

THE AESTHETICS OF CHILDREN'S THEATRE: APPRECIATING AND MAXIMIZING ON THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL POTENTIALS FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

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A few years ago, in Kenya, drama was only regarded as a pastime, and not an enterprise that one would undertake professionally and be able to make ends meet. Undeniably, even most celebrated local TV actors only pursued acting on the sides while holding on to full time jobs. Examples of such thespians that radiated our living rooms through Television screens in TV drama such as *Fedheha*, *Vitimbi*, *Vituko*, *Tausi*, *Tushauriane* and others, are innumerable. All that has changed in the last decade. Some of the best paid media persons in Kenya now are not only committed thespians but also derive their fame from their theatrical approach to, especially, moral, social and political issues. Local musicians too can live comfortably on their earnings. At last, the arts are getting the respect they deserve! Whereas theatre artists have tapped into the business potential of theatre arts that is adult-oriented, children's theatre has virtually been disregarded. While the United States of America established its first national children's theatre in 1931 in Nashville, and currently flourishes with such theatres in every single State, Kenya still does not have a single theatre specifically designed and dedicated to children and young adults.

While London City alone boasts of more than five children's theatres, Kenya is a sorry state where drama for children is minimally exploited mostly at the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival (KSCDF) besides incorporation of the genre in a few high cost private schools that subscribe to Western educational systems. Unfortunately, for the average Kenyan child, the KSCDF "becomes to most of them the first encounter with drama" (Shikuku, E.T., 2008, v). It is worth noting that even in this festival that was inaugurated in 1959, children drama was first staged in 1980 (Kabui, 1997, 35). That children's drama was recognized as worth of any consideration twenty one years later, says volumes about the status of children's theatre even now. In terms of children's theatre groups in the country, *Shangilia Mtoto wa Afrika* is the only one deserving such a title, notwithstanding that most of the dramatic art it engages in is scripted by adults. Whilst children are the future, drama is one very crucial avenue for social transformation. We need to comprehend, exploit and embrace the socio-emotional benefits of children's drama in order to foster not only social, moral but also economic change. On the latter, it is a fact that trade in children's stuff: dressing, toys, literature, films and the like, is one of the most lucrative businesses the world over.

This notwithstanding, we have kept a blind eye to the fertile children's drama. Perhaps, we still hold on to the view that children are "miniature adults" (E. Alembi, 2003) and that art that serves adults may as well serve children. Little wonder then that even the Kenya Schools and Drama festival, albeit "a good avenue for children to exploit their theatrical talent" (Shikuku, 2008, 2), is still not "effective because the plays majorly address an adult audience in terms of issues and how they are presented" (Kabui, 1997, 75). Children's drama is an artistic genre in its own right with its distinctive character and utility in the society. What are the social emotional benefits of children's drama? "Drama, by its very nature is based on cooperation" (Peter Slade, 2008, 147). When a participatory rather than the customary dictatorial, teacher/director-take-it-all approach is taken, right from the scriptwriting, and during rehearsals and performance, children learn immensely about the virtues of giving and receiving.

When they participate in the creation of the dramatic scripts and when tutored to reason on their own dialogue and action rather than merely utter words and perform like mindless zombies, impersonation of other people, whether real or just existing in the pages of a script, accords significance to the situations enacted. In dwelling in the psyche of someone else and glancing at the world from this individual's eyes, drama enables the child to learn to accept and tolerate other people while empathizing with others. By helping us understand each other in this world where, led by narcissistic leaders, humans have fashioned, perpetuate and unabashedly continue to validate artificial compartments based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, creed, political affiliations, sexuality and others, drama will ultimately have played its rightful role by broadening our minds and instigating emotions of tolerance and empathy towards others. Subsequently, the enactment available in children's theatre helps children discover meanings from their own real life situations.

Children also learn how to solve or confront certain problems in society. Inevitably tied to the element of cooperation are the virtues of communication, obedience and self-control. Since drama is a collaborative affair, it demands that the participants – scriptwriters, actors, directors, choreographers, designers, stage-managers and producers - communicate with and understand each other. ‘Communication’, a word which means ‘to make one with’, is key to any form of development. Once a child can communicate well with other people, he/she will understand him/herself better (especially from the community’s perspective). As a result, then, the child will be able to relate and work well with other people since he /she understands them. In a planet that is becoming less individualistic and more communal in confronting global challenges, with many countries all over the earth seeking for partnerships and to forge unities with their neighbours (the *European Union* and *East African Community* being cases in point), drama is a splendid mode for butchering any form of egoism and unconstructive introversion in children to enable them cope and also make their own contribution in future. In the same respect, the child will acquire confidence about him/herself and his/her own abilities, leading a sense of self-worth. A nation full of persons with a low self esteem cannot prosper and yet the seeds of self-respect can only be implanted effectively in childhood. As a Swahili proverb affirms: “*Samaki mkunje angali mbichi*” (fold the fish while it is still fresh and raw), drama can help nations shape their children’s perspective of life.

Since play is an exterior expression of the unconscious, fostering children’s theatre will accord children a projective avenue for articulating their private worlds and distinctive personality processes. In this regard, apart from serving a cathartic role based on the children’s previous experiences, children drama “can increase their sensitivity to emotional experiences and better understand their own emotional reactions” (Slade, P, 45) . Aesthetically, drama for children should be child-focused. Whereas critics such as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (2004) have argued that all identities including childhood are created by adults in the light of their own perceptions of themselves, notable psychologists Jean Piaget (1950) and Erik Erikson (1950) proved the contrary. Their findings are yet to be challenged scientifically. Piaget clearly outlines four major stages of cognitive development while Erikson found out that human life faces eight major affective crises during their course of life. While Robert Sears (1951) discovered that all human functioning is the product of interactive effects of all the influences, both congenital and experiential, that have impinged on the individual, his findings still do not support Lesnik-Oberstein’s thesis which intimates that children are *tabula rasa* , empty pitchers on which adults inscribe or fill in whatever material they wish.

So what is a child-centred play? The play should be about the “child world”: either centred on childhood or addressing issues from a child’s point of view. It is unlikely that a play or any work of art for that matter that centers on wife-inheritance, or giving birth (Alembi 2003), drugs, alcohol, death, graphic violence and sex, would be of interest to a child, unless the child is already crude due to poor upbringing. If such subjects have to be tackled in a children’s play, then they must be dealt with sensitively and from a child’s angle of vision. As much as children will in real life sometimes be forced to deal with the demise of a relative, they must not be perpetually reminded and in a gory manner that life is after all very temporary. We may end up nurturing a whole generation of cynics. On no account should drugs and alcohol be glamorized in a child’s play. Such subjects can only be infused in a children’s play if it is evident that absorbing them leads to the characters downfall; thus pointing out the dangers of imbibing them. On violence, it would surely be depraved, indeed unforgivably immoral to ask a child to play the role of a serial killer in drama or film. It is worse when the serial killer becomes the central character in the children’s play or film:

...it matters that it is the protagonist who is violent. It is natural when viewing any kind of narrative entertainment to identify oneself with the protagonist. An adult may identify with a violent character while watching a program without wanting to *be* him, but for children this is often a difficult distinction. The problem is compounded when ...the protagonist is presented as heroic and glamorous. (Buchanan, M, 1999, 4)

Themes for children’s theatre must therefore be selected cautiously. Plekhanov (1953) emphasized that art has significance only when it illuminates or arouses or conveys actions, emotions and happenings that are of relevance and indeed importance to the society. Art is not only a product of the society; it is also a force in the society. The power that is children’s theatre controls can therefore be used appropriately and profitably at the same time to not only make money but most significantly, to affect and inculcate good attitudes, since art works on the emotions. Context is also a key issue in children’s drama. The play should be based on the familiar. A play based on snake-gods, cooking of felines, cannibalism and transsexual gender identity will definitely be as inappropriate and repellent to an African child as scatological (toilet) humour. Propelled by a new focus, presently there are palpable energized efforts to increase local content in our TV drama. Many locally produced TV programmes now pervade our screens: *Papa Shirandula, Makutano Junction, Changing Times, Tahidi High, Higher Learning, Nairobi Law, Mother-in-Law, Wash and Set, Siri, Beba*

Beba and others. The list is impressive. However, most of these programs target the adult, the young adult or the general viewer. Locally produced drama designed for children is negligible with only one programme, **No Zone**, which has components of drama, being aired by one of the local TV stations. No local animated drama or films exists presently. Our children are still treated to the foreign **Ben 10, Secret Saturdays, Scooby Doo, Tom and Jerry, Best Ed, Flap Jack, Chowder, Bat Man, Spider Man, Beast Machine, Sky Dancers, Angels Friend**, among many other foreign animations. The result is a child who is out of joint with his/her own environment. Child drama and Film is the area that artists need to tap into to not only shape the society accordingly but also in order to earn a living. It is obvious that there is a lacuna in this regard to the extent that our children are either fooling with Play station at cyber cafes or homes or accompanying their parents to pubs, most of which have designed a children's amusement corner to profit from children who have a limited choice in terms of entertainment. And if as Goodman (1964) avers that children "usually admire and want to be like their elders and hence soak up the ways of these elders, without much inclination to pick and choose", then we run the danger of nurturing a whole generation of drunkards.

Nashville Children's theatre, the oldest children's theatre in the United States of America, receives up to 800 visitors every day. The Children's Theatre company (CTC) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, serves between 275,000 and 350,000 families annually. Polka children's Theatre in London engages over a 100,000 children every year. Indeed, while children's theatres thrive in the developed countries and some developing countries in Africa such as South Africa and Egypt, while such theatres are taken seriously in terms of their role in social development, most African nations have not considered such theatres as important. It's like we have a hankering to forever play catch up.

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