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Troubled but Alive and Kicking: New Insights into Political Theatre outside the Establishment

Daniel H. Mutibwa

The production of contemporary political theatre in third sector theatre companies – perceived as organisations operating outside established and commercial theatre sectors with a view to articulating societal issues and possibly acting to change them – is often either associated with an exclusively socio-political function or is considered to be isolated, fractured or even in terminal decline altogether (Van Erven 1988; Holdsworth 1997). The socio-political function involves critiquing perceived structural injustices in society, tackling subject matter that addresses a wide range of themes through performances, and encouraging broader involvement in such performances (Brockett 2000; Morrison 2008a). In subscribing to these socio-political imperatives, third sector theatre is seen to enhance democratic practice and drive social change (Prentki and Selman 2000; Landy and Montgomery 2012).

However, my fieldwork revealed that as socio-political and socio-economic circumstances have gradually changed, other emerging imperatives - particularly of a professional, artistic and commercial nature - now play an equally important role in the production of political theatre in the third sector. The interplay between these different imperatives can be conflicting, pulling producers in different directions. Moreover, producers can be subjected to demands from subsidy. The ways in which producers respond have not been sufficiently studied.

In a bid to address this gap, this article analyses how producers negotiate the divergent imperatives and respond to demands from subsidy. In doing so, the article not only draws on perspectives from the political economy of communication tradition (Murdoch 1980; Curran 2002), the sociology of cultural production (McIntyre 2012), and from scholarship on alternative, community and radical theatre (Traore 1972; Kershaw 1992; Holdsworth 1997; Lange 2008), but it also employs ethnographic research comprising semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation and the study of documentary evidence conducted between 2009 and 2011 in five British and German third sector theatre companies. For my purposes in this article, I choose to focus only on two British companies, namely Antarc Theatre and Gray End Productions which I complement with case study research undertaken in 2014 on two third sector theatre companies in Africa: Handspring Puppet Company in South Africa and Jos Repertory Theatre in Nigeria.

The case study companies were selected based on longevity, claims to subscription to socio-political goals, adherence to professional, artistic and commercial values, and a reliance on subsidy. Whilst these companies are not representative of political theatre in third sector contexts in the North and South, they are reflective of contemporary practice in both regions. I use pseudonyms to refer to the British companies in line with research ethical norms but use the real names for the African companies as they appear in the outputs I studied¹. This article is structured as follows. A synthesis of relevant theoretical perspectives provides a conceptual underpinning of how to approach and understand contemporary political theatre in the third sector both in the North and South, followed by a description of the divergent imperatives and an analysis of how producers at the case study organisations navigate them. The article then highlights producers' perceptions of their work following the negotiation of demands from subsidy before concluding with the new insights yielded by this research.

My main argument is that the evolving environment in which these companies operate sometimes compels producers to prioritise professional, artistic and commercial imperatives over socio-political ones and to give in to subsidy pressures, thereby compromising their

distinctiveness in enhancing democratic communication and driving social change. In light of this empirical evidence, this article points to two key insights, namely a) the production of political theatre in the third sector is more prevalent than current research tends to acknowledge although sometimes ridden with contradictions, and b) there is an urgency to contemplate sustainable funding strategies or business models which would enable the sector to fulfil its socio-political function more effectively.

Theorising third sector political theatre

Commentators have noted that from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, political theatre produced outside the Establishment in the North was driven predominantly by arts collectives and troupes that subscribed to alternative, community and radical theatre movements (Van Erven 1988) and grew out of the general militancy of that era, resulting from the 'theatricalisation of protest and resistance' (Kershaw 1992: 170). Such resistance manifested itself in the questioning and rejection of dominant values, the dissent on social issues such as abortion and drugs, the treatment of dominant themes like the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movements among others, and provoking widespread demand for social and political change (Rawlence 1979). In Britain, for example, this was the key aspect that distinguished political theatre at the margins from established theatrical entertainment in earlier centuries (Prentki and Selman 2000). Where the former – featuring pioneering organisations such as CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) (1967), Red Ladder (1968), Portable Theatre (1969/1970), Foco Novo (1971), 7:84 England (1971) and Joint Stock (1974) - clearly mobilised for socio-political transformation mostly through foregrounding the dialogic relationship between the audience and performer (Boal 1979) and through agitpropⁱⁱ which was 'inexpensive to produce, could be performed anywhere, and the material could be altered to suit changing situations' (DiCenzo 1996: 44), the latter was misused for political endsⁱⁱⁱ as we shall see below on the one hand, and on the other mostly offered an escape from the cruelties of day-to-day life (Reinelt 1996).

In the South, resistance was generally exhibited through productions in public spaces that stimulated deliberation and discussion about how to combat colonial rule, facilitate cultural self-assertion, and promote self-representation (Gibbs 2008). In African countries such as Nigeria, many of these productions were considered 'traditionalist' in that they were highly critical of the demonization and abandonment of the respective national values and customs in favour of so-called modernisation (Traore 1972). In both the North and South, arts collectives and troupes took their performances - which tended to be cheap or cost no fees - to non-conventional theatre venues where ordinary people gathered for social, recreational and political activities (Lewis 1990; Lange 2008). Owing to evolving socio-political and socio-economic conditions from the mid-1980s, some arts collectives and troupes gradually 'professionalised' and grew into third sector theatre companies as we shall see below while others disintegrated.

My research showed three key differences between arts collectives and troupes and third sector theatre companies. First, the latter attach great importance to professional practice which means emphasising skills and conventions in theatre-making while the former do not lay claim to such professionalism. Second, and following on from the first point, many third sector theatre producers exploit professionalism to make profit as opposed to practitioners of arts collectives and troupes who tend to refrain from profit-making which they associate with corporate excesses and domination. Third, many producers of political theatre in the third sector receive subsidy (ideally on their terms) and embrace opportunities to perform in mainstream television and established theatre in an effort to reach larger audiences. By contrast, most arts collectives and troupes steer clear of institutional television and

established theatre to avert having their work appropriated into the dominant conventions of such settings which they challenge.

Despite these differences, both demonstrate a significant similarity: the understanding and employment of theatre as a conduit for cultural intervention. Deriving from Augusto Boal's (1979) notion that theatre can be utilised as a tool for both domination and liberation in equal measure, producers of political theatre in the third sector and practitioners in arts collectives and troupes make use of this art form to try and animate the public to take control of their destiny rather than have it dictated for them. One such application is entertainment-education (E-E). Employed as either a process, strategy or as an intervention to communicate important messages for entertainment and education purposes through performance as well as electronic media^{iv}, E-E draws on research-based work to influence attitudes, lifestyles, perceptions and public policy among other things with a view to addressing pressing societal issues, particularly in countries located in the South^v (Sabido 2004; Singhal and Rogers 2004). As we shall see below, the application of E-E in this way is well-illustrated by one of the case study companies notably Jos Repertory Theatre in Nigeria.

Alongside E-E, the socio-political value of both third sector theatre and arts collectives and troupes alike lies more commonly in the ambition to create work that interrogates and influences social and political realities and effects social change in ways that established and commercial theatre are proving unable and/or unwilling to. Scholars have attributed this to two key developments. First, politics has always sought to appropriate established theatre for its own agenda. As far back as the seventeenth century in Britain, for example, politics 'hijacked' theatre and dictated what was thought to be good for the public social order. A key instrument to this end was the Licensing Act of 1737 which granted politics the right – among many other things - to censor perspectives that might incite disobedience. More recently, governments have expressed positions that either encourage self-censorship on the part of theatre-makers or even threaten to withdraw subsidy if works stir controversy (Brockett 2000; Needham 2012).

By contrast, established theatre in the African context flourished through colonial cultural institutions such as schools, colleges, universities and BBC radio in the case of Anglophone Africa especially in countries like Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya (Hutchison and Walder 2011). It provided a platform through which colonial values were passed on under the guise of modernisation. In the post-colonial period, many new African governments such as Tanzania utilised conventional theatre for propaganda purposes (Lange 2008) in the same manner that the British political Establishment appropriated theatre for its own purposes in earlier centuries and forces of contemporary cultural globalisation have encroached on cultural production in many countries in Africa notably South Africa, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe just to name a few (Loots 2006; Kerr and Plastow 2011).

Second, theatre always seemed to be in the grip of commerce. Already in the 1980s, Murdoch observed that established theatre from post-World War Two onwards in Britain was 'firmly in the hands of commercial interests [a consequence of which was that] the conservatism of the commercial managements combined with [censorship] to ensure that the harsher edges of political and social life seldom intruded' (1980:153). Compared to Tanzania, for example, especially before electronic media became relatively widespread in the country - commercial theatre in many cases provided the main source of entertainment for those who could afford it (Lange 2008).

Invariably, established and commercial theatre both in the North and South targeted predominantly elite audiences, thereby bolstering dominant control. For political economists of communication, the power accruing from exercising control over the production and

distribution of ideas, values and beliefs inherent in cultural production reinforces the interests and perspectives of privileged elites rather than those of the wider public (Curran 2002). Consequently, perspectives outside of perceived dominant norms are likely to be alienated (Murdoch 1980). Moreover, commercial control generates the production of 'populist' and bland work the priority of which is to maximise profit rather than inform and enrich civic life (Curran 2002).

Versions of such views have motivated third sector theatre producers to provide alternatives to prevailing established and commercial theatre drawing on the thinking and vocabulary from alternative, community and radical theatre movements. In Murdoch's words, the task has been 'to lay bare the structures of power and privilege and to show how they permeate everyday life, limiting and curtailing opportunities for self-realisation and social change [and] to present a view from below by recovering [and articulating the wider public's] lived experience of domination' (1980:151). This, coupled with the ascendancy of artistic, professional and commercial imperatives, has generated a dynamic production context to which the discussion now turns.

The dynamics of third sector political theatre

We have seen that political theatre in the third sector constitutes work whose subject matter seeks to discover, critique, influence, and intervene in the social and political realities in the wider society (Kershaw 1992). To this end, producers aspire to involve diverse groups and perceived marginalised views in their work with a view to articulating multiple lived experiences in a more active manner than is often permissible in established and commercial theatre. I conceptualise this as socio-political imperatives in this article and follow the conceptualisation with a description of the set of the aforementioned emergent imperatives below.

To begin with, professional imperatives in the sector can be looked at from two inter-related perspectives, namely the expertise and attitude of producers. The expertise of producers points to an emphasis on 'skills, techniques, conventions and traditions' (McIntyre 2012: 24) that are crucial in putting together productions ultimately demonstrating professionalism. Such expertise might also include skills in budgeting, project management, administration, marketing, distribution and evaluation (Matarasso 2000). The attitude encompasses the willingness to work collaboratively in partnership with a range of third parties sometimes even with low or no pay (Morrison 2008a).

Artistic imperatives, the second set of the emergent imperatives, have many dimensions. For third sector political theatre producers, one dimension means presenting work in interesting and compelling ways. Another dimension concerns 'the technical competence of the final work, its ambition and originality, its ability to communicate the ideas or feelings of its creators to audiences and the nature and longevity of its impact' (Matarasso 2000: 53). Yet another dimension is the ability to question through creating challenging work and to make connections (Oakley 2009). Altogether artistic imperatives in this sector can be said to embody 'the ability to generate novel and useful ideas and solutions to everyday problems and challenges' (McIntyre 2012: 5).

Lastly, commercial imperatives compel third sector political theatre producers to 'seek the greatest degree of profitability and therefore make market-driven programming decisions that lead to the greatest possible paid attendance' (Morrison 2008b: 201). Often, there is a 'general desire [...] to see places full rather than half empty. Who fills them doesn't really matter' (Lewis 1990: 148). Therefore, '[u]nder these market-driven conditions, [critical and experimental productions] would rarely find their way onto the stage' (Morrison 2008b: 201).

The interplay between the different imperatives leads critical sociologists of cultural production to argue that routinised ‘professional cultural practices’ and commercial interests foster the making of ‘uniform’ and ‘uninteresting’ cultural work geared towards profit maximisation (McIntyre 2012: 118 – 119) . This is clearly at odds with artistic and socio-political imperatives which tend to prioritise the making of cultural work that may entail ‘unpopular ideas, perplexing artistic conventions, and anything that might make the general public uneasy’ (Brockett 2000: 17). This then begs the question how third sector theatre producers can create novel, critical and challenging work whilst working within a web of ‘professional cultural practices’ and profit-driven motivations. Additionally, subsidy can sometimes be a double-edged sword. Although mostly intended to promote artistic excellence, to encourage the creation of socially relevant work that may not otherwise find a market, and to make such work widely accessible, strings attached to subsidy have the potential to constrain producers’ autonomy. Before analysing how producers respond, it is useful to provide a brief historical account of the context within which each case study company originated and operated.

Competing imperatives: breaches, contradictions and interactions

Up until the mid-1980s in Britain, producers of third sector political theatre committed primarily to socio-political goals. For example, Antarc Theatre - founded as a touring radical agitprop collective in 1968 in London - focused on the production of plays which fed into political disputes and militant class struggles until 1984 and targeted primarily working-class audiences first in London and then in Yorkshire. Similarly, Gray End Productions - established as a troupe in 1972 - addressed perceived structural injustices such as discrimination and trade union disputes. Its target audiences constituted predominantly working-class groups and selected migrant communities in London.

On its inception in 1981, Handspring Puppet Company sought ‘to produce new children’s theatre with puppets that reflected life on the [African] continent [...] and to stake a claim for puppet theatre as a legitimate part of [the] local theatre vocabulary’ (Kohler 2009: 42). The political situation then meant that Handspring Puppet Company toured its performances^{vi} in predominantly white schools ‘because [black schools] simply couldn’t afford to pay [and the company was not] in a stable enough situation to perform for free’ (Jones 2008: 97). In 1997, Jos Repertory Theatre set out to tour productions that engaged with educational texts in local secondary schools in Jos in north central Nigeria (Dugga and Oteh 2008: 83). A key motivation for its establishment was that the region did not have a theatre of its own (ibid).

However, evolving socio-political and socio-economic circumstances from the late 1980s onwards led these companies to restructure operations particularly by widening their themes in a bid to respond to the interests, concerns and tastes of a range of audience groups uncatered to until that point. For Jos Repertory Theatre, this trend set in from 2000 onwards. My research found that this move was mostly triggered by the prospect of building new and diverse audiences that provided new markets to enable survival in the marketplace. An analysis of the ways in which producers in each case study company responded (and continue to respond) to the interaction of the different imperatives and to societal changes follows below.

Antarc Theatre

The pursuit of larger followings compelled Antarc Theatre to alter its artistic policy four times, a move that had a fourfold impact: First, this sparked a move away from the production of plays which fed into matters and struggles of class politics targeting predominantly working-class audiences to addressing a host of topics pertinent to broader

audiences largely neglected by established and commercial theatre such as women, youths, minority ethnic communities, and the disabled throughout the late 1980s as well as LGBT and environmental activist groups in the 1990s and 2000s.

Second, Antarc Theatre transitioned from collectively scripting plays that was the norm in the countercultural years to commissioning a group of playwrights called The Rainbow Writers who not only were (and are still) committed to making theatre that addresses the interests and issues important to diverse audiences, but more importantly, such writers belong in them too. Of this, Adam – the Artistic Director – comments:

What we are open to is making sure that we maintain a diverse artistic team. So, I'm conscious that I want to work with women. I want to work with lesbians, Asians. I want to work with people of African-Caribbean background. We are gonna be working with a writer who is Scottish-Ghanaian mixed race. There's a writer who is Muslim. Alicia is a lesbian writer. But when you hear yourself describing that, it sounds so contrived. That sounds like we are just ticking boxes, you know. These writers are also very good. So, I am not gonna work with an Asian just because he's got brown skin, you know. I'm not gonna work with a Ugandan actor because she's Ugandan. I'm gonna work with her because she's a really good actor. I'm not gonna work with [a disabled actor] because he has no legs. I'm gonna work with him because he's a phenomenally good actor. So, you know, there is an artistic quality here as well

Third, in reaching out to new audiences, Antarc Theatre evolved from a radical, touring collective with no permanent base to a hybrid structured theatre company operating from leased premises. According to Adam, the company 'was forced into a hierarchy with an artistic director at the top' to avert bankruptcy while simultaneously decentralising 'artistic control', a strategy that signalled a move towards professionalisation. Today, the premises not only provide a space in which rehearsals and performances take place, but they also offer a breeding ground for the company's work where The Rainbow Writers meet to discuss their work and how best to address the preferences of the range of audiences they serve.

Fourth, the themes of the company's performances invariably widened. For instance, plays that stood out in the 1990s addressed the concerns of minority ethnic groups and disabled people, issues of cultural identity, gender and sexuality, AIDS, domestic violence as well as education, poverty and pregnancies among young people. The 2000s have witnessed productions whose subject matter drew on a host of prevailing issues: the 2001 racial riots in northwest England, environmental degradation, community tragedies, and the persistent structural inequalities in British society. These developments demonstrate that Antarc Theatre appears to continue to foreground socio-political imperatives in its productions.

The interaction between the different imperatives in many of these productions is evident. One of them is *The Blue Asbestos Tragedy* – a community tragedy that explored the circumstances surrounding the contamination of an inner-city in Yorkshire with asbestos dust emitted by a local asbestos factory between the 1870s and 1960s. According to Adam, although the local authorities have remained coy about the circumstances surrounding the tragedy for decades, it is presumed that many of the deaths in the area are related to this tragedy. One of the The Rainbow Writers, Isaac, used this tragedy as subject matter to create an experimental musical comedy informed by thorough research and in-depth interviews with members of this community:

I found myself singing songs that were very melodic and easy to sing along but actually, they were about people dying. And I saw - there were old people in the audience who were of the generation that lived there – I saw in their faces these songs were making them think about, you know, people they had lost - their loved ones. And so, all the people were laughing along with the piece. There were also moments which were really touching for them. And it was like a pantomime because at one point, one of the people in the audience shouted: 'He's behind you', you know. And so, afterwards in the pub, [we] were saying: we've got something here. There is a form here that we need to rediscover which is a

sort of working-class opera, working-class pantomime that is for adults. It's not for children. And it's political and it's entertaining and it's comedic (Adam).

Socio-political imperatives here emphasised the exposition of any 'hidden or obscure histories, relationships, issues and problems which [are] important to the [community] from which they [are] drawn' (Kershaw 1992: 246). Although the piece was collectively researched and featured two community members as actors, it was developed into an experimental comedy by Isaac and Adam, a testimony to artistic and technical excellence. By valuing the input from community members, producers made them 'feel involved in the creative process; [becoming] aware that the play [was] for them, and in a very real sense, by them' (Van Erven 1988: 177). Adam noted elsewhere that *The Blue Asbestos Tragedy* was well received and sold out suggesting a successful interaction between socio-political, artistic, professional and commercial imperatives.

It is worth noting that much of Antarc Theatre's work is reliant on subsidy which it utilises for social and rehabilitative purposes although artistic and professional imperatives are identifiable. Commercial ones do not play any role because the company (still) strongly rejects capitalist tendencies out of principle. The purposes involve working with so-called 'disadvantaged' youths, particularly the training of young offenders in theatre-making to enhance their 'self-development' and 'self-confidence' as Adam notes. This instrumentalist use of theatre can be said to effect social change at individual and community levels. The analysis now shifts to the second British case study, namely Gray End Productions.

Gray End Productions

Between 1972 and the mid-1980s, Gray End Productions focused on countercultural themes directed at working-class groups and 'West Indian, South Asian, Irish and children audiences' in London. From the late 1980s onwards, the company underwent three key changes: First, the company dispensed with the 'collectivist-democratist' structure that characterised so many political theatre troupes during the countercultural era and replaced this with a hierarchical organisational structure. Today, the company is overseen by a Board of Directors and managed by Solomon – the Artistic Director, who is assisted by a general manager and an associate producer called Amanda.

Second, Gray End Productions converted a disused hall on a high street in London into a local theatre complex which comprises a cinema, a gallery and studio spaces. Third, from the early 1990s onwards, the company resurrected the verbatim technique whereby 'the characters [which] appear in [productions] exist or have existed in the real world [...] and that the words those people are shown to be speaking are indeed their own' (Hammond and Steward 2008: 9 – 10). Generally, verbatim productions – also referred to as 'tribunal plays' because they involve editing transcripts of public enquiries set up to investigate suspected wrongdoing or crimes - are seen to provide 'more space, more words, and more scope than newspapers and TV and radio news bulletins' do (Norton-Taylor 2011), something that harmonises with socio-political and professional imperatives.

The most popular tribunal plays put on at Gray End Productions in the 1990s were *Dodgy Deal* (1994) which explored circumstances surrounding perceived illegal arms sales to the Middle East and *Eltham Hate Crime* (1999) which portrayed a suspected fatal racial attack on a black youth. In the 2000s three of the most successful productions include *Administering Injustice* (2004) about the indefinite imprisonment of suspected Muslim terrorists in Guantanamo, *Century Of East-West Relations* (2009) charting over a century of Afghan culture, history and politics and how the country continues to be the focal point of the West's foreign policy and more recently, *The Capital in Flames* (2011) exploring the events surrounding the riots that shocked Britain in August 2011. As far as socio-political, artistic,

professional and commercial imperatives were concerned, the documentary evidence I studied pointed to a successful interplay between the different imperatives in these productions for the most part.

However, there were exceptions. An illustrative example is *Torture and Murder in Military Detention* (2011) in which socio-political and professional imperatives were more dominant than artistic and commercial ones. The subject matter of the play was based on a public enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of an Iraqi hotel worker who passed away while in British military detention in September 2003 during the Second Gulf War. The play also explored the general indiscipline within the army ranks at the time. Commenting on the play, Amanda – Associate Producer - noted:

It had fantastic reviews [...] I think the subject matter was great. Box office was terrible. And it's really hard to strike that balance because we are known as Britain's leading political theatre. You know, all The Time's leaders, New York Times leaders even, you know. There's no other theatre in the UK even that is getting that kind of coverage in the broadsheets and not in the Culture section, but actually in the Politics section. And yet, you know, that's what we are totally lauded for, and yet, we do something totally political like that, and nobody comes

Asked what the reasons for the 'terrible box office' could have been, she noted three factors, namely the unfortunate timing (the play was performed in mid-summer), the inadequate press coverage of the public enquiry on which the play was based, and the possibility that the 'queer taste and sedentary style' in which 'nothing happens on stage except a witness leaves and another one comes on [is] not everybody's cup of tea'. With regard to socio-political imperatives, it is clear that the play attempted to expose the wrongdoings within the British military given that the government had tried to conceal information concerning the scandal allegedly for fear of endangering national security.

Professional imperatives were demonstrated in the 'skill [...] and hard work' (Hammond and Steward 2008: 10) employed to edit what Amanda called the 'long', 'dry' and 'not really exciting' public enquiry report about the scandal into a script for the play. In artistic terms, although the 'sedentary style' of the play might have seemed less imaginative, the play got 'fantastic reviews' nonetheless. Commercially, the 'terrible box office' might well have had to do with the timing rather than the nature of the play itself. Nevertheless, Amanda noted that producers at Gray End Productions continue to stage such productions regardless of box office performance because 'that's what [they] are [t]here to do' and '[t]hat's why the Arts Council give [producers] their money'. I return to the discussion of subsidy below.

One way producers are reducing financial risks is by undertaking co-productions with established artists and commercial theatre companies with a proven track record and the ability to attract audiences, a development that has the potential to encourage the making of palliative and 'populist' works at the expense of critical and challenging ones:

You obviously do quality controlling, you don't just say, oh, anyone or any other company can come in. You know, we've spent years building relationships, so our company has a shared experience. We just know that what they will produce will be a shared experience show and that's fine. And you also know that that will be a huge thing and that people will come and see it. So that's the way you kind of balance it in your programme. You get incoming shows that you hope, obviously, will be, you know, your bread and butter and that gives you the freedom to do something like this (Amanda).

I would argue that this development is as pragmatic as it is worrying. It is pragmatic in the sense that producers are making effective use of their mainstream networks and co-productions to stage work with a 'populist' appeal, thereby earning a much needed income which, in turn, ensures longevity in the marketplace. This strategy - which clearly aligns itself with commercial imperatives - can be seen here as a means to keep Gray End Productions afloat whilst pursuing socio-political work rather than as an end in itself. What is worrying is

that whereas ‘populist’ work almost always generates income as alluded to above, it also tends to be ‘bland’ and uncritical, has the potential to distract producers from core challenging and questioning work, and is likely to discourage investment ‘in truly unpredictable work’ which – though not always profitable - might ‘surprise with a new or startling perspective’ and ‘explore uncertainty’ (Morris 2012) all of which are key ingredients of third sector political theatre. The discussion now turns to the two case studies from the South, starting with Handspring Puppet Company in South Africa.

Handspring Puppet Company

From the mid-1980s, Handspring Puppet Company sought to widen its work from merely producing new children’s puppet plays to creating adult puppet theatre that reflected some of the lived experiences of the deeply divided South African nation. This involved identifying subject matter that lent itself to adaptation on stage with puppets and that was not limited to the common puppet play themes such as ghosts, animals and mythical creatures (Kohler, 2009: 46). Episodes of an Easter Rising (1985) - adapted from a radio play – was the first adult puppet play that the company put on. The piece engaged with the social and political realities in South Africa at the time, with a particular focus on racial relations and homosexuality in tune with socio-political imperatives. From an artistic point of view, producers limited the visual to the necessary and dispensed with masking the puppeteers, something that audiences liked (ibid: 47-48). The success of this performance paved the way for the company’s first international tour in France.

Owing to increased political turbulence particularly in Cape Town where Handspring Puppet Company had been based until that point, the company moved to Johannesburg where it experimented further with puppet plays for adults and developed synergies around puppet exhibitions and children’s TV programmes. Of the latter, Jones noted that though educational, they were not very well researched and hardly engaged with the socio-political circumstances of the day but rather served as an income stream to keep the company afloat (2008: 101). Rather than viewing this as a breach of the company’s socio-political function, a closer study of the context within which Handspring Puppet Company operated at the time points to a pragmatic move to endure year after year in a similar fashion as Gray End Productions demonstrates above with its co-productions with established artists and commercial theatre companies. Other productions the company put on in the late 1980s included *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1988) and *Tooth and Nail* (1989) which challenged the traditional conceptualisation of theatre and captured the mood that swept South Africa prior to the country’s first ever national elections in the early 1990s respectively.

The 1990s saw Handspring Puppet Company broaden its artistic repertoire through experimenting with technical innovations combining puppetry and animated film. These new artistic features appeared for the first time in *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992) – a German adaptation repurposed to narrate an experience of migrant history in 1950s Johannesburg. The performance has been hailed as one of the most successful productions in the company’s history and as such, has toured in many parts of the globe - most recently in September 2012 in the U.S for the second time (Handspring Puppet Company 2014).

During the mid-1990s, the company added the verbatim technique to its repertoire as was reflected in *Ubu* and *the Truth Commission* (1996), a performance whose subject matter derived from the stories that victims and perpetrators alike experienced during Apartheid. In this production, producers made use of the technique through ‘curating a series of cultural responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ (Kohler 2009: 79). Bearing in mind that verbatim theatre can be very dull and unexciting as we saw in *Torture and Murder in Military Detention* (2011) by Gray End Productions, producers at Handspring Puppet

Company blended the serious and often tragic accounts of the victims with black humour, animated film and dance (ibid). The only critique is that given the very personal nature of these stories, it would have made for more authenticity if the company had encouraged broader participation whereby victims and perpetrators performed their own lived experiences rather than having professional actors perform these.

Still in the 1990s, the company professionalised further by exploiting its synergies to full effect. It set up a Trust for Puppetry in Education which ran numerous outreach programmes, restarted comprehensive educational broadcast programming, promoted teacher development training in the arts, and established a national network which developed organisational and artistic skills in the community theatre sector (Jones 2008: 102 – 104). All this mostly suggests a successful interaction between socio-political, artistic, professional and commercial imperatives.

In the 2000s, however, the situation appears to be different. As the company continues to push artistic boundaries and to explore fresh ways of making work which is desirable, socio-political imperatives seem to be relegated to the margins. *Tall Horse* (2004) and *War Horse* (2007), for example, which capture the extraordinary journey of a giraffe from Egypt to France and celebrate the artistry and technical skill that brings puppet horses to life on stage respectively and have recorded exceptional box office income, do not appear to engage with social and political realities at their core. If at all, this seems secondary as in the case of *War Horse* (2007) which to a degree evokes World War One memories (Billington 2011). Artistic, professional and commercial imperatives appear to have dominated Handspring Puppet Company's productions in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a trend that – though pragmatic – erodes the company's socio-political focus. This appears implicit in the concluding remarks that the incumbent artistic director made in a written piece recently:

I would like to note that Handspring is now in a difficult position. The company has toured productions abroad for well over a decade. This works well from a financial point of view [...] However, the disruption of normal social rhythms at home is considerable. Also, the shows seem to have gotten bigger and more ambitious with concomitant pressure. Thus we are looking to find smaller, more modest projects (Jones 2008: 107).

Could these words of reflection be interpreted to mean that Handspring Puppet Company now probably recognises the relegation of socio-political imperatives to a marginal role in their latest productions and sees the need to redress the balance? Further research on the company's continued path of development would bring certainty. In the following, we now look at Jos Repertory Theatre in Nigeria – the last of the four case study companies in this article.

Jos Repertory Theatre

Between 1997 and 2000, Jos Repertory Theatre toured its performances exclusively in local secondary schools. Receipt of subsidy led the company to expand its artistic repertoire in the 2000s to be able to reach adult audiences as well. According to Dugga and Oteh, it all began with an invitation to perform at a national Festival of Arts in 2000 in Lagos (2008: 83). The company seized the opportunity to raise awareness of its work and continued taking up other similar opportunities in the hope that making a name for its work would help make contact with prospective funders and influential people in Nigeria's cultural scene. This eventually came to fruition when a contact became interested in the company's work, culminating in the award of a grant by the Ford Foundation which enabled Jos Repertory Theatre to rent office premises, purchase two computers, pay salaries of four staff members, and cover the costs of the performances of theatre-for-development (TfD) plays in a number of neighbouring cities (ibid: 84), all of which ushered in a drive towards professionalisation.

For better or worse, the grant required Jos Repertory Theatre to produce Tfd, a form the company had no experience in at the time. Valley Cry (2001) – the first piece that promoted a local HIV/AIDS education and awareness campaign and is an illustrative example of the application of an entertainment-education (E-E) intervention – communicated a vital health message woven from various accounts contributed by local politicians, health officials and ordinary people who until that point had not been heard in theatre (ibid: 85). A successive grant from the Ford Foundation enabled the production of another piece called Community Call (2002) which – in line with the funder’s agenda of facilitating public education around democratic practice - dealt with issues of ‘good governance and accountability’ prior to a national election (ibid). From 2004, the company professionalised further owing to more subsidy through building capacity in terms of recruiting experienced performers whilst simultaneously training fledgling ones, touring a mix of more Tfd pieces and political productions both nationally and internationally, establishing the Jos Festival of Arts now in its eighth year in 2014, and making effective use of international contacts to enhance professional skills in the areas of programming, administration, networking, audience development and marketing (ibid: 86 – 88).

Jos Repertory Theatre appears to have made effective use of its international contacts to collaborate on co-productions which, as we saw in the case of Gray End productions, has significantly helped the company not only to cover its operating costs, but also to tour its work abroad and to cement its reputation. An illustrative example of a co-production was *Our House* (2005) with Clyde Unity Theatre in Scotland, and ran under the auspices of the British Council’s Connecting Futures Project^{vii}. Blending music, dance and acting, the production explored socio-political issues such as corruption, identity, gender inequality and religious tensions among others from the perspective of young Nigerians and searched for any common ground between these and Scottish youths (Clyde Unity Theatre).

A key question the production raised was where ‘the hopes of the colonialists and the dreams of the nationalists in the post-independence era’ had vanished? (Dugga and Oteh 2008: 90). Unlike the other companies under study, producers at Jos Repertory Theatre show an appreciation of the possibility to pursue their work noting that *Our House* ‘was able to offer this radical questioning without leading to the detention of the performers’ (ibid). This suggests that critical work in Nigeria is unlikely to feature in established theatre which, in turn, might explain why Jos Repertory Theatre has received mostly international subsidy. Producers believe such subsidy will eventually help them grow into a sustainable, independent theatre company (ibid: 90).

Subsidy and producers’ responses

Subsidy has generally enabled producers of political theatre in the third sector to fulfil their remit which ‘has traditionally been to [...] put on plays that challenge or inspire debate but would not be popular enough to stage’ (Needham 2012). Whereas this is desirable, the issue is that subsidy can potentially ‘blunt social criticism’ (Van Erven 1988) and constrain the autonomy of producers through dictating the themes to tackle and how these might be conveyed. Where this has occurred, some theorists have spoken of the absorption of emergent and oppositional ideologies into the dominant means of cultural production (Williams 1981).

My research showed that producers respond in different ways. Sometimes producers manage to resist pressures from subsidy in an effort to retain their autonomy while at other times, they give in to its demands. Still others juggle their autonomy and such demands. In defence of his autonomy, Adam of Antarc Theatre, for example, intimates:

[W]e go to them with the project and go: isn't this brilliant? And they go: yeah. O.k., pay for it then. If we say with a begging hand, please commission us. Then the power is in their hands and they go: well... As an artist I have been in that situation before

Producers at Jos Repertory Theatre acknowledge the significance of subsidy to their work and seek to align their goals with those of the funders: 'no funder gives you funds to chase your dreams but if you succeed in aligning your dreams with theirs then you can begin to negotiate' (Dugga and Oteh 2008: 90). Producers accept subsidy on the understanding 'that any art must be created in an atmosphere of independence or it will take on the life of its funders' (ibid: 91) but simultaneously acknowledge that funders have a say (ibid: 89). In order to reduce their dependence on subsidy as a means of preserving their autonomy, producers have initiated fundraising schemes.

In a similar vein, producers at Gray End Productions rent out spaces in their premises for corporate use and have developed fundraising and sponsorship strategies in a bid to diversify their income base. However, like subsidy, sponsorships sometimes come with issues. Amanda gave an example of a sponsor who felt that his relatively huge monetary contribution entitled him to attend the company's rehearsals and even to give his input, something producers felt was 'intrusive'. However, Amanda admits that producers felt obliged 'to make sure that he feels like he is being listened to' because they were 'gonna need him in the future'. This development can potentially constrict producers' independence, and invariably puts the credibility and integrity of producers and their work at stake.

Producers at Handspring Puppet Company do not appear to have experienced tensions between juggling their autonomy and demands from subsidy considering that the company received an equivalent of approximately 320,000 Euros from international donors between 1990 and 2000 (Jones 2008: 104). Like Gray End Productions, Handspring Puppet Company has worked to diversify its income base by venturing into children's broadcast programming and undertaking co-productions with established theatre practitioners and companies with a very good reputation and track record. Similarly, producers at Jos Repertory Theatre have experimented with television ventures and discovered that their productions - though 'artistically satisfying' were nonetheless 'financially unsatisfactory' (Dugga and Oteh 2008: 90), a scenario that left producers in a precarious situation.

Overall, Antarc Theatre and Gray End Productions have received subsidy primarily from the Arts Council of England on behalf of the successive British governments and hardly any from international sources while Handspring Puppet Company and Jos Repertory Theatre appear to have obtained such support mainly from international donors^{viii} and minimally from their respective national governments. Why Handspring Puppet Company has not received sustained national subsidy over the decades is not clear.^{ix} In the Nigerian context, the implication is that (overly) critical work stands no chance of being nationally funded and in the most extreme cases, could lead to incarceration even if funded from abroad. Without subsidy, probably none of the case study companies would have survived beyond a couple of years. In a bid to break free from the confines of and strings attached to their subsidy, the four case study companies have devised various strategies to ensure longevity: undertaking profitable co-productions, renting out their spaces for commercial use, developing fundraising and sponsorship strategies, and broadening their repertoire in order to target and tap into the audiences that established and commercial theatre do not reach for reasons explained earlier. These companies understand that they will always face the pressure to conform to state or commercial interests one way or the other, something that is contradictory and raises ethical questions. Strikingly, it is by going about their work in this way that they have somehow endured and continued to make brilliant political theatre under acute tensions and chronic financial insecurity. They are clearly troubled but still alive and kicking.

Conclusion

The future of contemporary political theatre in the North and South is unclear owing to huge financial problems, but this neither means that its functions are no longer required nor that it cannot adapt and survive. If anything, the case study companies have demonstrated pragmatism at its best in facing up to the financial constraints by reconciling the principles of their work with the demands from commercial imperatives and subsidy as reflected in the various survival strategies that they have devised and refined over the decades: restructuring their organisations to cope with the rapid pace of change (altering artistic policies to accommodate multiple, innovative theatrical forms), developing synergies to widen income base (venturing into broadcasting, exhibitions, outreach programmes), carving out niche audiences alienated by established and commercial theatre whilst simultaneously targeting audiences served by the latter (particularly through co-productions), and bolstering their unique position in the communities they serve (through addressing the immediate socio-political contexts of such audiences and leasing or owning premises situated in their midst).

Producers have undertaken these innovative measures based on the urgency to protect political theatre in the third sector from being appropriated into the Establishment or even from vanishing altogether. Such protection is significant particularly at a time when many people – predominantly young adults – appear uninterested in (political) theatre more generally and seem to gravitate towards electronic media (Jensen 2007; Kerr and Plastow 2011). In particular, online streaming media services such as YouTube, Netflix, LoveFilm Instant among others seem very popular at present. This is aggravated by the tendency of established and commercial theatre to reinforce dominant perspectives and to shy away from a real engagement with the social ills inherent in society by focusing on work that is not only geared towards prioritising high profit-margins that render it ‘inaccessible to the majority due to prohibitive ticket prices [but is also] escapist and [though] entertaining [often tends to be] of little relevance’ (Prentki and Selman 2000: 9). All of these factors combine to undermine democratic practice. To underline the significance of multiple voices in a healthy democracy, this article draws on a report published by the British House of Lords to argue that ‘[a] free and diverse [theatre landscape is] an indispensable part of the democratic process ... If one voice becomes too powerful, this process is placed in jeopardy and democracy is damaged’ (2008: 6). This article makes a case for safeguarding third sector political theatre as a space for cultural intervention that not only criticises and attempts to redress the monopolistic grip over the production and circulation of cultural products held firmly by elite and commercial interests, but also as a conduit for free expression, debate and deliberation as well as the formation of ideas and opinions that enhance the making of civic decisions.

In the short term, the prospects of third sector political theatre in the North and South remain good provided that producers continue to maintain a successful negotiation between the different imperatives and a skilful response to demands from subsidy in order to create new, socially relevant, entertaining and experimental work which, in some instances, will be commercially successful and yield positive reviews. Much of that work will continue to be produced mostly on shoe-string budgets, thereby highlighting the endurance of the sector amidst the severest of working conditions. For the sector to attend to its socio-political function more effectively, sustainable funding initiatives and/or business models in both the North and South need to be devised to stabilise the sector and support its growth and independence in the long term. In an effort to strike a healthy balance between commercial motives and the public-service function, I argue for third sector political theatre companies what Picard (2008: 212) argued for media companies that when ‘conditions are stable and companies are financially secure, they tend to exhibit more willingness to attend to public functions than when conditions are turbulent and their financial performance is poor’.

Notes

ⁱ The use of pseudonyms for the British case studies - Antarc Theatre and Gray End Productions (including the names of producers and performances) is in compliance with the terms (anonymity and confidentiality) under which the author was granted 'preferential' access to conduct ethnography in those companies, something that was not the case with Handspring Puppet Company (South Africa) and Jos Repertory Theatre (Nigeria). Company profiles and other key data on the latter are publicly accessible which is why anonymising them did not seem to make sense to the author, and the ethics of doing so would have been questionable anyway.

ⁱⁱ See Kershaw (1992: 257 – 258) for a comprehensive definition of agitprop and associated conventions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reinelt (1996) and Prentki and Selman (2000) noted that until the 1980s, British theatre remained under the control of local governments and Regional Arts Boards but that the wider Thatcherite political economy from the 1980s onwards upset this by introducing a new series of funding schemes characterised by 'the kind of "entrepreneurial action" preferred by neo-conservatism' (Kershaw 1992: 172) that ultimately fostered what Prentki and Selman (2000: 58) termed a 'centralisation towards a normative, monochrome culture' that suited mainstream theatre to the detriment of theatre outside the Establishment.

^{iv} See Singhal for a discussion of the use of 'multi-media E-E interventions' in digital interactive environments that transcend the hitherto application of 'single-medium E-E programmes' (2013: 3-4).

^v It is worthwhile noting that there exists work on E-E interventions in the North (for example, Kawamura and Kohler (2013) on the 'application of Sabido's E-E serial drama strategy in local radio in the United States and Japan' and 'increasingly east-west' (cf. Singhal 2013: 5).

^{vi} The company's initial performances are reminiscent of the common application of entertainment-education (E-E) but there appears to be no evidence to suggest that producers at the time deliberately employed E-E as a strategy or intervention in the sense that the concept has become widely known and used.

^{vii} For more details on the British Council - Connecting Futures project, visit the following link:

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/researchinstitutes/bahcm/research/sigs/biosedimentology/developingcountriescharities/britishcouncilconnectingfutures/>

^{viii} Through its Trust, Handspring Puppet Company has received subsidy from predominantly international governments and for-profit and charitable organisations in countries like the United States, Denmark, Canada, Germany, the (former) European Community and Sweden. In the case of Jos Repertory Theatre in Nigeria, it has primarily been the Ford Foundation in the United States and the British Council (Dugga and Oteh 2008).

^{ix} Nationally, the company received what appears to have been a one-off subsidy from the South African National Arts Council over a three year period during which Handspring Puppet Company toured two very successful productions both at home and abroad: *Faustus in Africa* (1995) (which featured an account of the origins of colonialism and its subsequent reign adapted from the first two parts of Goethe's *Faust*) and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1996) (Jones 2008: 104). A possible explanation for the receipt of this one-off subsidy could have had to do with the thematic foci of the two productions which demonstrated a huge relevance to the country and Africa as a whole. Since there seems to be no record of rejected bids for national subsidy, it could be inferred that Handspring Puppet Company probably opted not to rely on subsidy and got by on the meagre financial resources at its disposal, particularly in the initial years when the company was run solely on producers' personal savings (Jones 2008: 95).

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