Brian O'Connors, see Applied Theatre as:

An umbrella term that defines theatre which operates beyond the traditional and limiting scope of conventional western theatre forms. It is often characterized by work which deliberately engages I spaces or with groups of people where mainstream theatre still fears to tread. The boundaries between actors and spectators are purposefully blurred as all participants are involved as active theatre makers. Frequently, applied theatre is constructed as a response to social or political challenges and is seen as a process where difference and change can be wrought through is making (np).

Applied Theatre as a discipline, is a conglomeration of courses under educational theatre; an umbrella name encompassing courses that use the dramatic and theatrical methods for the education of the students, community, school, prison, clubs, business and for developmental purposes. It is one of the

specialization areas of the theatre. In Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, such courses as Theatre in Education (TIE), Drama in Education (DIE), Community Theatre for Development, Principles of Adaptation/ Story Dramatization, Dramatic Techniques for the Classroom, Children's Theatre on Radio/Television, Applied Theatre and Community Education, Theatre for Development (TfD) are compulsory courses for students specializing in Applied Theatre. It is also a specialization area in the post graduate studies. According to the students' handbook of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka:

Theatre can be a useful medium for communicating methods and processes for change. Developing intellectual militancy may become a methodology for dialogue. The student learns how change and positive development embed in the mind and flower in community's mutual understanding of each other's culture and attitudes (32).

In practice, Applied Theatre is vast, spanning across many disciplines, with different techniques and methods. Its umbrella covers areas like Theatre for Development, (TfD), Community Theatre, Theatre in Education (TIE), Drama in Education (DIE) , Prison Theatre, Theatre for Health Education, Museum Theatre and others. All the above performance practices "fall outside mainstream theatre performance and take place in nontraditional settings" (Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton, 6). They apply theatrical and dramatical techniques in their practice.

### **Drama and Conflict Resolution**

Drama is the representation of life experiences on stage. Drama carries a message. It usually follows a sequential order towards the interpretation of such message on stage. Martin Esslin sees drama in the following ways:

1. Drama can be seen as a manifestation of the play instinct as in children who are playing mother and father.
2. Drama is something one goes to see, which is organized as something to be seen.
3. It is an enacted fiction an art form based on mimetic action.
4. In arts, drama is the most elegant expression of thought nearest to the truth (reality).
5. It is the most concrete form in which art can recreate human situation, human relationship (np)

The choice of the dramatic mode as a conflict resolution strategy stems from the way dramatic messages are conveyed through the actions of the characters in the drama in a seamless and unobstructive manner. These dramatic messages which are presented as dialogue while the characters interact among themselves on stage are laden with the message (s). As the interaction is ongoing, the spectators/ audience follow and react to situations or issues being raised on stage and empathize with them. Naturally, you do not empathize with something, if you do not understand or relate with it. Therefore, drama is a medium of communication because it has a message to pass on and which is passed to the viewer who receives it as coded signal and then decodes them. It uses characters in the form human or non human beings, spirits, animals, cartoons, depending on the choice of the communicator, who is the playwright. This fact is accentuated by Alex Asigbo who submits that "theatre can be regarded as the whole process of chronicling human experiences for display before a conscious audience" (191).

More importantly, the choice of the Applied Theatre technique is in the inherent qualities of the method. Philip Taylor, sees Applied Theatre as a theatre:

that is taken out into nontheatrical settings, community centres, parks and streets, prison and rehabilitation venues, therapy, and health care sites, housing projects, support service settings, and other locations for the purpose of helping the audience, or the participants, grapple with an issue, event or question of immediate public and personal concern (xx).

He goes further to clarify that it is an Applied Theatre "because the art form becomes a transformative agent that places the audience or participants in direct and immediate situations where they can witness, confront and deconstruct aspects of their own and others' action" (xx).

On the other hand, conflict resolution according to Hilal Ahmed Wani, is "an umbrella term for a whole range of methods and approaches for dealing with conflict: from negotiation to diplomacy, from mediation to arbitration, from facilitation to adjudication, from conciliation to conflict prevention, from conflict management to conflict transformation, from restorative justice to peacekeeping" (np). Concluding, he submits that:

Conflict resolution is the best instrument to be used to minimize and mitigate conflictual situations into peace - building process. It can be said that conflict resolution is the best mechanism towards social justice, peace, harmony, cooperation and world brotherhood. It is best slogan of peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building among conflicted

parties and war zones. Conflict resolution as a discipline has thrust upon that conflicts should be resolved only through peaceful means not through violent means of destruction (np).

The above quotation is accentuated by Neil Katz and Kevin McNulty who conclude that “conflict may end up in destruction and even death; conflict may also result in increased effectiveness, enhanced relationship and goal attainment” (np). What the above means is that conflict has two sides, namely the negative and the positive sides. What one makes out of conflict depends on how it is managed. It turns positive when the issues are amicably resolved and each party decides to forge ahead, using the lessons learnt for developmental purposes while ensuring that a repeat does not occur. This will generally result in increased trust, productivity and unity as well as the development of leadership attributes of respecting the opinions of others. On the other hand, it becomes negative when the parties involved refuse to shift grounds, give in or make sacrifices for peace to reign. The result is the escalation of the crises, anarchy, war, complex complications and bickering which may lead to wanton destruction of lives and property. From the above, it is evident that conflict has potentials and these potentials can be realized from the way the conflict is managed.

Consequently, it is clear that the most important role of conflict resolution is the minimization, alleviation or elimination of sources of conflict and establishment or restoration of peace through non violent methods. These methods range “from negotiation to diplomacy, from mediation to arbitration, from facilitation to adjudication, from conciliation to conflict prevention, from conflict management to conflict transformation, from restorative justice to peacekeeping” (Wani, np). Dramatic techniques to conflict resolutions incorporate many of the above methods hence the choice of drama as a conflict resolution strategy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is hinged on the phenomenal theory of Peter Brook’s “The Empty Space”. Brook is of the view that any space that is convenient should be used for or as performance space for the dissemination of theatrical message for the good of mankind, instead of waiting for a comfortable theatre building adorned with curtains, lights and seats since “everything is potentially theatrical, theatre is about life, and life about theatre, then there is no boundary between them”. According to Brooks any space can be converted to a stage and used for

performance provided there are actors walking across such stage and spectators watching them. Brook submits that:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. Yet when we talk about theatre this is not quite what we mean. Red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness, these are all confusedly superimposed in a messy image covered by one all-purpose word (11)

Commenting on the value of the Empty Stage theory, Negin Djavaherian asserts that “with his notion of ‘empty space’ Brook redefined the fundamental principles of theatrical space and laid down a path for discovering the invisible that leads to enhanced spectator experience” (np). What the above means is that spectators will now have more opportunities for performances to be taken to them and more opportunity for them to participate. The Empty Space theory is supported by the theory of the theatre of the oppressed as propagated and championed by Augusto Boal. Boal explains that “theatre of the oppressed is a non theatrical theatre style used to promote dialogue and community-centered problem solving. It is designed to promote awareness of one’s social situation” (<https://orccamericorps.weebly.com>). Hence, relying on Brook’s submission that any empty stage can become a stage for performance, practitioners are now at liberty to perform on any space provided there are actors and spectators. Also, the practice as championed by Boal who took performances to the people, gave impetus to the Ifite Unizik Bus Stand Experience.

### **Steps to the Ifite Unizik Bus Stand Experiment**

The Ifite Unizik Bus Stand Experiment followed the seven steps or stages enumerated by Okwori Jenkeri in his *Community Theatre: An Introduction* but with slight modification to suite our environment and purpose before it was performed. They will be explained in details.

#### **Stage 1: Preliminaries**

This is the articulation period of the project. Strategies were mapped out, location for the study was agreed and meetings with the community (Drivers Union and students) were held at different venues. The union gave their blessing for the project on our first meeting as their Chairman promised that all the drivers will watch the production. Another meeting was held where some drivers volunteered to join the rehearsal but pleaded that rehearsal time be move to late evenings when they may have finished the day’s work. We

adjusted to their time and pleaded to some student's volunteers for their acceptance. Some students who gave valuable suggestions were co-opted as actors.

### **Stage 2: Data Collection**

The format used for the data collection was informal. Investigations about the themes for the project were carried out. The class mixed freely with the drivers and students, engaging them in informal discussions while recording the discussions. This is where the issues (themes) are concretized. The drivers were worried about the condition of the park and the increasing number of "award" students, (students who enjoy nonpayment of transport fare in school) while the students complained about the withholding of their ten naira balance from fifty naira by the drivers as well as the condition of the park. Feedback from the research naturally took us to the next stage.

### **Stage 3: Data Analysis.**

The recordings with the drivers and the students union were played back and transcribed. From the transcript, Onyeka Igwe, one of the drivers was worried about the number of student's award he encounters everyday while working. According to him:

"these days, there are no trip that I undertake from Ifitte to new site that I don't carry an award student. Their numbers are increasing every day. When you calculate the trips I make in the day, you will see that award people just took all the money. Something must be done about it"

Another driver, Okechukwu Anoyochi complained about the condition of the park and the incessant repairs he carries out on his bus because of the deplorable condition of the park. He regrettably told us that:

"I change my brake pads every month and my shock absorber every two months because of these pot holes and water logging of the park. How much do I make to be spending such amount?"

The case of Azubuike Chigbu, a student was more pathetic. According to him:

Last week while trying to jump over a water-logged portion of the park, my phone fell into the pond. As we talk, I don't have a phone and it has been very difficult for me to cope. Please anything that will make the school or whoever is in charge to reconstruct the park is welcomed.

Thus, all information gathered from the discussions were exhaustively discussed and analyzed by the class. The procedures for actualization were mapped out and possible consequences for each action were weighed.

#### **Stage 4: Scenario Building**

From the result of the data analysis, the group started building the scenarios, kind of giving flesh to the bone. This is arranging the incidents/ issues, characterization and building dialogue to match the characters and incidents. It was a little contentious but being flexible helped as the sequences and characters often changed when a superior argument surfaced. The themes were finally built into five scenarios.

#### **Stage 5: Casting and Rehearsal**

Roles were shared and the try-out period began. Songs accompanying the movements were formulated, adapted and movements (blockings) done. When rehearsal was near perfect, another meeting with the union executives was held to determine the date and time for the performance. This was very necessary as to carry them along. Having agreed on a date, publicity for the production was carried out through the printing of posters, flex and hand bills which were pasted along strategic places in the school. Students were mandated to use the social media platforms to disseminate the date.

#### **Stage 6: Performance**

This may also be called the exhibition when the production was exhibited/ shown to the community. All the issues articulated were played out. There was a post production discussion where, comments on the issues raised were discussed and a line of action was mapped out.

#### **Stage 7 Feedback / Follow-through**

This simply entails revisiting the community to ascertain or evaluate how the issues raised during the dramatic performance were treated or to evaluate the impact and implementation or application of the themes of the performance by such community.

The above stages are similar to the five conflict resolution steps articulated by Erin Ford as follows:

1. Verify that a conflict exists and prepare to discuss it
2. Identify the source of the conflict

3. Agree on the problem
4. Brainstorm possible solution
5. Negotiate a problem(np)

### **The Iffite Unizik Bus Stand Experiment**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University has two major bus stands (parks). One is at the old campus called "Perm Site" very close to the Ifitte gate by Garuba Square while the other is at the new site before the university administration block. The Iffite bus stand serves the majority of students who live off campus in Iffite village as well as others who choose to use the Iffite end gate into the school while the new site bus stand serve those come through the express road to the admin block and other faculties in the new site through the commuter buses or tricycle popularly called "Keke".

The performance took place at the Iffite Park Bus ground on Wednesday, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019 and was attended by the bus and Keke drivers led by the Park Chairman, Driver Welfare Association (DWA), Mr Basil Chigbo and his Executives. Park operations were halted for one hour to enable all drivers and members of the union to watch the performance. The department was led by Prof. Cyprain Obadiogwu, who is also the course tutorial leader. The dramatic presentation which touched on all major conflictual issues was built into the following scenarios:

#### **Scenario 1.**

It opened in a joyous mood with various dance songs displayed by the students. The theme of the song centered on the need for all to realize that if the park is good, it is for everybody and if it is bad, everybody will suffer the consequences. It was an adaptation of late Nelly Uchendu's song "Nigeria Amaka" (Nigeria is good).

#### **Igbo**

"Park mama, omara mu na gi,  
for everybody,

park jo njo, ajoro mu na gi  
everybody;

onye obula tinye aka k'anyi mezie park anyi"  
join hands to rebuild

#### **English**

If our park is good, it is good

if our park is bad, it is bad for

therefore, everybody must  
our park

At the height of the dance, one of the actors brings the dance to an abrupt stop, goes to high table to salute the dignitaries and asks them a question. “Ndi isi kwenu! Kwenu!!, kwezuonu!!! Unu ochoro ka park anyi mma mma?” (Do you want our park to good?). There was a resounding YESSSSS. He thereafter invited them to join the dance on the stage. They are all happy, dancing and clapping as the scenario came to a joyful end.

### **Scenario 2.**

The students are alighting from a bus but the bus driver refuses to give them their ten naira balance from the fifty naira change they gave him. There is a heated argument between the driver and the students. The female students shy away and abandon the demand but the remaining three boys insist that the driver must give them their ten naira balance. They position themselves in a triangular format to prevent the driver from escaping into the crowd. A student appears and after listening to their complaints reports the case to a student union representative who orders the driver to give them their ten naira balance or he will be banned from operating in the park

### **Scenario 3.**

A keke arrives and as the students are alighting and paying for their fare, one student walks away without paying. He is accosted by the Keke operator only to be told that he is an award and therefore, not supposed to pay for his transport on campus. The operator who is not satisfied with his answer demands for his identity card or exemption letter from the student union. As the argument is going on, a students’ union representative approaches the student, presents his identity card and after listening to their explanations, calls the security to take the student to the students’ council for disciplinary action while informing other students and drivers that the school has made it compulsory for all award students to show their identity card before such benefit will be accorded to them

### **Scenario 4.**

The manner of loading the buses and how students are ordered from one bus to another is highlighted. On announcement, the students are told to enter a certain bus going to science village. The rush into it with some brushing and bashing one another, only to be told to disembark as that bus will now load to admin/ Bank. After some protestations, a union official goes to tell them that the destination of the bus change and that no other bus will load until they get off the bus. With no other potion, they grudgingly disembark to rush for another bus positioned very far away from the one they are getting off from

The rickety nature of the buses is also highlighted as two students get their clothes entangled with the bus and in the process one has his shirt torn while the other (a female student) who was wearing a white shirt has it stained by the rusted iron and dust from the seat she sat on.

### **Scenario 5**

Before they get to the next bus, three students have their cloths splashed with dirty water from an oncoming bus while another runs into a nearby pool. The other student's book fell into the dirty water. Each of these scenarios was to depict the deplorable nature of the park and the roads. They resolve to go the park chairman who expresses his sympathy. He makes a phone call to the personal assistant to the Vice Chancellor. After his complaints, the PA connects his call to the VC who promises to do something about the issues raised by the Park Chairman. The presentation ends with another dance by the students.

### **Post production Discussions / Result**

At the end of the production, there was a post production discussion on the issues raised during the drama. Comments, questions and answers were taken from the participants and declarations which are the decisions of the day on the theme were made by either the Chairman or the Student's Union Representative. They will be analyzed scenario by scenario.

### **Scenario 1**

This is the opening scenario. The theme of the song centered on the need for the park to be good. The discussion centered on the dance and song. The participants unanimously agreed that everybody must cooperate to better the park. Four points of actions were agreed, namely:

- i. Regular clean up of the park
- ii. Sand-filling of the pot holes
- iii. Respect for each other
- iv. Regular inspection of the vehicles to ensure that they are roadworthy

### **Scenario 2**

The roles of the drivers were played by the bus drivers. When asked to explain why drivers were withholding student's ten naira balance, his response baffled the audience. Amidst laughter, Chukwuemeka Okoro forthrightly told us that "we have been looking for a way to increase the shuttle fare to fifty naira per

drop but the students have always resisted it. So we unofficially agreed not to give them their change by pretending that we don't have change, even when the change is there, we hide it".

### **Result**

It was declared that withholding of any student's change will lead to the stoppage of the shuttle driver from operating in the school. The proclamation was received with great joy by the students.

### **Scenario 3.**

The award issue has led to some skirmishes between the drivers and students. Some students even use their relationship with the students' union executives to get award status. This was revealed by one of the discussants. Emeka Nwafor when he said "to get award is very simple if you know somebody or somebody who knows somebody. Just go and tip the person and the award status is yours". Although his claim was contested by the SUG representative, nevertheless a proclamation was made.

### **Result**

The SUG representative proclaimed that:

1. All awards have been suspended forthwith.
2. All awards will be issued an identity card showing their status
3. Only those with identity card will enjoy award on campus
4. Any defaulter will be handed over to the school security.

These proclamations were received with great joy by the drivers.

### **Scenario 4.**

The theme centered on the loading pattern of the drivers. Ifeoma Ikechukwu did not hide her feelings when she spoke:

The matter here is how we are being ordered from one bus to the other. In the process, there is rush. If your dress is not soiled, your money may be snatched from you. At times our phones are stolen. This mad rush and orderings is usually noticed in the morning when we are hurrying to meet up with our early morning lectures. Please something serious needs to be done to curtail this.

Another student, Ifeoma Ogechukwu said that “on many occasions our dresses have either been torn or dirtied by the rickety and dirty buses. My friend lost her designer gown to one of the buses. Since then she will rather wait for keke or trek to the lecture hall”.

## **Result**

The DWA secretary Mr Okwuchukwu Udoka, apologized for the troubles this action has caused the students. He conferred with the chairman before proclaiming that a loading sign with direction of the area the bus is going will be provided to be mounted on any loading vehicle. He again apologized for the shortcomings. He assured the students that all rickety vehicles will be directed to go for body work while drivers will henceforth be made to wash and clean their buses every morning before they load.

## **Senario 5.**

The discussion here centered on the deplorable condition of the park and the need to reconstruct and upgrade the park. Every speaker acknowledged this very important fact. However, it was further clearly stated that reconstruction of the park is above the union. No proclamation was issued here but was unanimously resolved that the matter be discussed with the school authorities. This resolution formed our action plan for the follow- through.

In his vote of thanks for the production, the vice chairman of the union, Mr Ebenezer Okoye expressed his gratitude to the department for the production and the lessons they have learnt. According to him:

In fact this is an eye opener to some of us because it is about another peaceful way to resolve community issues. If our government will tow this path, things will be better. We shall take your methods home and see how to apply it in resolving our personal and communal problems.

The chairman of the union in his closing remarks thanked the staff and students of the department for bringing the production to them as they may not have the opportunity of seeing such drama because of the nature of their job. He concluded thus:

I am happy that we have been told the truth through this production. The issues raised are very clear. In fact, they should have snowballed into bigger crises if neglected. We were laughing over these challenges instead of agitating, demonstrating or fighting. We shall take the matter on the reconstruction of the park to the school authorities. I also urge the

lecturers and the Students Union to do the same. All the other issues will be looked into when we meet.

The Chairman's speech formed our action plan for the follow-through.

### **Follow-through**

The importance of a follow-through session in Applied Theatre is emphasized by Chukwu- Okoronkwo Samuel who opines that:

the initial enthusiasm that usually greets theatre experience to just easily fritter away, perhaps, out of lack of will or motivation or resources to carry through with the action- strategies agreed upon, there arises the need to revisit the communities to encourage and re-motivate them; as well as examine new areas of cooperation; or assess the impact of previous or on-going action (81).

It is in the consideration of the above submission that the researcher and the class representative visited the University Director of Transport Services who informed us that a philanthropist is already discussing with the university authority for the reconstruction of the park. We also went back to the park after three months of the performance to find out the level of compliance by the drivers on the issues raised during the performance and found out that the park has been reconstructed. The whole park area has been cemented and a loading bay built for the drivers by Chief Johnbosco Onunkwo. The park has also been renamed as "Chief JohnBosco Onunkwo Motor Park". The keke that took us there also gave us our correct balance. Some students agreed that there have been a higher percentage of adherences since after that production by drivers. Though we saw some rickety buses, the chairman said that the drivers are taking turns to do repairs on their vehicles as they cannot withdraw all the vehicles at once.

### **Conclusion**

The production which used drama as a conflict resolution strategy was successful as it highlighted some of the challenges of both the students and the drivers. These challenges are: the deplorable condition of the Ifitte Bus Park, withholding of the students ten naira balance and resolution of who an award student is. It entertained, educated, and informed the audience. Most importantly, the post production discussion was a no barred session where the participants fully expressed themselves, thus purging their ill feelings. There was an instant declaration or resolution on what future action should be for peace to reign. Most importantly, the discussions brought to light, the need for

dialogue which justifies the Igbo adage that says “akpa akpa atoo ute” meaning when you discuss well, you can lay your mat and sleep peacefully.

Apart from the peaceful resolution of the challenges and entertainment values which soothed frayed nerves, the project created awareness on the powers of drama as a multidisciplinary tool which cuts across many disciplines and its power for resolving societal problems. Such sensitive problems or misunderstanding which would have snowballed into students’ demonstration and possible destruction of properties and possible loss of lives were acted out and discussed in a convivial atmosphere.

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