

AUDIENCE MOBILIZATION AND HOUSE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE PRODUCTION OF SUNNIE ODODO'S *HARD CHOICE*

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Abstract

The paper examined the various strategies that were deployed to mobilize the various levels of audience for the production of Hard Choice in UNIUYO Season of Productions 2024. The research was based on Ex post facto design, while the theoretical framework was based on Chris Nwamuo's Theatre Monitor Theory which states that management should be people's comfort oriented. The research is qualitative nature. It was discovered that the audience is an important part of the theatre and that the success in audience mobilization can enhance the zeal to create and also inspire to the aliveness of the institution, encouraging effective "theatrepreneurship". The paper further points out that mobilization can be effective through the specification of duty to stage management team, intensive publicity, segmentation of audience, ticketing formula, hospitality and security consciousness. The paper concludes that the success in audience relationship can redefine the thrust of the theatre. When an idea is conceived, it should be reviewed and executed. Innovation that reshapes the world springs from strategic ideas executed in confidence. Theatre Arts can encourage a wider scope of personal initiatives towards entrepreneurship in the society through audience-stage rapport.

Keywords: Audience-mobilization, Creativity, Entrepreneurship, Management, Production,

Introduction

The place of the audience in the encouragement and promotion of creativity in theatre calls for the need to prioritize the strategies for audience mobilization. It is in the actions and reactions taken by theatre producers that the presence of desired members of audience can be guaranteed. This implies that a well mobilized audience can help harness and strengthen the symbiosis of town-and-gown relationship which promotes the transaction of values within the theatre communities, towards sustainable creativity and cultural development.

Creativity, to this effect, is subject to appraisal, indicating that there should be someone to nod or frown at the displays of a performer. To make the audience behave, sit, stand or gather in a specific manner, they must be planned for because they too are a unique set that stimulates the desire to create. To Effiong Johnson, "the audience factor is the most crucial factor of the theatrical experience. It does not seem to have a replacement. Therefore, to a great extent, the audience factor is indispensable to theatrical productions" (191). That means, the presence of the audience is what crowns the total experience of theatrical performances. Considering the need for whom to perform for, as stated above and the threats posed by other home-based means of relaxation; audience mobilization demands purpose driven strategies to maintain the living theatre concept which usually expects the audience to gather at a specific place other than their 'comfortable' homes or residences.

In Chris Nwamuo's view, "mobilizing the audience deserves a scientific and skilful design. It is a set of organized and focused endeavours executed with precision in order to win a large audience to a specific event" (18). Creative persons must be available to engage the laid down plans dutifully to attain synergy because "what actually surfaces as a setback for theatre administrators especially in higher institution currently is the attainment of a full house (Mohammed-Kabir and Akowe 103); in educational theatre productions for instance, it is commonplace to have few audience members from the town come to attend the production, and in other times students are relied on, to fill the auditorium.

As Jerzy Grotowski puts, “in terms of formal technique... it is difficult to say what element in our production yields results to... we vacillate between practice-born impulses and the application of a priori principles” (18). This is an indication that certain techniques for certain activity in theatre are improvised from experience (a priori) and innate impulse towards the task.

This paper discusses the various strategies that were used to mobilize and cater for the audience for the stage performance of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*, directed by Sunday Umanah for UNIUYO Season of Productions 2024.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is the Theatre Monitor Theory. The theory was propounded and developed by Chris Nwamuo and was brought to full glare in the work of Ejikeme Ugiri and Mohammed-Kabir Jibril. The focus of the theory is on the use of homogenous but trusted select-few in the administration of art. These few are expected to envision the content, the space and the audience welfare and scheme to achieve the ultimate objective. According to Ugiri and Jibril:

By this model, the expertise committee is aimed at sustaining audience interest so they can be retained. The committee works as a team, brainstorm and device the means of bringing this homogenous audience together through the careful study and monitor of the aims and objectives of the arts events and programmes (124).

Another tenet of this theory is that the target audience is streamlined to manageable segments and accorded their due treatment. Those deserving VIP treatments are so treated and the regular audience members are given the treatment they deserve. These concepts of Theatre Monitor Theory were engaged by the Media crew in charge of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*.

The Production of Hard Choice

The yearly schedule for putting up performances in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies in the University of Uyo, is tagged “UNIUYO Season of Productions”. It is a Departmental programme that occurs in the first semester of an academic session. Both lecturers and students freely select plays to direct and produce on stage; some produce full length plays/films while others put up dance performances. There are usually an agreed number of days for the entire productions to be put on stage for the audience members and the team of examiners. UNIUYO Season of Productions 2024 with the theme: 'Ingenuity', held between 4th and 9th of March 2024.

Hard Choice was one of the productions in the 2024 Season of Productions that left an indelible footprint in the sand of time. The play is one of Sunnie Ododo's plays that drive mental engineering for a positive mind shift. The play makes an expose on the various dimensions of human greed, betrayal, inordinate ambition and deceptions. *Hard Choice* is a tragedy of reality! Its production for UNIUYO Season of Productions 2024, as directed by Sunday Umanah, encapsulates total African theatre aesthetics. The production was held on Friday, 8th March, 2024; at the Dance Studio of the University and featured year three students of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo. One of the unique aspects of the production was its production's audience mobilization strategies that aided the management.

Audience Mobilization Strategy

Audience mobilization entails the procedures of engineering the mindset of prospective audiences. The engineering concept comprises the application of strategic techniques, the use of technical skills and convincing tools, to secure the patronage of audience members. In the view of Innocent Ohiri, audience mobilization “focuses more... on propelling (one) into action of buying of the commodities promoted” (30). On this position, the theatre is a producer; production is the content for sale; while the audience is the consumer. To mobilise, then, is to incite the audience into patronizing what the theatre is promoting,

with assurances of satisfaction, safety and convenience. As Stephen Umoh observes, the theatre is a world of signs; it is only at convenience the audience can decode the various sign (269), while Anietie Udofia and Aniekan Akpan generalize that space and comfort can induce spirituality in the audience (39).

Audience mobilization is the act of attracting attention of the audience in diverse ways to hearken and honour the call to participate in the theatre experience. According to Muyiwa Awodiya, to mobilize the audience is choosing one of the “dozens of ways to promote an arts organization's service: word-of-mouth, referrals, advertisement, personal contact, presentations of community groups, flyers, and of course, brochures (to attract the audience)” (216). This agrees with the views of Sam Etuk and Inih Udoh that mobilization may involve calling, informing, arranging for the safety of the audience and establishing a good relationship that can induce them to come when they are so needed (524-525). Audience mobilization bends more to the activities carried out by the management team of the theatre to draw audience attention to the activities of the stage.

To mobilize the audience, the knowledge of the audience's type should be taken into consideration. In Uwemedimo Atakpo's view, the place of the audience is so significant that levels are accorded. The major substance is the rapport created by the performers to sustain the interest of the audience (287), while Umoh intones the treatment of the audience to feel at home through indigenous ambience and dispositions (204). To this effect, audience mobilisation “is synonymous with ensuring customer (audience) well-being. This is achieved in terms of offering the right goods (performance) and service (care) at the right prices and places” (Okpara and Njoku 531). The role of audience members as patrons demands that their mobilization to the theatre be taken rather seriously.

Therefore, Sunday Umanah acknowledges that audience mobilisation is used interchangeably with audience engineering. The requisite strategies for audience mobilisation may include reconstituting managerial group into functional sub-groups and setting of committees over each managerial plunge for audience invitation; intensive publicity, mouth-to-mouth discussion and invitation, ticket branding, hospitality and security of the audience (272-273). The job of audience mobilization can be simplified with the setting up of a committee or committees with the sole responsibility to attract audience members to the theatre. However, the following strategies were deployed to aid the production of *Hard Choice*. Each of the strategies is elaborated as used, and some are represented with pictorial evidences.

Social Media: This sub-committee was constituted shortly before the auditions were held and the intention was to avail members the opportunity to curate the activities of the auditions' exercise as pre-production contents on social media. After the auditions and casting sessions, the pictures of successful actors who were cast for major roles, were published online with their resumes.



Plate 1: Clip for publicity (Umanah)

Uploading the pictorial online stirred the curiosity of prospective audience members. So, from the moments of auditions, the public is given the opportunity to make up their mind in favour of watching the productions.



Plate 2: Clip of Publicity (Umanah)

During the rehearsals, the social media crew used both still and video cameras to capture interesting actions, which they edited and gave to the entire cast and crew members to share on their various social media handles: Facebook, whatsapp, Instagram and tik tok. In this case, as the rehearsals were ongoing and the clips being shared; the 'town and gown communities' were already aware of the upcoming production. These processes went on for the twelve (12) sessions of rehearsals (two hours per session), for both major characters and the entire cast.



Plate 3: Snapshot from WhatsApp (Umanah)

Print Media: This Committee focused on generating momentum and creating awareness for the production in focus (*Hard Choice*). Different models of flex banners were designed by this Committee and hung in different strategic points around the University of Uyo Campuses: In addition to the flex and banners, the crew also produced posters and placed them at major notice boards on campus.



Plate 4 Colour Poster for Marketing

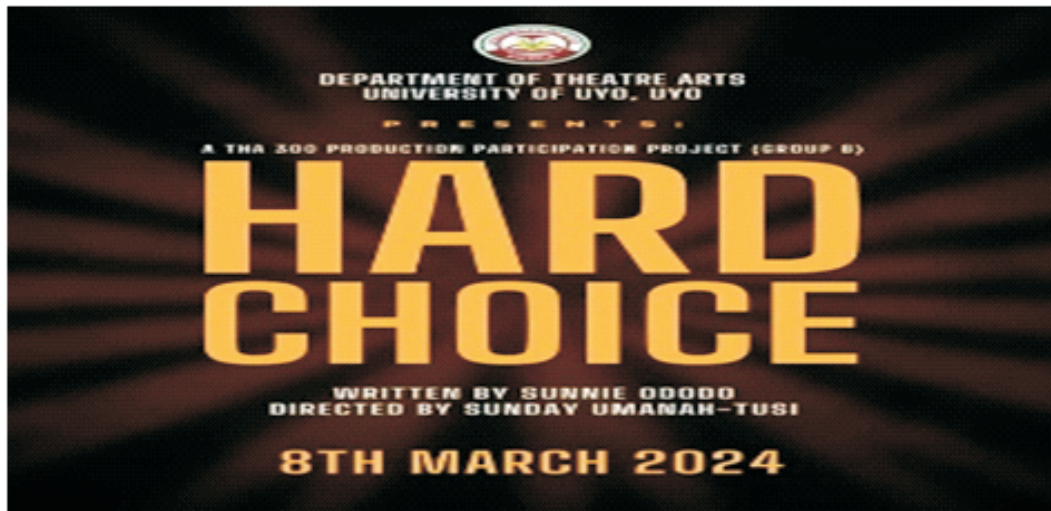


Plate 5: Colour Psychology for Marketing (Umanah)

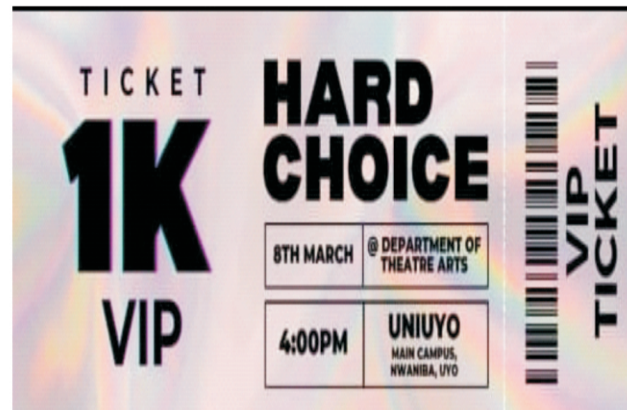


Plate 6: Poster at Main Campus

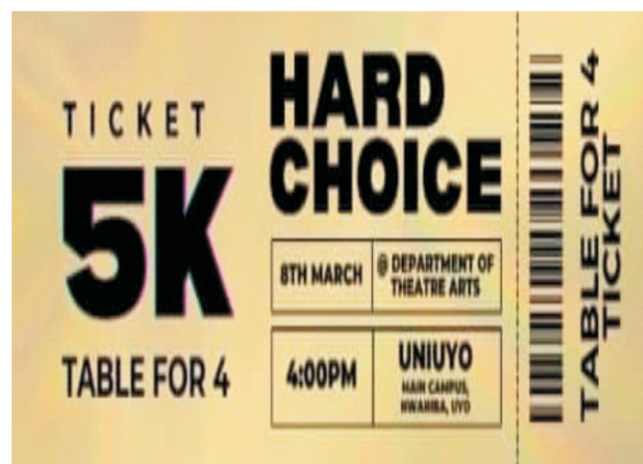
Electronic Media: Members of this sub-committee were saddled with the responsibility of using electronic media to reach out to prospective audience members outside the University Community. They developed audio jingles to air on some Radio Stations, secured Radio interviews sessions where the Publicity Managers had opportunity to address the public and also extended invitation to them. The crew sent invitation to Media Organizations in the State for Media partnership. Most people, who watched the production of *Hard Choice* on the 8th of March 2024, came from the town.

Advanced Ticketing Mobilization Strategy: To ensure a wider reach of audiences for the production the basic production details like the production title, name of Playwright, Name of the Director, date, time, venue and reservation fee were dully stamped on the ticket. By so doing, the ticket became an effective means of enlightenment and a reminder notice. Another very interesting part concerning advance ticketing is that, those who bought the ticket(s), became so committed to attend the production, since payment had already been made. They do everything possible to make the production a part of their programmed engagement and because of the relationship that they have with the person who sold the ticket to them, they view their attendance as an obligation that has to be discharged dutifully.

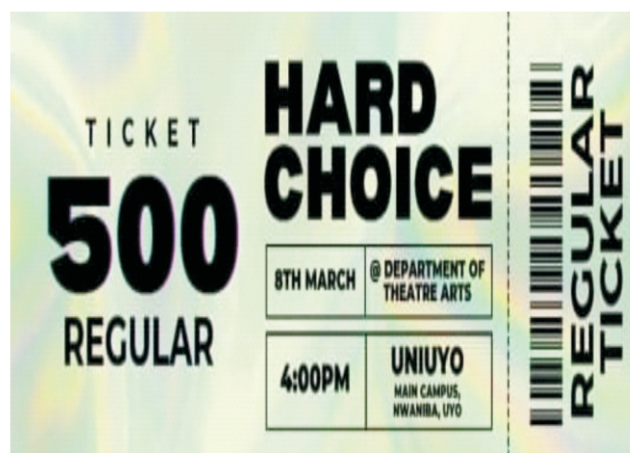
However, tickets churned out, were classified according to the designation of the auditorium: tickets for regular members of the audience at a particular fee, tickets for very important personalities (VIPs) at a different fee and tickets for 'very very' important personalities (VVIPs) had a fee tag higher than the others. This classification of the tickets, made it easy for the House Managers to direct the respective members of the audience, to their designated sitting area and accord them the preferential welfare package. In addition to the tickets meant for sale, the Production Team also introduced a complimentary ticket which was given to Lecturers in the Department and their invitees (in some cases), to access the show free of charge. Expectedly, those with complimentary tickets were treated specially, as some of them were not only audience members but also examiners.



Plates 7: 1000 Naira Ticket



Plates 8: 5000 Naira Ticket



Plates 9: 500 Naira Ticket

Categories of Tickets for *Hard Choice* (Umanah)

House Management Strategies: There was a set of normal theatre management strategies that was used to project and protect the space, audience comfort and box office activities during the production of *Hard Choice*. Prominent among these strategies are discussed below under subheadings.

Choice of Venue: The success of any theatrical performance, depends primarily on the choice of venue made. A good event planner must take so many things into consideration before deciding on what venue to use for his or her performance. Such factors to be considered include but not limited to: proximity of the proposed venue to targeted audience members, will the audience members be willing to attend the production at the chosen venue? Another factor to be so considered is the security of the venue, is the area known for violence? Also, a manager should be able to take decision of the choice of venue with the interest of his audience members at heart. “In choosing your venue, you need to consider potential hazards (and) accessibility” (Awodiya 73). In choosing the venue for the production of *Hard Choice*, the director chose a five-hundred seater Dance Studio in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo.

Branding and Classification of Audience Members: The production team arranged the tables and chairs in such a manner that it was easier to recognize the various classes of the audience expected in the show. The organizers brought in some labels and logos of sponsors as well as partners. The various production logos created were to serve as identifying tools for the audience. Event branding needs to be taken serious as the audience members are easily attracted and or otherwise by the impressions your brands push out.

On the other hand, the tickets were used effectively to classify the various audiences. The different sections were admitted by the class of ticket that the audience member bought. There were sections for regular audience members, a section for very important people (VIP), a section for very very important people (VVIP) and another section for the Examiners, who attended the show to carry out the academic aspects of the class production (THA 300). The audience classification aided traffic control, because people were directed orderly to the section that their tickets identify.

Box Officers and House Managers: The production of *Hard Choice* engaged the use of advance ticketing, a situation where tickets were sold head of the production date. In this case the production team has an idea of how many audience members were expected to attend the production and the calibre of audiences expected. So, it was easy to clear people into the auditorium without stress as selling of ticket was minimized. “This means in context, masking investment through the use of theatre crafts” (Umanah *et al* 187).

As Umoh further submits, managing the box office of the theatre goes “beyond only making profit but also targets at reshaping the thinking of the people and the world at large” (104). Because of the effective use of space in the hall, audience members' comfort was guaranteed. Those who sat at the table areas were served items of refreshments. A good number of students were co-opted into the house management committee to be able to attend to the numerous needs of the audience members. To take care of heat, the organizers brought in ox-fans and placed them at strategic places, especially in VIP and VVIP areas.

Conclusion

In the cycle of theatre productions, effective planning and strategic implementation of the plans can make much difference. The Production Team of *Hard Choice* was strategic in its audience engineering operations which included setting up of mobilization sub-committees with specific mandate on targeted delivery. When ideas are conceived, reassessed and executed, a newer perspective of a process may surface. Space management requires insight for audience mobilisation and return of investment in the theatre.

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