Migration and Identity Crisis: The Interplay between African Theatre and Emerging Media to the (Mis) Representation of Old Age as Disability in Performances

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Abstract: **The influence of digital technology in Nigerian theatrical performances happens to be often used for the sake of entertainment and publicity but not as an integral part of directing or playmaking. Migration encounters this new media approach to directing Nigerian plays where audiences in the diaspora can always have a feel of their cultural identity, in the pieces of rituals and customs when watching stage performances in the digital space. African traditional theatre can be performed in any space and still be given a global view with the aid of digital live-streaming devices and YouTube. Therefore, this paper shall be taking a broad exposition into inquiring if the knowledge of digital media can be applied to the African understanding of theatre and the representation of old age as a disability in performances. Also, do African countries have what it takes to imbibe the digital culture, and what does it take to get Africans especially the aged audiences to benefit from this? Data is collected from selected African stage performances on YouTube to consider the indices that will foster transitions from traditional to digital performance modes. This research is pivotal to the artistic application of multimedia as a tool in solving the misrepresentation of old age on stage. The paper draws the attention of theatre practitioners, theorists, academics, students, activists, and policymakers, on the issue of migration and identity crisis through the stereotypical depiction of aged characters on stage.**

Keywords: **Ageism, Old Age and Disability, Global Performance, African Total Theatre, Migration, Identity Crisis, New and Emerging Media, Digital Performance, YouTube.**

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper interrogates the essence of a digital conceptualization of theatre from its controversial and structured conventions to a diverse and inclusive multimedia mode. We advocate for re-imagining the misrepresentation of aged characters from having a form of disability and distorted appearances in most Nigerian performances to a new mode of presentation with the aid of new media. Theatre is transmedia and has over time adapted to new forms and approaches for dramatic representations on stage. The United Nations in a 2017 report on aging explains that an 'aging population' is a sociodemographic term used in industrialized countries to denote increasing life expectancies and decreasing fertility rates. This definition establishes a dichotomy between the aged population and human reproduction because the classification of old age and 'aging' is based on many-sided experience and position.

There are a variety of age classes that have emerged within the literary and performance arts to overcome the ordered indicator of old age based on the number of years. The cultural identifiers of old age as functional, and perceived socio-

physical traits are richer in capturing the diversity in the portrayal of aged characters in performance than sequential age. This study focuses on the age of 65+ as the customary and cultural maximum to refer to older adults and actors. Also, 65 is mostly the rightful retirement age in some developed and developing countries, although this law is changing globally. We acknowledge that old age-related physical and behavioral traits are based on aging experiences and biological aspects that are strongly linked to the character's age as represented by the playwright.

However, the mischaracterization of old people on stage with disabling features is subject to criticism. We examined the diversity of social structures, and agency in the later lives of older adults by providing a voice to the older characters on stage through the contributions of emerging design and technology. The objective here is to evaluate and address how design and technology can be implemented to cater to the needs and aspirations of older adults in the diaspora through the representations of aged characters on stage in both comprehensive and nuanced ways. The inherent diversity amongst the aging population in society needs to be considered when studying and designing ways in which older characters can be better represented in Nigerian performances. There are unique challenges that pose a problem for directors when trying to achieve the depiction of old age on stage and this paper attempts to identify the root causes and effects through exploring a collection of performances.

Interrogating the dualist approaches to digital technology is useful especially with a reference to its positive effects when it comes to solving the identity crisis that comes with migration, especially for older Nigerian adults in the Diaspora. Old people should be properly portrayed and not restricted to disabled representations and distortion of their physical appearances in theatrical performances. The concept of disability must be checked to understand the difference between "old" and being disabled. If the playwright does not represent it as such, then Nigerian directors and actors must learn to portray such elderly roles with fidelity to the play text. Digital technology has made it easier for directors to enlarge the features of actors on a stage before a co-audience participant with projectors and digitized audio and lighting systems.

II.   NARRATIVES AND CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL REALITIES OF AGED CHARACTERS ON STAGE

From the classical Greco-Roman era to the twentieth century, there has been an assemblage of human and design elements, collaborating in the making of a performance. However, from an audience's point of view in some theatre productions, the role of design elements in the success of production has been subjected to aesthetics and spectacles rather than the language of meaning. These design elements come into use when representing aging characters on stage through the distortion of their faces beyond the natural realities to establish the desired effect before an audience. The way aged characters are portrayed on stage in most Nigerian performances contrasts with the playwright's point of view thereby sending a different meaning to their global peers and Nigerian elders in the diaspora.

According to the Anthropologist, Milton Singer "Cultural performance' refers to the ways a culture articulates and presents itself, encompassing not only cultural and artistic performances but also religious, ritual, ceremonial, and political practices, as well as stories and so on..." (7) This ideology was later taken up by various theatre studies scholars, including Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) and Jan Cohen-Cruz (2010). This section considers three stage performances uploaded to YouTube and the ways aged characters are portrayed on the Nigerian stage.

The play *Idi-Araba to Akoka* on YouTube written and directed by Otun Rasheed was commissioned by the University of Lagos to mark the 50th Anniversary of the institution. The stage play is a docudrama chronicling the fifty years of the University of Lagos; 1962-2012. In this Nigerian play, there is an obvious white coloring on the face of the aged main character suggesting that he is above 65 years old, and this makes him look clownish. The aged character's robotic and unbalanced movements on stage become worrisome as the young actor reenacting the role of the old man tilts his head and moves his body in an immobilized form. (Fig. 1)

Figure 1 From Idi-Araba to Akoka (2012) Photo Credit: Otun Rasheed

Also, considering another stage play on YouTube "Ije - The Quest" by The Elevation Church (TEC) in 2019. The main character in "Ije" doubles as the narrator and royal adviser as this young actor struggles to reenact the role of an aged man similar to observations in Idi-Araba to Akoka. The exaggeration and excessive display of a distorted physical form are observed in "Ije" when the aged character moves his body across the stage while delivering his lines. (Fig. 2)

Figure 2 "Ije - The Quest" (2019) Photo Credit: The Elevation Church

The final performance on YouTube is by the National Troupe of Nigeria, and Eda Theatre Troupe titled "Mafaa" staged in 2016. "Mafaa" chronicles the life of a warrior called Osusu sold into slavery alongside his pregnant wife and son. The story on stage is told by an aged character who serves as a narrator stationed at the top of the slave's cage, hence, suggestive of disabled mobility attributed to older people as also seen in "Idi-Araba to Akoka" and "Ije" respectively. However, the reason why he was stationed at the top of the cage and not allowed to move across the stage is subject to further criticism. Conclusively, we gathered that the roles of narrators and storytellers are mostly reenacted by an aged character in these three performances which is a form of stereotype. (Fig. 3)

Figure 3 "Mafaa" (2016) Photo Credit: The National Troupe of Nigeria

III.   SUMMARY AND FINDINGS: MISREPRESENTATION OF AGED CHARACTERS IN NIGERIAN THEATRE PERFORMANCE

Representations of aging are repeated across performances over time and so are the values, and the mischaracterization of aging that has shaped society negatively. Often an older adult is shown as grumpy or having mobility issues with obvious white and black colorings on the hair and face. Miller, Leyell & Mazachek affirms that "The impact of the negative stereotyping can damage the self-concepts of the elderly and disrupt the socialization of young people to the elderly which contributes to ageism" (315). While some of this is true, performance tends to deal in extremes and includes when a character is portrayed as either very healthy or frail.

Kriebernegg and Maierhofer, maintains that the "social realities of age and aging are not primarily based on biological facts but on social constructions of what it means to be and grow old" (103) Positive aging encourages those who are healthy and productive known as the young old who are actively aging but isolates those who are ill and must deal with the realities of aging. The negative concept of old age refers to images of them being dependent and frail. The most dominant representations of old age as a human decline are in situations whereby the old are stereotyped as always suffering from either physical or mental decline (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 316). This idea is further developed by identifying the old as having to rely on others and incapable of being in control of their movements due to physical limitations.

Young people who have little contact with older people in the real world may get the wrong notion about their personality and physical attributes from watching these Nigerian performances. The audience is most likely to believe that the way old people are portrayed in these performances represents the reality of old people living across Nigeria. Aging has come to occupy such a central position within modern culture because there is more age than ever before and more varied resources to shape the experiences. Hence, the arrival of pop culture has shaped the experiences of how we view later life, and it is important to have a better and more realistic representation of old age on Nigerian stages.

A. Suggestive Ways to Better Represent Aged Characters on Stage

Age as performative of normal life is useful to think about how well or badly theatre professionals can feign age. The stage rather than film is the right venue for testing and exploring the positive tendencies of aging because of the live actors that project a variety of age groups during a performance. The stage portrays fascinating bodies from whom we cannot avert our eyes, and age studies can draw wisdom and data for solving real-life problems that pertain to aging. However, theorists tend to treat the bodies as objects as if they had as little meat as puppets, subject to historical discourses even in sexuality, illness, and pain.

Theorist John Rouse rightly says that "the signifying systems used by theatre and drama are always already part of other cultural texts, especially the text of the actor's body" (213). Thus, our ageist ideology may infiltrate representation and interpretation by the audience whereby old age as a new beginning should be viewed positively to encourage active behavior in later life. Old age should be portrayed as happy, active, and satisfying by conforming to the ideals of an independent stage actor with non-biased and restrictive movements on stage.

The aged characters should be allowed to adapt and keep up with societal changes mentally and physically whilst copying the behaviors of the younger generation by the disassociation of old age with an eternal sexless love (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 203). This is a new way of aging that is promoted as inspirational and positive, an active way of maintaining one's youth and aging well (Ylänne, 205). This presentation of old age is prevalent in films with older casts but is difficult to identify in Nigerian stage performances that rely on an exaggerated costume and fantastic make-up as a way of distinguishing between the aged and the youthful.

B. Significance of Emerging Technology and Design to the Characterization of Old Age

A stage play titled "Here is My Ashes" by Kingdom Kre8v Expressions Productions Llc has 1.2 million views on YouTube and this African-American performance depicted aged characters in weak forms and distorted faces. The stereotypical portrayal of an aged character can arouse a different emotional engagement from the audience, hence diverting their attention from a play's message. The ability of stage performances to be seen by over one million audiences across the globe depicts the influence and importance of emerging media to the visualization of theatre. Thereby, the over one million population are provided with a subjective depiction of the older adults in the society which calls for reassessment. If only the mode of characterization was different, then over one million audiences across the globe would have a different perception of the form of disability attributed to older adults.

Anderson & Perrin, states that "older adults are increasingly becoming integrated into our digital society. Though research shows that older adults still lag younger age groups in their use of technologies, the rate of increase in crossing the digital divide has been substantial in recent years." (2017) Therefore, we should be careful of misrepresentation on stage before a wider range of digitally enabled audiences. Through YouTube, online streaming platforms, and digital archives, there has been a rapid promotion of socio-cultural representations of aged characters in Nigerian theatre to younger and older audiences in the diaspora. African theatre practitioners should strive to interrogate the relationship between stories and the materialization of reality as 'normalcy' on stage to how performances constitute selves.

This is one of the reasons why it is vital and sensitive to give the best and most accurate description of these older adults in Nigerian performances. The circumstances of the bifurcated social identity of older Nigerian migrants and their efforts to reinvent or deconstruct a certain image of self in their everyday life draw on Goffman's idea of "dramaturgy," that the public presentation of the self is like a performer reenacting a role on stage. Hence, contemporary Nigerian drama should concentrate on how aged characters are presented on stage, to prevent identity crises and stereotypes of older Nigerian immigrants and migrants. The aged population needs the confidence to better manage their impressions and representations of themselves to peers and social groups in their respective home societies without a loss of identity.

Nigerian play performances should be constructed to include stories that evolve around older adults and not restrict most of the aged roles to storytellers and narrators. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) need to be employed to foster the effectiveness of performances that center on aged characters. ICTs provide opportunities that enable people to stay connected to the world around them even when they are away from their motherland. Bruggencate, Luijkx, & Sturm, observes that "this social connection is important in later life to guard against deterioration in cognitive and mental health, as well as physical health problems and early mortality." (770) This view by Bruhggencate et al was supported by scholars like Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013). Therefore, when ICT is imbibed into the digital propagation of Nigerian theatre, it encourages the viewership of stage performances amongst older Nigerian adults in the diaspora, thereby enhancing their social engagement and connection.

Winstead et al support this view that "ICTs allow older adults to surpass the social and geographic barriers that may lead to both loneliness and isolation." (540) The message of a play can be well executed without distorting the physical, mental, and vocal qualities of the actors playing the role of aged characters. The role of digital media is important to contemporary performance in the representation of the old characters because it will assist in reshaping the cultural perception of elderly persons in Nigeria across the globe. It provides indigenous audiences in the diaspora a sense of identification and understanding that people do not grow old and lose all sense of vibrancy due to the economic realities prevalent in Nigerian society. Nigerian and African playwrights should write more on aged characters as main characters in their works because some elderly folks are equally as vibrant as their global counterparts.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Nigerian directors and theatre companies should make provisions to source older actors to play aged roles to help avert such mischaracterizations. In cases where younger actors play the role of aged characters, the reenactment on stage should be based on what is obtainable in the play's narrative to avoid a negative depiction of the Nigerian-aged community to a global audience. Subjecting disability and distortion to aged characters on stage should only be applied in fidelity to a play text. The naturalists purport that drama is a slice of life, and Nigerian performances should stay true when portraying older characters for a better self-identity and global recognition. Emerging media makes it easier for older adults to connect with the theatre, and more older actors should be encouraged to participate in theatrical productions.

APPENDIX

Digital Archival Sources of Primary Data

[1]. "Idi-Araba to Akoka" written and directed by Otun Rasheed https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-V8_7gyx 7U&t=847s

[2]. "Ije" -The Quest: A Stage Drama Production by The Elevation Church (TEC) https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=4SYb_ZlHYfc

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