

Pandering to the Pandemic: Perks, Problems and Prospects from the 2020 Eko Theatre Carnival Experience

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic was sprung upon the globe in 2020, and up till now the world still reels from its aftershocks. Without doubt, theatre is one of the worst hit sectors in the global economy. This is because the COVID-19 induced protocols and lockdown policies are hostile to the nature and practice of theatre. In Nigeria, theatre workers were ill-prepared for the effects of the onslaught of the dreaded virus on their livelihoods, and they struggle to adapt to their current stark realities. However, the Eko Theatre Carnival (ETC) 2020 braved the storm and presented itself in what Segun Adefila- the festival director, coins a 'Real_Tual' format. This coinage of the words 'real' and an abbreviated 'virtual', basically refers to a blend of the minimized live and maximized virtual performances. In this paper, I investigate what the previous editions of the Eko Theatre Carnival were like, what has changed, and plans for future editions as the festival adapts to the new world order. For this study, I employ the participant observation method to collate data, and I adopt Adefila's 'Real_tual' approach to interrogate the pros and cons of distributing theatre presentations through digital means. The paper explores the challenges and prospects of performing during the pandemic, and what the future of theatre in Nigeria looks like. This study finds that digital media skills, creative collaborations, and promoting virtual theatre presentations are features of the new normal in producing theatrical performances for global consumption.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Eko Theatre Carnival, Segun Adefila, Real_tual Approach.

Introduction

COVID-19 is a highly infectious and deadly respiratory disease caused by a new strain of the Coronavirus which emerged in the year 2019. In world history, several pandemics have besieged the globe, but COVID-19 is reputedly one of the worst. The world first heard of COVID-19 in December, 2019, when the virus broke out in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, in China. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global health emergency, and subsequently declared it as a global pandemic by March 11, 2019.

The advent of COVID-19 global pandemic brought with it diverse but dire consequences for all the sectors of the world economy. These consequences vary according to the economic and socio-cultural realities of the countries involved. Africa, being populated by developing countries, bears the brunt of the pandemic. Egbule (2020, p. 46) notes that the pandemic has wreaked much havoc on the future of Africa, in terms of “increased rate of unemployment, loss of income, hunger, and death”. On the African continent, the creative sector is one of the worst hit, as the COVID-19 protocols of minimal movement and social distancing have proved to be inimical to the norms and practice of live theatre and performance.

Currently, social gatherings are still limited, and as a result, theatre spaces in many African countries are yet to be in full operation. Due to its interactive nature, the theatre industry finds itself at the receiving end of the pandemic. Expectedly, the stringent policies and protocols which accompany the prevention and containment of COVID-19 greatly affect theatre and the livelihoods of theatre creators in Africa. However, it is observed that in spite of the constraints of the pandemic, some theatre companies have been able to brave the storm and create theatrical works for public consumption. One of such brave outings is the Eko Theatre Carnival 2020 (ETC 2020), which was floated in spite of the pandemic.

The ETC 2020 took place in what the festival director- Segun Adefila, tagged a *real_tual* format. *Real_tual* in this sense is a coinage of ‘real’ and an abbreviation of the word ‘virtual’. It simply refers to the process of combining real live performances with pre-recorded performances in a festival. It also involves the streaming the live performances of the festival through digital means. With its outing at the 2020 edition of their annual Eko Theatre Carnival (ETC), the Crown Troupe of Africa remains outstanding for putting up the first post-COVID-19-lockdown theatrical event in Nigeria. This study, therefore, puts the ETC 2020 under the microscope, and the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What was ETC like before the advent of COVID-19?
2. What was the ETC 2020 experience like in terms of challenges, gains, and potentials?
3. What does the future look like for ETC?

The study which generally seeks to identify the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 on theatre and theatre creators in Africa, provides a crucible to examine the emerging issues in theatre practice in Africa during and post-COVID. Using the ETC 2020 as premise, the study particularly investigates how new methodological demands of theatre have been challenged, redefined, or consolidated within and post-COVID world.

COVID-19 and Theatre in Nigeria: A Marriage of Inconvenience

It is widely acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic brought the globe to a screeching halt, and put an uncertain stop to the lives, livelihoods, and interests of people. In Africa, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Egypt on 14th February 2020. Subsequently, notable arts and cultural events across Africa were halted, and the jobs which many theatre creators and performers had lined up in the second quarter of 2020, in effect, disappeared.

The multiple and staggering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa cannot be overstated. In Nigeria for instance, all recreational centres like theatres, bars, night clubs and restaurants were shut down during the lockdown in 2020. This also compelled the postponement of several theatre productions, festivals, and carnivals. Resultantly, the economy was locked down, millions of Nigerians were displaced, and this led to a high unemployment rate.

Nigeria, with her approximately 200 million people, is the most populous country in Africa, and 70% of the Nigerian population are reportedly under 30 years (Reed and Mberu, 2014, p. 320). It is therefore not surprising that the theatre industry is also populated by youths. The pandemic robbed the Nigerian youths of their livelihoods, and many of the unemployed youths became a burden to the society, as some of them took to crime to survive. Since the COVID-19-induced lockdown, there has been a worrisome hike in kidnappings, armed robberies, cultism, and other social vices across the country. Beyond its economic effect, the pandemic has also taken a toll on the mental health of people.

In spite of the comparatively low figure of COVID-19 cases and fatalities in Africa compared to the other continents, there is a notable daily increase of affected persons. Thus, several African countries continue to go in and out of lockdown. Movement restriction in Africa where financial support from the government, power supply, good housing systems, and other basic amenities are not easily accessible, translates to even

bigger issues than the stark realities of the pandemic. Consequently, this greatly affects people's mental health. Some of the mental issues that have been reported due to the pandemic are "anxiety, depression, anger, confusion, insomnia, post-traumatic disorders, boredom, loneliness, and adjustment problems" (Lawal, 2021, p.1). These are issues which theatre could easily help alleviate, which is why Bakare (2020) argues that due to its therapeutic essence, theatre is and should be acknowledged as an essential service in a pandemic era.

Currently, the theatre industry in Africa is still greatly affected by the pandemic, as things are yet to fully go back to normal. Just recently, the National Council for Arts and Culture in Zimbabwe Ministry of Culture, in a viral press release on June 14th, 2021, announced an indefinite suspension on events and activities in the arts sector. This was done to curb the surge in new COVID-19 cases in the country. But, as the popular theatre saying goes "The show must go on", indeed the show is going on. Theatre arts practitioners have devised means to replace the physical theatrical activities, with online versions in order to adhere to the COVID-19 protocols, while still keeping the art alive and thriving. Segun Adefila stands out as one of such theatre makers.

Segun Adefila and his Crown Troupe of Africa

Segun Adefila is a renowned Nigerian multidisciplinary artist. He lives in Nigeria where he practices his art as a choreographer, dancer, actor, singer, director and performance artist. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Creative Arts from the University of Lagos, Nigeria. For almost three decades now, Adefila has been working extensively in the integrated arts of dance, drama, music and visual arts, and he has created several award-winning works. He has facilitated workshops for young people across the world, and his works which can be best described as experimental physical theatre, have been performed globally.

The Crown Troupe of Africa officially started as a theatre company on the 1st of June, 1996. It was founded by a group of young friends who shared a common belief in the viability of the performing arts. The founding members of the theatre company are: Sonny Eselekhomhen, Femi Nosa James, Adaeze Okpara, Bola Ige, Lois Ukaonu, Cynthia Chukwu, Adekunle Adegeye, and Segun Adefila. As the years rolled by, the founding members grew apart, and moved on to other ventures and careers, leaving only Segun Adefila as the last man standing in the troupe. The Crown Troupe of Africa; which is now being solely run by Segun Adefila, is popularly known for being a youth-focused group which deploys art as a viable tool for social engineering and rejuvenation. Today, most of the members of the troupe are conscripted from Bariga - an economically disadvantaged local community in Lagos, which happens to be the base of the group.

Bariga is infamous for its high rate of cult clashes, gang conflicts, and crime. Young people in communities such as Bariga are usually considered endangered and prone to crime due to poverty. Hence, the primary aim of the Crown Troupe is to keep talented youths from such deprived backgrounds off the streets and positively occupied so they can make a living, and to ensure that they do not engage in crime and other unwholesome activities. The company's main objective of youth empowerment is achieved through regular staging of theatrical productions, organising and participating in art workshops, seminars, artistic consultancy, trainings, art exhibitions, workshops, research and documentation, applied theatre outreaches, and cultural exchange programmes with local and foreign art companies.

As a theatre company, the philosophy of the Crown Troupe is to create socially relevant works to provoke thoughts and conversations towards positive actions in the society. Since its inception, the company has dedicated itself to creating works that address and seek to correct social ills and vices. Over the years, the troupe has evolved to become a training platform where vibrant young men and women pool their artistic resources together, and channel their passion and youthful energy towards community intervention projects in order to conscientize the society for positive change. They have collectively created and produced several plays, and also recorded a ten-track album titled *Aruwo Oja*. It is worthy of note that with its outing at the Eko Theatre Carnival 2020, the Crown Troupe is the first theatre company to curate a post-COVID-19-lockdown theatre festival in Nigeria.

Eko Theatre Carnival: A Historical Review

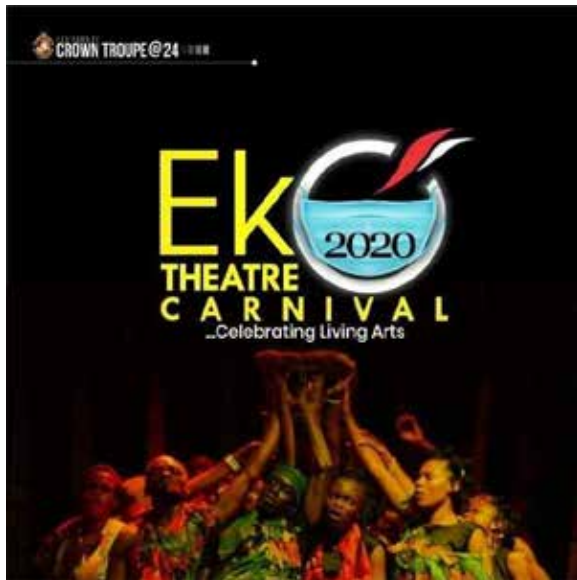
One of the major projects of the Crown Troupe of Africa is the Eko Theatre Carnival. The festival evolved from the Bariga Open Air Theatre (BOAT), a performance-based carnival organised by the Crown Troupe for the benefit of talented youths of the Bariga community in Lagos. By 2016, Bariga Open Air Theatre (BOAT) metamorphosed into Eko Theatre Carnival (ETC). The ETC was conceived as a coming-of-age festival for the Crown Troupe, and was inaugurated to commemorate the troupe's 20th anniversary in 2016. Since then, the festival holds annually in Lagos State. As directed by Segun Adefila, the week-long fiesta of diverse artistic activities holds in collaboration with other theatre and film companies across different venues of Lagos.

Below is a breakdown of the outlook of the various editions of the Eko Theatre Carnival by the Crown Troupe of Africa before 2020:

Date/Year	Events	Collaborators	Venues
1 st - 7 th August, 2016	Carnival Procession, Lectures, Seminars, Workshops, Theatre, Film screening, Concerts, Art exhibition, Boxing bout, and Poetry jam	One Six Productions, Masque Troupe, Renegade Theatre, Kininso Koncepts, Oxzygen Koncepts, Footprints of David, Ilumo Cutural Group, Jinga Concepts, and Ore Apparel	Freedom Park, Oba of Bariga's Palace
31 st July - 6 th August, 2017	Lectures, Sports, Workshop, Theatre, Art exhibitions, Film screening, and Concerts	Mainframe Productions, Kininso Koncepts, Always Boxing Club, Troopers Arts, Oxzygen Koncepts, Renegade Theatre, Pablo Football Club, OneSix Productions, and Theatrecentric	Freedom Park
30 th July - 5 th August, 2018	Theatre, Musical Concert, Visit to Art Galleries, Lectures, and Drum invocations	MTN Nigeria Foundation, African Isreali Stage Group, One-Six productions, Zuri 24 Media Production	Freedom Park, Nike Art Gallery, Ameckor's Dream Orchard, National Arts Theatre
29 st July - 4 th August, 2019	Theatre, Poetry, Film screening, Concerts, Art exhibition, and Workshops	MTN Foundation, Gifted Steppers, Art Castle Academy, Whitestones Culture Ambassadors, Just Theatre, Sights and Sounds de l'Afrique, Kings and Queens Art Academy, Illuminate Theatre, Park Theatre, Maniacs Theatre, Terra Kulture, Inside Art Productions, National Theatre Nigeria, Shimmers Productions, Ela Osupa	Freedom Park, Shodex Green Theatre, Creative Arts Theatre Hall of the University of Lagos, Tejuoso Market Complex in Yaba, One Draw Gallery in Ikoyi, Open Air show at Oworo, Tejuoso Market Complex at Yaba, Open Air Show at Obalende bus-stop, Ojo street junction, Amphitheatre

		Productions, Ape Ennovate Dance House, Creative Arts Students Association, Don Dudu Productions, ASSITEJ Nigeria, Eti-Osa Youth Development Initiative, Bariga Artistes Forum,	under the bridge, Falomo
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ETC 2020: Performing a Real_Tual in the Face of a Pandemic



The festival logo of the Eko Theatre Carnival, 2020

Source: Segun Adefila

As COVID-19 ravaged the world, Africa, and indeed Nigeria, one of the notable theatrical events which was successfully achieved during the pandemic is the Eko Theatre Carnival, 2020. The 2020 edition of the annual festival held from 3rd – 6th August, 2020. However, the 2020 edition took a drastic departure from the festival’s usual modus operandi. ETC used to be an all-physical festival held in several venues across Lagos State. However, for the 2020 edition, the festival took a ‘Real_Tual’ outlook, as physical performances and live audience participation were drastically minimized, while a digital presence of the festival was maximized.

The 'Real_Tual' approach for curating the festival takes root in the festival mission statement which was shared by Segun Adefila- the festival director, as a broadcast message across social media platforms. Adefila (2020) states that:

When the rhythm changes, so does the dance. Therefore, the 2020 edition of the annual Eko Theatre Carnival shall be a mixture of a blend of the minimized 'real' and maximized 'virtual'. We shall make and call this edition a 'Real_Tual' - A blend of the 'real' and 'virtual' ... COVID-19 is a ravaging rain that falls on whom it finds. What then shall we do? Fold our arms in resignation or roll up our sleeves in readiness to keep the flame of living alive? We have chosen the latter. The times are hard we know...The strident voice of art faces the danger of being silenced. Artists are endangered and the global fear is palpable, but dance we must. The 2020 edition of ETC shall reach you wherever you are, thanks to technology. Please, stand with us as we face this collective challenge headlong.

So it happened that with the above powerful mission statement by the festival director, ETC 2020 was floated in spite of the pandemic. This segment of the paper will attempt a breakdown of the form, content, and structure of the ETC 2020 events.

ETC Day 1- Monday, 3rd August, 2020

The 2020 edition of the Eko Theatre Carnival started with a festival discourse. A keynote address was delivered by Professor Rasaki Ojo Bakare, a seasoned theatre scholar and practitioner, and the current Commissioner for Arts, Culture, and Tourism in Ekiti State, Nigeria. He spoke on the topic 'Nigerian Theatre in the Age of Pandemic'. The session which took place on Zoom was moderated by Dr. Funmi Adewole, a writer, dramaturge and scholar at De Montfort University, Leicester, England. Afterwards, the Footprints Arts Ambassadors treated the spectators to an energetic performance of the South African-inspired *Gumboot Dance* on the streets of Awofodu in Bariga, much to the delight of the residents. After this, the show moved indoors, into the Crown Art Factory, where the Dream Dance Company performed a dance piece titled *Bloom Not Doom*. The last presentation for Day One took place inside the compound of the Crown Arts Centre, where six dynamic actors of the Just Theatre House effected an interpretation of Joseph Edgar's *Our Duke Has Gone Mad again*.

ETC Day 2- Tuesday, 4th August, 2020.

On the second day of the festival, Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome a.k.a Ali Baba, Grand Comedian of the Federal Republic (GCFR) mounted the Zoom platform to deliver a lecture on the nexus between the arts and entrepreneurship. Ali Baba, the pioneer of modern Stand-up comedy in Nigeria, spoke extensively on his philosophy of collective

growth in the arts. He stresses that the business of comedy is big enough to accommodate all who are determined to make a successful career out of it. He also advocated that a high standard of professionalism be maintained. The talk session was moderated by Princess Damilola Adekoya, another Stand-up comedian.

The first performance after the talk was *All of Me*, created and performed by Olayinka Samuel of Orida Entertainment. *All of Me* is a chess game-inspired dance piece which explores power politics between powerful people and nations. After that came the live performance of Tosin Jobi Tume's comedy - *Corona Palava*, as interpreted by the dynamic children's group - Gifted Steppers, and directed by Oma Harrison. As the Gifted Steppers kids performed the play live on stage, a pre-recorded version of the same play which was performed by the Crown Troupe, was being streamed on Facebook and YouTube. The events of the day came to a befitting end with an amazing 'trado-contemporary' dance piece titled *H20* choreographed and performed by Tunde Olumoye of the Roots Dance Company.

ETC Day 3- Wednesday, 5th August, 2020.

The third day of the festival commenced with a poetry jam by the Bariga connection of Poets in Nigeria (PIN). The event which was anchored by budding poets - Agnes Olayemi Johnson and Abimbola Otu, was a voyage of enthralling renditions from various enthusiastic young poets. The poetry session was wrapped up by a powerful spoken word performance by Sage Hanson. After the poetry jam, it was the turn of the Uche Obi Odogwu-led Starlight Home of Entertainment, in their presentation of a medley of percussions, chants, songs and dance titled *The Good Old Days*. The group treated both the real and virtual audience of the festival to this musical menu before passing the performance baton to the host company, Crown Troupe of Africa.

The Crown Troupe subsequently presented a musical theatre skit titled *Progressive Express* through which they challenged the audience to take responsibility for our collective progress as a people. After the Crown Troupe's performance came, the children's group, Glorious Art Productions, who presented Rasheed Ridwan's devised dance theatre piece titled *Omolewa*. The professionalism of the performers belied their innocence and age, as they kept the members of audience engaged all through. The last performance for day was *Window Talk*, written by Segun Adefila and performed by the duo of Okoro Kingsley Okkorria (Art Castle Academy) and Agnes Olayemi Johnson (Ola Black Arts). *Window Talk* is a near absurdist versified play that questions various answers in existence and life.

ETC Day 4 – Thursday, 6th August, 2020.

Apekanuko - a dance piece created and performed by members of the Pathfinders Art, kick-started the fourth day of the festival. It was followed by a performance of *Monkey Post*, a dance-drama written by Segun Adefila, directed by Adewale Ayodeji and performed by the kids of the Kings and Queens Art Academy. *Monkey Post* tells the story of the current social ills and vices in Nigeria, using the football game as a parody. Then there was a performance of *Crossroads* by the Illuminate Theatre in conjunction with the Don Dudu Creations. Afterwards, the Ijolomo Dance Company thrilled the audience to a spectacular dance piece titled *That's Another Story*. The day wrapped up with *Our Area*, a dance-drama piece created and performed by the members of the Crown Troupe.

ETC DAY 5- Friday, 7th August, 2020.

The fifth day of the festival began with a drums ensemble performance by Pappy Drums. Then there was *'Difu*, a play written by Chinyere Lilian Okam, directed by Ifeanyi Eziukwu, and performed by the Just Theatre House. *'Difu* enacts how human desires and action transcends their immediate understanding and needs within the existential context. Then came *Iba*, a drums and dance fusion devised by Peter Abayomi, directed by Seun Awobajo, and performed by Footprints of David. The day ended with the performance of *Aluta*, an opera composed by Segun Adefila and performed by the Crown Troupe of Africa.

ETC DAY 6- Saturday, 8th August, 2020

The sixth day of the festival opened with *Where is the Love*, a dance-drama, written and directed by Kingsley Okkorria, and performed by the kids of the Art Castle Academy. Then it was the turn of *One Thousand Alujo Plus*, a Sakara musical performance, led by Noheem Tajudeen, and performed by Ebony Sakara. Last but not the least was *Golden Fleas*, a play written and directed by Segun Adefila, and performed by the Crown Troupe of Africa. *Golden Fleas* is a social commentary on the state of Nigeria, and the effect on Nigerian youths.

ETC Day 7- Sunday, 9th August, 2020

The grand finale of the ETC 2020 started with *Opakopa*, a performance art presentation by Yusuf Durodola. This was followed by *Balance for Better*, a multidisciplinary art presentation by the members of the Crown Troupe of Africa. The festival ended with a Musical Concert as a closing glee. There were vibrant performances from popular Nigerian musical artists like Sound Sultan, Wunmi Olaiya, Edaoto and Yemi Sodimu.

Theatre in the Era of a New Normal: Lessons from ETC 2020

The 2020 edition of the Eko Theatre Carnival was achieved in compliance with the COVID-19 protocols. The venues for the festival were reduced to one; the Crown Art Factory premises, while most of the festival activities were conducted online. To minimize the crowd at the performance venue, ticket sales were conducted online, and there a discount for early registrations. To avoid the risk of clustering infection, COVID-19 protocol checkpoints were set up at the entry points of the performance space, and the temperature of entrants were measured. The festival organisers made provision of water, soap and bowls for all the performers and members of audience to properly wash their hands before gaining entry into the performance arena. Free customized Crown Troupe face masks were also given to the members of audience. This served doubly as COVID-19 prevention and publicity materials for the festival. Hand sanitizers were also administered on the members of audience at regular intervals during the performances.

In observance of social distancing, the festival organisers insisted on admitting only twenty members of audience per each live show. They made good use of the social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to showcase all the festival events. The festival schedule was widely broadcast on the Crown Troupe website and social media handles several weeks before the festival. During the festival proper, all the performances and other festival activities were streamed live on the Crown Troupe Facebook page, YouTube channel and Zoom meeting room, and their access links were widely broadcast on the troupe's website and all social media platforms. Thus, members of audience who could not be in the real theatre space were encouraged to watch the performances via the various virtual spaces. Another positive implication of this approach is that it ensures that creative works that were produced for the festival are properly documented and available for public consumption even long after the festival. This has a tremendous effect, as the heavy online presence of the festival activities succeeded in putting the festival on the global map.

Challenges:

Lack of access to venues: The original design of the ETC is such that the festival takes place at several venues across Lagos State. It is so designed so that people can experience the festival in diverse ways and spaces, regardless of their status or class. However, all the theatre spaces which hitherto hosted the festival were inaccessible as they were shut down in compliance with the COVID-19 protocols. Consequently, all the festival activities were restricted to one venue – the Crown Art Factory, which was the only space the festival organisers had authority over, and where they could effectively adhere to the limited number of audience as permitted by the government.

Funding: According to the festival director, funding was a major problem for ETC 2020. He noted that even though the festival was initiated in 2016, it was largely self-funded until 2018, except for a few handouts by well-wishers. It was therefore a welcome idea when the MTN Foundation approached the Crown Troupe to support the festival in 2018, and the support continued till 2019. However, with the advent of COVID-19 in 2020, things changed drastically, and the MTN Foundation withdrew from the ETC sponsorship, claiming a dwindled fortune as a result of COVID-19. The other sponsors that were approached by the Crown Troupe also had the same story to tell. As at now, funding is still a huge challenge, as the MTN Foundation and other potential sponsors are still recovering from the 2020 economic meltdown.

Limited number of audience: The government banned gatherings of large number of people, and limited the number of public gathering to only twenty people. This meant that the gate takings dropped drastically, thereby, reducing the income of the performers. However, this did not dampen the spirit of the performers, as they had been in a hiatus for long, and were just happy to be back at work. Their passion; not the thoughts of financial rewards, fuelled their performance at the festival.

Network connection: Weather largely determines network functionality in Nigeria. During ETC 2020, there were unavoidable technical glitches because the festival took place during the rainy season. As a result, there were disruptions with some of the activities which were being streamed online. Also, running the festival on a virtual space was a new experience entirely, so the facilitators had a hard time getting a hang of things technically. However, the facilitators of the festival have now gone for more training to update their skills in that area, and should expectedly perform better in subsequent editions of the festival.

Crowd control: The festival organisers had advertised that only twenty tickets will be available for each show, and subsequently advised that people should buy tickets online to avoid last-minute rush. However, it was difficult to convince the crowd of theatre lovers who thronged the festival venue that the festival had to abide by the COVID-19 protocols, and therefore would be unable to admit more than twenty people for each event. The Bariga community, and indeed the entire Lagos, had been starved of theatrical activities for too long, and so they all wanted a taste of the festival. Thus, to control the crowd proved to be a herculean task. A case in point is an incident which happened on the fourth day of the festival; a knife-brandishing drunk -who claimed to be a policeman, gate-crashed into the performance arena and in the process wounded one of the performers. People rallied round to get the injured artist treated, as he was billed to go on a stage a few minutes after the incident. Social media went agog, protesting the injustice of the disruption, and unwittingly generating more publicity for the festival.

Benefits:

Conducive performance space: As earlier stated, the pandemic necessitated the shutting down of all public theatre and performance spaces across the nation. Thankfully, the Crown Troupe of Africa runs a repertory theatre, and they have their own space. The Crown Art Factory is located at Number 32, Awofodu street, off Pedro road in Bariga, Lagos. The compound houses two large buildings with diverse and versatile spaces within the premises. All of these spaces were explored as performance venues for the various activities of the festival. To lend a community feel to the festival, some performances were also staged on the street where the Crown Art Factory is located. Also, a large percentage of the troupe artistes are resident at the Crown Art Factory, this helped to mitigate the problem of restricted movement during the lockdown.

Rehearsal time elasticity: The several months of lockdown meant that the artistes had lots of free time on their hands to create and explore. The abundance of time was deployed positively towards ETC 2020, even though it was not sure at the time if the festival was actually going to hold or not. However, the resident artistes created and rehearsed several artistic pieces ahead of the festival, with little or no distractions. This led to a bountiful harvest of artistic offerings at the festival.

Wider reach through virtual channels: As already established, the organisers of ETC 2020 admitted a limited number of people to see the live shows. However, they were able to create the opportunity for those restricted either by numbers or distance to join the festival virtually. Ironically, for the first time since the festival started in 2016, it was able to generate more awareness and reach a wider audience. The Crown Troupe Facebook page and YouTube Channel came alive, while their Zoom meeting rooms were active throughout the duration of the festival. The various artistic events of the festival were easily accessed from across the globe. Resultantly, the artistic outputs at ETC are no longer time bound, as people who missed the festival can now access the performances online.

Cost effectiveness: According to the festival director, in spite of his initial fears, the 2020 edition of ETC was much cheaper to facilitate than the previous editions. Restriction of movement meant that fewer people had to travel down for the festival, hence, lesser logistics issues to handle. The fluid nature of the performances also ensured that they were produced with minimal needs for set, props, costumes, and other production logistics.

Collaborations: Although, ETC has always been a collaborative effort of the Crown Troupe of Africa and the prominent members of the art community in Lagos state, the 2020 edition of the festival was special, as it thrived greatly on the overwhelming support of well-meaning people and organisations. The festival benefitted from the moral

and material support from several art bodies and institutions. Some of them are: National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), Committee for Relevant Art (CORA), Eti Osa Youth Development (EOYD), Guild of Nigerian Dancers and Practitioners (GONDP), International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People = Association Internationale du Theatre de l'Enfance et la Jeunesse (ASSITEJ), Guild of Theatre Directors (GTD), and Society of Performing Arts in Nigeria (SPAN). The festival director alludes greatly to the benefits of collaboration in his vote of thanks after the festival:

Brethren, Eko Theatre Carnival 2020 has come to a successful wrap. This edition of ETC was special in so many ways, particularly the manner in which people took ownership of it. The people took it over. The people owned it. The people produced it. You, the people, made it happen, and I have no words to adequately express my gratitude. The following are the access links to the Crown Troupe website and social media handles:

<https://g.page/crown-troupe-of-africa?gt>

<https://ekotheatrecarnival.crowntroupe.org>

https://youtube.com/channel/UCX8D-36KzpORdXjdrkTB_aQ

<https://www.facebook.com/crowntroupeofafrica/>

Crown Troupe (@troupe_crown) on Twitter

@crowntroupeofafrica on Instagram

Conclusion

As far as the Nigerian creative industry is concerned, the Eko Theatre Carnival 2020 was a daring response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While other theatre creators were stranded and undecided on how to proceed after the COVID-19-induced lockdown in Nigeria, the ETC organisers jumped in with both feet. They re-branded theatre and made it available when it was needed the most. As promised by the festival director, the 2020 edition of ETC reached everyone through its strong virtual presence. The week-long festival which recorded a huge success in virtual and physical attendance, featured twenty-seven performances/artistic events. The works of brilliant playwrights, directors, choreographers, actors, musicians, dancers and visual artists which were presented during the festival include: four dance performances, five dance-dramas, two musicals, one concert, a sound performance art, a poetry/spoken word jam, and eight straight plays.

With the indelible lessons learnt from the ETC 2020 experience, there is a paradigm shift, and going forward, it is certain that the festival would change in outlook. The festival organisers are now better equipped technically to perform better in subsequent

editions of the festival. In an interview with the festival director, he revealed that “as the COVID-19 situation improves, we’ll be increasing physical participation. 2020 edition of the festival felt like diving into an ocean of newness of technology, but this year we have learnt a bit of the swimming and can put it to practice. I’m sure we can swim better.”

As the world continues to battle with the challenges of COVID, there is a need to harp on the invaluable quality of art, as it helps people to cope during dark times. The pandemic has been around for over a year now, and with the advent of a new and wilder strain of the disease, it is obvious that the deadly virus will continue to be with the world for some time. Undoubtedly, this calls for proactive measures towards securing the livelihoods of theatre creators in Africa. It therefore behoves on theatre practitioners in Africa to embrace new ways of presenting theatre, so as to survive the COVID-19 onslaught.

As theatre struggles to regain traction, there is an urgent need for critical thinking on how theatre can survive and thrive even with the presence of COVID-19. As rightly observed by Onah et al (2020, p.12.), in the effort to re-strategize and re-adapt to life with and after COVID-19, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is pertinent. There is no gainsaying the fact that ICT is a most viable tool for theatre, to cope with the new normal which COVID-19 has sprung upon the world. ETC 2020 has shown us that theatre can survive any pandemic, we only have to adjust to our new reality.

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