



Contrastive study of the trend of metamorphosis of political activism using theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first century

Waliya, Yohanna Joseph

CONTACT: Waliya, Yohanna Joseph, Department of Modern Languages & Translation Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria, E-mail: waliyayohannajoseph@unical.edu.ng

Keywords:

theatre, political activism, art
historiography

Abstract:

Ever since antiquities, theatre has been a medium of provoking sentimental reaction and an entertainment of the populace especially the elite. Authors of this genre do present active noble characters in their works making as if it is real. We do learn in Greco-Roman Empire how amphitheatre hosted Caesars, their officials and empiric subjects watching the gladiators and the persecuted Christians in the medieval era. Fifty years of cinema and the television as well as the new media have changed the mind-set of the global community towards life in general to form a unique interconnected universal cultural chains. In this research, we would like to use political activism theories called pluralist theories of Norris Pippa as critical lens to analyse the trend of political activism in the modern theatre of the early 21st century in comparison to that of the 20th century which led to violent revolutionary movements.

1. Introduction

Theatre as the genre of dialogue presented to the public stands till now as an arm for instigating the people targeted by the artist, playwright or the author. It is generally believed that every art work is directed towards a particular audience, races, social classes, regions, nations, Continents and the world at large (Southern 1961, p. 22; Guilleron, 2002). Prince and Jackson (2005) quoted Roy Scheider's perspective on theatre arguing that "Theatre doesn't exist because it's entertainment. It exists because it's a part of the energy of living, of human-kind" (p. 23). The radar which directs community's liveliness has shifted more in 21st century than in the 20th century as an arm of revolting against bad polity in a nation, because of technology and youth exceptional active participation in politics and humano-centric belief system. "Over the past 2000 years, the theatres, the costumes, and even the audiences have changed a great deal. What has not changed is the human need to act out life's situations and to enjoy and learn from those performances" (ibid. p. 27). This trend metamorphosis is the major concern of our discourse in this research, knowing that socio-economic dilemma of a State fuels the political activism. Novarina would uphold that "Tout théâtre, n'importe quel théâtre, agit toujours et très fort sur les cerveaux, ébranle ou perpétue le système domineer (2007, p. 21)". All theatre, whatsoever type, it may be, it acts very strongly on the minds, eternalising or shaking the powerful popular system. Even though, Pal (2010) argues with others that theatre does not cause revolution but rather is a rehearsal for revolution (p. 50). In the antiquities, theatre has been a powerful tool to just entertain the public after work or war as leisure, as luxurious life was order of the days for the elites and also it was a medium to send a signal of warning the populace about the cultural and moral decadence in the society during religion and political rites. Majority of the theatres are mythological and presentations of war winning (Viala, 2017), as it crossed to the Dark Ages precisely fifth century.



Eventually, we can see how political propaganda is related to theatre from the ancient world (Greek, Rome, China, Egypt, Iraq, etc.) In 1920s, the public spectacle gradually shifted from the elite class to the general public with the aim of political activism to boost socio-economic standard of the lower people (Pal, 2010, p. 49).

2. Methodology And Theoretical Framework of The Study

We applied a hypothetical deductive method to draw our unstructured data from different comparative literary reviews. This research explains the drift of political activism through theatre from immediate past century to the early 21st century. Pluralist theories of political activism are used in order to support our findings. These theories are upheld by Norris (2003) that they

“give an equally important role to intermediary groups, with the competition between groups seen as vital to provide checks and balances in a democracy, whether trade union, business and professional associations, welfare and charity organizations, civic and community groups, educational, art and cultural social clubs.”(p. 7)

The political activism using the theatre influences the people, gender and social class concerned. We also dived into countering or supporting good political ideologies of the parties that will transform the social well-being of the majority in order to bridge the status quo between the social classes which are deep rooted in the some societies around the world, for example India, China, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe etc. These linked us to the metamorphosis in political activism using theatre art.

3. Theatre and Political Activism in 20th Century

The drifting of the theatrical objectives did not start in the twentieth century but in Dark Ages and the eighteenth century following the French Revolution in 1789 and the subsequent years. Pope was the most influential political leader who decided the happenings in all ancient European monarchies in the medieval periods. The abuse of theocratic power led two English Lollards (John Wycliffe's disciples) to revolt against Pope John XXIII's theocratic maladministration extended to the city of Prague, Czech Republic in 1414 AD. Being painting artists and activists, the young men designed and painted an art at a strategic area for the whole city dwellers to reject papal supremacy demonstrating activism using theatre art. When people saw the paintings they were able to get the exact messages into their hearts without any stress (White, 2008. p. 70).

Two strangers...being artists as well as preachers, they proceeded to exercise their skill. In a place open to the public they drew two pictures. One represented the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem “meek, and sitting upon ass (Matthew 21:5), and followed by His disciples in travel-worn garments and with naked feet. The other picture portrayed a pontifical procession-pope arrayed in his rich robes and Triple Crown, mounted upon a horse magnificently adorned, preceded trumpeters, and followed by cardinals and prelates in dazzling array (ibid.pp. 69-70).

Graczyk & Landes (1989, p. 401) would put it clearly that after the “tyrannicide” of 1793, theatre is used mainly as instrument for political propaganda against the State. It is all about giving the public new ideas and inculcate in them the appropriate political sense as in the Jacobins' regimes, a little effort rescheduled policy and hard dramatic carriage of arts and languages. Using noble characters is liable to change a social class as a result of interacting with the lower class. These caused the metamorphosis in the setting of traditional dramatic tragedy policies. Political activism needs the theatre activism as a media in order to stand the test of the time and progress into next generation liveliness. Political activism is one of the theatre activism segment. Theatre is that “catalyst that illuminates a political issue in a way that leads to mass mobilization and action. In what follows, then, I lay out an array of forms that community art at the intersection of activism has taken in the spirit...” opined Cohen-Cruz (2002). During the French revolution, theatre became political forum and the political inclined spectators are seen at the stage presentation, more of symbolic meaning to the facts of the news (Graczyk & Landes, 1989, p. 396). The aim of theatre is spelt out vividly in the work of James Scott Bell titled “*Element of fiction writing: Conflict and Suspense*” where he argues that “Tragedy (which is a type of theatre) was the original intent of drama. But as Aristotle pointed

out, the idea was to create emotion and then catharsis, thus making the audience better citizens. So the inner experience of the audience was primary” (Scott, 2011). Ancient Greek used theatre to develop their society into the most famous Western patrimony which her influence will still flood into the fabric of the coming generations. We can see the Athenian democracy still controlling the whole world sovereign States even now.

The French revolution might likely have been the real source of inspiration for the Red Ladder also originally known as Agitprop theatre group of the 1920s. Izzuddin (n.d.) would affirm in his fascinating research paper titled *Political Activism through theatre: A Reflection of Fifteen Years of Bangsar Utama Theatre Group* in which he lies emphasis on the performance of the agitprop theatre troop that makes political activism banal in the whole world from 1920s-1980s.(id.)

Agitprop theatre is said to appear as a tool for political ideology through *agitprop* concept, a short form for *agitation and propaganda* in various form of art performances in Russia around 1920's. Agitprop spread across the world and became popular especially among the left-wing politicians. In the early stage, this concept was used by the Russian Communist Party to spread their ideology and propaganda. (ibid.)

Political activism using theatre was deep rooted in our culture today thanks to the boldness and creativity of the Agitprop which stirred the spirit of the freedom using theatre mechanism. The Moroccan theatres buttressed the fact that populism is peculiar political philosophy worthy of implanting in the fellow nationals' hearts. The artistic movement was able to secure their independence from the French and Spanish domination. Siddiki (2012) affirmed that “Moroccan theatre at the beginnings of 1920s supported more of political activism than artistic activity. Her kick start coincided with the Rif's war from 1921-1926. (p. 424)”. Theatre does express in text, artistic visual designs, music, stage performance and festival ever since twentieth century. Russian political activist instigated massive revolution in Russia through theatre in 1917.

Lenin saw an important role for art in the newly formed Soviet Union following the Russian Revolution of 1917. For him, festivals were a means to educate a large population. Intertwining experimentation, politics and popular entertainment enabled audiences to grasp ideology by rendering ideas visually and capturing the audience's attention. (Cohen-Cruz Feb. 2002 & McCarthy 2006)

Festival as a street theatre or carnival is also smuggled into this movement as a stylistic mood to incite political ideologies to the extent of influencing legislations and public policies as in the case of Boal Augusto in Brazil. Singhal (2004) & Sadler (2010) cited Boal's critical appealing work titled *Legislative theatre*, written in 1998, they opined thus:

Boal used theatre as a participatory political tool to make new laws, labeling this technique. Boal as a city counselor in Rio de Janeiro developed Legislative Theatre to translate needs discovered through Forum Theater into a dossier used as a basis for making laws. Seventeen municipal laws were enacted through this process. Achieved or not, even having policy change as an aim shapes an activist art project in a meaningful way.

We discovered that theatre is a simple and easy means of reaching out to the youth owing to their stick to the world of entertainment across the globe. It does sell out particular philosophy to audience. Gorman (2015) & Ferrari (2013) confirmed that “across Western Europe and North America theatre and dance reflected on and engaged with emancipatory movements throughout the 1950s and 1960s and onwards.”

Twentieth century closed its theatre activism objectives within a few secluded countries in the Western world. Some innovative artists emerged in the 1960s-1980s who were passionate about political activism through theatre but they ended in books and films in archives, philosophical ideologies and performance without pushing the masses to serious action against the States globally (Ferrari, 2013). The vulgarization of the Internet and the satellite cable televisions around the world such as Aljazeera, CCTV, CNN , Dailymotion, Sky News TV5, Vimeo ,Vine, YouTube, , etc. has made politico-theatre activism an international phenomena building unified global circuit in which when a current of imperialism or any political marginalization is switched on, as it affects one country, it flows round the whole world in seconds instigating a universal reactions to question the crisis and the government of the State in power. Twentieth century left an impression of independence in the heart of the masses raising better hopes for the next century.



4. Theatre and Political Activism in 21st Century

In the twenty-first century political activism using theatre metamorphoses into elaborate street party-festivals (carnivals) to sell political ideologies in Australia, Europe, Africa and Asia. The 2000s have provided equally fertile ground, as artists and political struggles have become more connected across geopolitical barriers (ibid). Consequently, political activism using theatre has brought global community into single united activism vision and purpose.

Street theatre like the gay Mardi Gras in Sydney... Events at Genoa combined a mélange of mainstream charities like Oxfam and Christian Aid, as well as radicals like British Drop the Debt protestors, the German Freie Arbeiter Innen Union, and Italian anarchists like Tute Bianchi and Ya Basta! Collective action through peaceful channels has become a generally accepted way to express political grievances, voice opposition, and challenge authorities (Norris. 2003, pp. 4-5).

In the twenty-first century, the political activism using theatre slipped from the hands of professional actors and actress as well as the international Non-Governmental Organizations, entertainment sphere into the scholarship world. For example the *Theater of the Oppressed* which is one of the theatre activisms according to Sadler, has the potential to provide higher education with a method of pedagogy both inside and outside of the classroom, based not on authority and canonized texts, but on self-expression and individual narrative (Sadler 2010, p. 93). Education being the means of socializing the youth is gradually moving into theatre activism. To this effect, “The Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) was originally established in Belarus in 2005 to produce shows, to provide **an alternative education to young people** through the medium of theatre, and to campaign for freedom of expression and human rights” affirmed Gorman (2015).

The statistics of the world political activists using artistic placards to protest against the United States of American launching war in Iraq and their individual countries’ support on February 15, 2003, indicated millions of global citizens showing their repulsive disagreement with the world powers fighting one country, killing innocent civilians in the name of looking for the rebellious president of the country. They demonstrated their criticisms against the new postcolonial imperialism sponsored by the United States. This protest took place in the major cities of the countries around the world on the same day says Tarrow (2005, p. 15). See the table 1 below for detailed statistics:

Table 1. The statistics of the world political activists using theatre

S/n	Countries	N ^o of the Political Activists using theatre
1	France	250,000
2	Italy	500,000
3	Germany	500,000
4	USA	500,000
5	United Kingdom	1,750,000
6	Spain	2,300,000
7	New Zealand & Australia	16,000,000

It means, street protest that is used as political activism influenced by the theatre will be the uniting factor to fight socio-political injustices now that the whole world is interconnected thanks to the social media on the internet. It is obvious that dictatorship will probably see her extinction in the twenty-first century. The statistics above did not capture African countries like Nigeria and the Maghreb who demonstrated their anger against the Western world attack on Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti’s Empire.

In the twenty-first century, the political activism using theatre floods the street of the Sub-Saharan African countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. Enlightenment came under aegis of the Non-Governmental Organization, United Nations subsidiaries and national film making industries to the populace. Article 19 (the Global Campaign for Free Expression) choose

popular theatre as a means to reach Africans because of its appreciation in the African soil. She reported in her research captioned *Women's Voices and African Theatre: Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe* that we can turn popular theatre into politico-theatre activism instrument as she emphasised thus:

Popular theatre is also used as a way to promote political participation, including through elections, and as a means to discuss contentious issues like the impact of commercial farming on food crops, female circumcision, foreign debt and prostitution. In some cases, performances have also focused on issues facing popular theatre itself, such as concerns about economic viability or female actors. (Article 19, 2003, p. 13).

The analytic statistics above shows that the theatre activism is popular mostly in Europe and America. Thanks to the Article 19, programme for Africa which made us know that it is also traditionally and historically rooted in African society. (ibid. p. 4) but the twenty-first century mechanisms popularised the genre to fight many socio-political disasters and crisis. In south Asia in countries like Philippines and China, this political art which depicts the government misbehaviours are highlighted by Loot in Singhal's research.

In the Philippines, the People's Theater Network, a grassroots theater movement composed of over 300 regional groups, created a new breed of performing artists: The ATOR, the actor, trainer, organizer, and researcher. In South Africa, Protest Theater by the politically disenfranchized, made visible how apartheid victimized Black people (Singhal, 2004).

Political art fighting for the human right or educating masses on the delicate issues such as political participation as popularised in the early twenty-first century aids in developing and empowering youth and women to be active in our global community to the extent that democracy was evolved in some countries as the people or citizens oriented polity in its realness. But shall all countries embrace democracy as their system of government? Is Africa ripe for democracy? What has African achieved in this democratic era that is turning to fascism era with the advent of Donald Trump and some political parties in Europe?

5. Contrastive studies and challenges of the political activism and the theatre of the 20th & 21st Century

Political activism engaging theatre has suffered a huge set back at the same time made great progress in the twentieth century and beyond. The major challenge of this movement is the government censorship policy as the activism which questions the misappropriation of the public fund, dictatorship, gender inequality and the relegation of the poor masses especially children, youth and the women in their dilemma (Article 19, 2003, p. 4).

Twentieth century served as a precursor from all indications to the twenty-first century political activism and theatre. Though, censorship of arts or political arts was introduced into the Western world by the Roman Catholic Church in the middle Ages whereby they tried to monopolise everything including inventions such as German Printing Press (Menois 1995, p. 17). This plan aroused the interest of the artists of different kinds to use their pens to fight the Church and in which they succeeded which will later lead to the separation of the States from the Church (ibid. p. 205; Gasparini & Gojoso, 2015, p. 30).

The Roman Catholic Church implemented the censorship as a means of countering the Reformation of the Protestants but "As far as Reformation "art" was concerned, text-heavy altarpieces, crude life-size block prints, and cheap broadsides were the means through which reformers created an ideological public that split Christendom forever" (Heuer, 2017, p. 82).

Likewise from the Antiquities to the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the artists are still suffering the consequences of their creativities. The notable persecution recorded in the twentieth century for African writers was the assassination of Frantz Fanon, the reputable Sub-Saharan African, medical doctor and playwright by CIA whom United States of America took him for a threat because of his theatre art agitating for independence of the black nations and his status as doctor to the top apostles for the liberation of the Africans. He authored a piece of theatre called *Les mains parallèles* seeking for freedom of his race of which he paid with his life says Gordon (2011, pp. 230-232).

The popular theatre artists and playwrights in Kenya such as Abdi Latif Abdalla, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Al-Amin Mazrui have been detained without trial (Article 19, p. 27), in Nigeria, the case of Nigerian hip-pop



artiste, Eedris Abdulkareem whose popular song titled “Jaga jaga¹” in 2004 was banned by the former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, just because he sang a critic against the government in power whereby all things are falling apart.

The twentieth century suffered the challenge of reaching out to the larger masses and demography but nowadays, the whole world is interconnected through internet and the globalisation of ideology through the activeness of the United Nations and multinational Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) who continue to use theatre for development in this era to propagate as well as educate the whole world on the pertinent global concerns. For example, in the early twenty-first century Youtube, the largest video sharing website in the world, reach out to “more than 200 million unique visitors arrive at this page each month from all over the globe, according to the company. Of those, 68 million are from the United States” reported by Schepp & Schepp (2009, p. 3). The population of the users grows exponentially every minute conquering the whole world. Moreover, certain statistics website called Statista reported thus:

[Sic]As of July 2015, more than 400 hours of video content were uploaded to YouTube every minute and according to YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki, more than 1 billion hours of content are consumed on the platform every single day as of March 2017. Popular types of YouTube content include music videos – in February 2017, the most viewed YouTube channels on the video platform belonged to Indian music label T-Series, with over than 952 million channel views in the preceding month, and Ryan ToysReview, with over 745 million views in the previous month [sic] (Statista, 2017).

The new technologies are revolutionizing this era beyond the capacity of the communication art management repertoires because of the flouting in the system. Nobody is regulating internet. This poses many social issues again.

Le théâtre donne, à la politique, l'éternité ; la politique offre, au théâtre, l'incandescence. Sans théâtre, la politique est vaine ; sans politique, le théâtre est court. (Barbier, 2015 p. 6)

Barbier ideology can be translated in this way thus: theatre revives politics eternally, politics illuminates theatre, without theatre, politics is vanity, without politics, theatre is limited. We can see how theatre influences politics vice versa. It is for this reason, our topic best suit this discourse.

6. Conclusion

Knowing the efficacy of the political activism influenced by theatre in communicating, empowering and educating populace, we must establish on its conveniences not forgetting the pains that persecution bring into the artists' lives. Theatre is the instrument that can spread the message from the playwrights or artists to the society rapidly. We must also recognise its ideological drifting over the centuries as new ideas crept into our society seeking popularity with the youth. The remarkable major breakthrough in the political activism using theatre is its transnational nomenclature extended to humanism philosophy of the human right activists and their right to access internet which engendered digital humanities and transhumanism ideology. It is impeccably recommended that the sure instrument for the global transformation as for now is theatre via Internet and other technologies such as social Medias.

REFERENCES

- Article 19 (2003). *Women's Voices and African Theatre: Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe*. South Africa: Article 19. 4, 13, 17.
- Bennet, J.W. (2016). *Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years*. Nashville: Nelson Books.
- Boal, A. (1998). *Legislative theatre* in Singhal A. (2004). Empowering the oppressed through participatory theater in *investigación y desarrollo*. Vol 12, n° 1: 151.
- Barbier C. (2015). *Dictionnaire amroueux*, Paris : Plon.
- Cohen-Cruz J. (Feb. 2002). *An introduction to community art and activism*. Retrieved March, 22 2017 from *communityarts.net*. http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/02/an_introduction.php

¹ c.f. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eedris_Abdulkareem



- Coursodon J.-P. & Tavernier B. (1995). 50 ans de cinéma américain. Paris : Nathan.
- Faerber J., Couprie A., Oddo N., & Rauline L. (2014). *Bescherelle, chronologie de la littérature française : Du moyen Age à nos jours*. Paris: Hatier.
- Ferrari, G. (2013). Compositeurs militants dans les avant-gardes de l'Italie des années 1960-1970 : Quelques notes sur l'impact de l'engagement sur leurs œuvres. In M. Combes, I. Z. Contreras et P.E.Yavuz. (Eds.), *À l'avant-garde ! Art et politique dans les années 1960 et 1970*. Coll. Comparatisme et Société. Bruxelles : P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A. No 23:43.
- Gasparini, E. & Gojoso, E. (2015). *Introduction historique au Droit et Histoire des Institutions*. Éd. 6^e. Paris : Gaulino.
- Gordon, L. (2011). *Dernière année d'une vie bien vécue Requiem pour Frantz Fanon*. Lacoue-Labarthe Isabelle & Sow Fatou (Eds.) *Politique, esthétique féminisme*. Paris : Tumultes/Kimé. 37:230-232.
- Gorman, D. (2015). *The Art of Disobedience: Arts and Politics*. London: IETM.
- Graczyk, A., & Landes É. (1989). Le théâtre de la Révolution française, média de masses entre 1789 et 1794. In: *Dix-huitième Siècle, n°21*, 401. Montesquieu et la Révolution. Doi : 10.3406/dhs.1989.1715 http://www.persee.fr/doc/dhs_0070-6760_1989_num_21_1_1715
- Guilleron, G. (2002). Français: 1^{res} Toutes séries. Paris: Bordas.
- Heuer, C. P. (2017). Task of Art: Exhibitions on Martin Luther and the Reformation explore authoritarianism and dissent in the first media age, edited by Warren Rebecca & Marks Matthew (2017). *Art in America*. 82.
- Izzuddin, M.R. (n.d.). *Political Activism through theatre: A Reflection of Fifteen Years of Bangsar Utama Theatre Group* https://www.academia.edu/20206162/Political_Activism_Through_Theatre_a_Reflection_of_Fifteen_Years_Bangsar_Utama_Theatre_Group. Retrieved 29th March, 2017.
- Loots (1997). in Singhal A. (2004). *Empowering the oppressed through participatory theatre in investigación y desarrollo*. Vol 12, n° 1: 152.
- McCarthy, T. (2006). *Tintin et le secret de la littérature*. Paris: Hachette.
- Menois, G.. (1995). *Censure et culture sous l'ancien régime*. Paris: Fayard.
- Norris, P. (2003). *DEMOCRATIC PHOENIX: Reinventing Political Activism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Novarina, V. (2007). *Le théâtre des paroles*. Paris: P.O.L. Editeur.
- Pal, S. (2010) Theatre and Activism: The Agit Prop Theatre Way. *Music and Arts in Action*. New Delhi: Music and Arts in Action. Vol. 3: 1. 48-64.
- Prince, N. & Jackson J. (2005). *Exploring theatre*. Columbus: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill.
- Saddiki, T. (2014). *Une figure emblématique du théâtre marocain Jean-François CLÉMENT*. Feuillebois-Pierunek E (Ed.). *Théâtres d'Asie et d'Orient Traditions, rencontres, métissages*. Bruxelles : P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., 424.
- Sadler, K. (2010). Art as Activism and Education: Creating Venues for Student Involvement and Social Justice Education Utilizing Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed in *Vermont Connection*. 31:82-93.
- Schepp, B. & Schepp, D. (2009). *How to make Money with Youtube: earn cash, market yourself, reach your customers, and grow your business on the world's most popular video-sharing site*. New York: McGraw Hill. 2-3.
- Scott, J. B. (2011). *Element of Fiction Writing-Conflict and Suspense*. Ohio: F+W Media, Inc.
- Southern, R. (1961). *The Seven Ages of The Theatre*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Statista (2017). *Statistics and facts about YouTube*. Retrieved 6th May, 2017 from *The Statistics Portal*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2019/youtube/>
- Tarrow S. (2005). *The new Transnational Activism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Viala, A. (2017). Histoire du théâtre. Coll. Que sais-je. Paris: Puf.
- White, E.G. (2008). *The Last Call: The Great Controversy*. USA: Word's Last Chance.

