

**Post-Production Concepts in Cameroonian Theatre Practice:
Problems and Prospects**

Donatus Fai Tangem

Performing Arts and Cinema Section, Department of Arts and
Archaeology

University of Yaoundé 1

Email: tdonatus@yahoo.com

Abstract

The fundamental and standard stages of theatre production are well known. However, the applicability of these stages in practice is wholesomely complex and ultimately dependent on other related components. Among these are the objective and established goal of the performing troupe vis-a-vis the target community which is the destination of the performance. Therefore, while post-performance or post-mortem, constitutes a crucial component in theatre practice, the potential that is locked up in the exercise, reserves appreciable openings both for the community to appropriate the performance, as well as the promise of inclusiveness on the part of the troupe that owes it as a duty to the community. In essence, every theatre performance targets an audience, yet, whether or not the audience effectively takes ownership of the performance can only be measured from the quality and quantity of data obtained for post-mortem exercise. This is to say post-mortem is a veritable gauge and measuring yardstick for the certification of the depth of critical relation between the target and the performers. At this juncture, the place and role of post-performance go beyond applause, commentaries and any standing ovation or not, that sanctions the reception of a spectacle by its target audience. Otherwise, the post-performance exercise opens a leeway for an evaluation of the practical implication of the target audience in the performance. It is through this implication that the performers gain greater insights as to how the show effectively comes across or even how the performers access the needed feedback from the spectators who, by the same measure indicate to both the technical and artistic crews what aspects of the show require urgent amelioration. This paper therefore undertakes an evaluation of both the problems as well as the prospects of post-production in theatre practice in Cameroon. The analysis enables comprehension of what is either missed or gained in the event of whether or not, post-production is reasonably upheld by a theatre company. After all, it concretely assumes that every post-performance also invariably constitutes a preperformance, albeit intrinsically or even indirectly.

Keywords: Theatre practice, post-production, prospects and problems.

Theatre Production is a collaborative endeavour that poses as many challenges as it is rewarding. Traditionally, play production unfolds along clearly defined sequences that refute and resist omissions except at the risk of dissatisfactory outcomes. This Paper is focused (not generally) on the traditional production sequence (which I assume is only too well known), but on the concept of post-production about theatre practice in Cameroon. The contention in the paper is that Cameroonian theatre practitioners do not pay sufficient attention to the laid down rules and the stages of play production. In their fusion, and omissions of certain steps in production, practitioners deny themselves various opportunities that enhance the theatre experience. The critical material that is always available for use is never really exploited. In a few circumstances where post-mortem or post-production meetings are held, the agenda is limited essentially to financial matters and the take-home envelopes. Although theatre practice is an honourable activity, it is unfortunate that in Cameroon, it is left in the hands of adventurers, half-baked professionals and amateurs in search of popularity. Since their drive and interest in the art is not thus honourable, the outcome of the effort is also only approximate. This despicable outcome only further betrays the art in front of its detractors. Whereas theatre as an art form is particularly appropriate and well adapted to social mobilization, education and transformation, the practice simply requires a methodical approach for the expected results to be achievable. This is to emphasize that the power and full potential of the theatre remain a powerful bailout for societies and communities in search of novel experimental models of social action for positive change. With different levels and different intensities, theatre contains all that is needed to move people and mobilize communities to new levels of consciousness. Therefore, the intrinsic methods and options available to measure impacts as well as gauge feasibility for a rerouting and the calibration of basic objectives invariably depend on how every performance is received by the target community or the particular group of people for whom the production is meant. As expected of professional theatre practice, the indicators of the impact of a performance can be evaluated from essentially three perspectives such as-

- Immediate perspective
- Short-term perspective/intermediary perspective and
- Long-term perspective.

As a standard expectation, each of these perspectives of evaluations offers great chances for the artistic and technical teams to establish with a degree of certainty the objective impact of the performance. As concerns immediate term indicators, the resounding applause or the absence of it at the end of a theatrical spectacle is to be taken seriously as sanctions on the part of an audience. For the cast and crew, applause and sometimes a standing ovation constitute an immediate show of appreciation by the audience. However, something much more by way of follow-up, is needed to ascertain the veracity of the content of the voluntary comments and associate remarks thrown around consciously by members of the audience. On the other hand, the medium-term perspective of evaluation could be based on third-party post-performance publications, newspaper reviews, news talks and related debates triggered by the different media outlets.

Proper content analyses of reviews and news reports somehow constitute the raw material that normally informs key points of the post-mortem session. In other words, the tone and themes of newspaper reviews serve as authentic parameters needed to measure the degree or overall impact of the production. The long-term perspective and disposition for measuring the same impact is contingent on the attitude and or behavioural change seemingly triggered by the performance. Although there is a need to also ascertain the provenance of the noticeable change, it may not be too much to say many factors including the live performance could coincidentally merge to orchestrate the positive change in people and communities. Therefore, it is in anticipation of this positive outcome that post-production in the theatre finds undeniable relevance.

In standard terms, every production process, be it on the radio, television, cinema or theatre, unfolds according to laid down stages or steps that can be classified broadly into two phases, pre-and post-production. Except for the theatre, post-production as a concept enjoys popular

practice among media practitioners, particularly in film and television. This popularity is perhaps due to the specific implication of the term, or better still, the importance attached to post-production as a complementary condition sine qua non for broadcast in the case of TV or film production as the case may be. The implication of the term or the concept assumes new impetus when viewed as synonymous with post-performance, post-mortem or post-performance discussions. In a professional theatrical setting, the stages of production include script selection, script analyses, set design/construction, cast call, auditioning, casting, read-throughs, line rehearsals, blocking, technical rehearsals, dress rehearsals and opening night (performance proper). For Semi-professional or intermediary theatre practitioners, the above stages are exhaustive even if the content of each stage varies according to the prevailing circumstance. For example, a script does not always jumpstart a production process. According to Michael Gillette (1987),

The production of some plays begins with just an idea. That idea may be developed by the performing group in a variety of interesting and creative ways some of these concepts may evolve into written scripts and others may remain as conceptual cores that the actors use as guides when they improvise dialogue during the actual performance (2).

The adjustments, cuts and general production concept adopted are often intended to ensure effective communication. This anticipated outcome as a matter of principle can only be measured from the perspective of the audience that is the ultimate beneficiary of the performance. The effect that play production is expected to have on the spectator can only also be determined from the spectator's reaction or feedback and from what Sauter, (1995) calls "Theatre Talks". In his analyses; Sauter defines Theatre Talks as a theory whereby spectators are prompted to comment freely about a performance. This post-performance talk could be formal or informal even though the end point is to trigger commentaries that concretize either the case of impact or the absence of it on the spectator. After all such comments, whether intense or not still greatly inform the

crew of the value and weight of its production on the target population. However, it turns out, that the information and feedback from the audience remain valuable raw data that is processed in the course of post-performance sessions.

In research carried out on audience reception in Stockholm, Sauter (1995) sampled the views of spectators to identify the feelings that animate theatre spectators. According to the researcher the emotions of sympathy, empathy or antipathy that result all dovetail as a basis for the reception theory. As expected, the reception theory logically contributes to the (re) formulation of the theatre theory. Sauter explains that:

Several exploratory studies of the relationship between actor and spectator have indicated that spectators basically react to the personality of the actor. A satisfactory performance theory has to account for such empirical results unless an essential aspect of theatrical communications is left out. Other empirical “discoveries” include the environmental aspect of the theatre events, the significance of the craft and skills for the act of theatrical communication (126).

To account, therefore, for the empirical results, Sauter recommends the Theatre Talks approach. By its very nature, this strategy supplies and makes available invaluable material and information needed in assessing audience reception and the global impact of the theatrical spectacle.

Unfortunately, the Cameroonian culture of theatre practice has relegated post-performance or post-mortem as an activity that is not only optional but also conditioned by the availability of proceeds (money) to be shared. This purely capitalist outlook has even further urged theatre practitioners to undermine classical stages of play productions and this, at a great cost. Edwin Wilson (1994) once intimated in his scholarly theatrical piece *The Theatre Experience*, that creating good theatre is not the work of chance but demands commitment and sacrifice. In his critique, the theoretician underscores the crucial role that pre- and post-performance activities play in the overall impact of a theatre experience. On his part,

Robert Benedetti (2001) emphasizes the importance of teamwork, which depends for its success on three fundamental factors. He explains:

...First, when each member (of the group) is genuinely committed to the common purpose. Second, when each member supports the other in this particular objective as members of the group, third when all agree to maintain the possibility of free and open communication so that any difficulties encountered in the work can be walked out (6).

Commitment, support and open communication all put together, offer the troupe or the team an excellent opportunity to resolve problems and obstacles that affect the theatre experience. Since theatre production is meant for a target community or group of people, the expected impact and positive transformative effect are subject to factors such as commitment, support and communication, the absence of which would jeopardize the experience. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these factors makes post-production not only important but also urgent.

As already noted, pre-production in the theatre involves all the activities, both artistic and technical, that take place before the performance proper. On the other hand, post-performance or post-performance discussions, informal chat, and oral or written critiques that emanate from a theatrical experience all constitute enviable material for the enhancement of the job of theatre promoters and practitioners. It is this latter part of the production process that Cameroonian theatre practitioners take for granted. In his theatre handbook, Jerzy Grotowski (1968), comments that “theatre people themselves do not usually have an altogether clear conception of theatre” (29). According to his theoretical conception, theatre can exist without costumes, set, light and even a text, but never without an audience. This therefore means that the *raison d’être* for theatre is the spectators. The need therefore to investigate and understand the reception, reaction and emotional state of the spectators thus becomes legitimate and desirous. While the objective of every performance is to induce positive change in the spectator, the need to be

sure that communication and a sense of commitment are effective is the reason post-performance continues to be central in the organizational plan of professional operations. This is also applicable in all domains of human life and daily practice where this process is simply considered as feedback.

In every theatrical venture where the guiding motif is to reach out to a large audience, every post-production effectively qualifies to be considered a pre-production. The logic of this statement is contained in the expectation that the critical commentaries made after a performance become a guiding factor for subsequent spectacles. The problems with this stage of post-mortem in play production are therefore very challenging. The challenges can be measured at various levels:

Cost:

The extra cost involved in organizing planning and running a post-mortem in the theatre is scary. In both material and financial terms, post-production imposes certain constraints on budgeting that may sometimes negatively impact the theatre experience. In circumstances where guest actors are hired under strictly professional terms, they tend to view any extra performance activity as an infringement on their valuable time and may demand compensation for the time spent in such sessions. This partly explains the levity with which the concept is viewed in the Cameroonian theatre practice. Beyond paying the extra hours of professional crew members, post-production sessions also often require further financial investments in areas such as questionnaires, the hiring of professional reviewers as well as payment for the services of professional critics and technical/artistic evaluators. The cost of post-mortem is accentuated by the role newspapers and related media operators play. Therefore, where standard media is contracted to cover and report on the production, the budget increases sometimes inhibitive enough to limit further investments in post-mortem sessions thereby

sacrificing propitious opportunities for monitoring and evaluation of the impact of performances on the receiving communities.

Inexperience:

Inexperience on the part of the theatre director, producer and production manager may result in a complete omission of post-mortem or post-production following a theatrical performance. Jerzy, Grotowski (ibid)warns that:

The producer's job demands a certain tactical savoir-faire, namely in the art of leading. Generally speaking, this kind of power demoralizes. It entails the necessity of learning how to handle people. It demands a gift of diplomacy and cold inhuman talent for dealing with intrigues. These characteristics follow the producer like his shadow even in the poor theatre (48).

The production team has to deploy its reach experience while mustering the courage and commitment to integrate post-mortem or post-production as an integral stage of theatre production. An experienced production team pre-arranges for post-production through strategic planning within a framework that obliges spectators to comment. This information and comment "hunting" may, if not properly handled, result, in claptrap and a degree of sycophancy, which may result from the disguised pressure to impress the actors and the production crew. In the event of such cheap praise, the ensuing post-mortem takes off on a biased premise that only lays a foundation for a prospectively disastrous performance. The feasibility of theatrical sycophancy as masterminded by theatre audiences is rife when objective platforms and related contexts of authentic and realistic theatre talk are absent and when falsehood and impressionism kick in.

Tele-guided commentary:

Closely linked to inexperience is the open manifestation of guided commentary or theatre talks that are motivated by other factors. In the situation of "theatre talks" theory, the involvement of actors and members of the production team must be seriously monitored. The reason for this

is that deceptive and false admiration of an actor or a strongly prejudiced disregarded by an audience can easily falsify the outcome of the theatre talks. Where commentaries are employed as an avenue for settling old scores (as is often the case between and within artists who are at loggerheads) the exercise may further jeopardise group cohesion. Similarly, where the opportunity for theatre talks is misconstrued as a praise machine, the troupe fails to draw the benefit of a genuine intent which should constitute a permanent practice in the production sequence. The urge to praise and the joy to hear praises both constitute a danger in information gathering for post-production. By asking questions overtly to members of the audience, the actors or production crew may influence and falsify the audience's response. Sauter cautions against such an eventuality by noting as follows:

One of the basic principles of theatre talks is that no questions are asked. The group of people who gather after a performance consists normally of seven individuals who know each other from work, for example. The group leader accompanying each talk does not ask questions but invites the participants to speak to each other. In the process, the crew member simply notes the ideas and observations brought up during the conversation (124).

By not having to answer questions or even talk to the actors or production team, groups of spectators in a free-for-all chat reveal useful information that serves enormously after the performance. In another audience survey, Hemil Shoenmakers who worked with Sauter on the project concluded that three forms of identification can be distinguished in the theatre after a performance. The three forms according to him are resemblance, wistfulness and enforced identity, he concludes that; this “anaesthetized emotion” may occur as a result of group reinforcement. Consequently, it becomes very difficult to ascertain or confirm what Aristotle assumed as “a cathartic purification of the spectator’s feeling” (125).

Impatience and fear are also emotional states that affect post-performance. Fear on the part of the technical or production crew and the actors can greatly harm and hamper the smoothness of the exercise that builds up to a worthy post-mortem. Fear of criticism, fear of failure and fear of the unknown may also negatively affect both the preparatory phase of post-production and the post-production proper. The preparatory phase of post-production happens to be the production itself. Where fear and tension grip the actor, the performance is in flames. To combat fear, anxiety and tension, Robert Benedetti, (2001), identifies three principal aspects that the actor must take note of. These are tension, excessive effort, meditation and “being whole”. The magic wand that solves this he continues, is relaxation. It is interesting to measure the interconnection between pre- and post-production processes which are unavoidable practices in theatre owing to the crucial outcome that the exercise offers in terms of cultural sustainability and value to communities and nations that value the arts.

The holistic approach needed to build a harmonious crew that works towards congruence requires both tact and courage. Tact because getting an actor to remain focused and free of audience pressure and stage fright is no easy fit. Courage too because the theatre director should address the minutest detail of every component of the show that has any probability of interfering and obstructing effective audience reception. It is common knowledge that no audience tolerates boredom and so once an audience member is not receptive to a spectacle or a part of it, impact and expected feedback are immediately affected and sometimes forfeited, hence the theatre performance becomes an effort in futility. It is this phenomenon that lays the foundation of what builds up to sacrificial theatre, i.e., theatre without impact or relevance to its target population. However, with courage, tact and commitment, the theatre director

confronts every situation and undertakes to orientate every technical and artistic endeavour towards the achievement of palpable impacts.

Incidentally, relaxation happens to be the only activity recommended for the actor immediately before stage action. In his explanatory note, Benedetti emphasizes that relaxation is about “letting go”. “Letting go of your person allows you to take in another and become another person”. It is therefore this letting go and taking in that pre-set compelling performance that has the power to move and joyously transform the audience as it is the genuine and great expectation of the production team. No doubt that it is entirely based on these noble objectives that post-mortem remains a must in the theatre practice despite the odds involved in conducting it professionally.

In his theatre laboratory, Grotowski calls on the actor to train and release all tension and external pressure which constitute a wedge to an aesthetically satisfying performance. He adds that:

The actor, who, in this special process of discipline and self-sacrifice, self-penetration and moulding, is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable unity, attains a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind. He literary becomes much sounder in mind and body and his way of life is more normal than that of an actor in the rich theatre (45).

Despite the difficulties and problems rife in post-production or post-mortem, the exercise is quite rewarding and so worthy of the trouble. We already observed that pre- and especially post-production are integral parts of the theatre experience. So much for the audience – the target of the performance as well as for the theatre practitioners (actors and production crew) upon whom the spectators depend for satisfaction. Robert Benedetti once again refers to the events in post-production as “Growth after Opening”. He argues that:

In the live theatre, the opening of the show is never the completion of your work but only the start of a new phase of the growth process. The audience contributes in many ways perhaps most by providing the responses that complete the rhythmic shaping of the work (207).

In their standard duty of shaping and complementing the work, the theatre audience offers keen insights and more through the comments, applauses and reactions that follow. As has already been established, responses of the audience may take various and varied forms like laughter, sobs, stillness, restlessness and other feelings. These sets of emotional displays require proper assessment and adjustments at the post-mortem. During analyses in post-performance discussions, the production team and the actors may realize they have a surer and stronger basis for judgment. When this happens, “Unessential detail/begin to fall away and (subsequent) performances are made more effective by distilling them to the essential” (208).

It is the enormous contribution made by the audience and solicited by the production team that “previews” are often organised. In previews, a quasi-audience is invited at dress rehearsals to supplement the “ideal audience of one” (director) who, in rehearsal, tries to foresee audience responses. The stage becomes, first, the melting pot and source of inspiration for the audience’s emotional outburst and second, it assumes the attractive point and instantaneous interphase between the spectators and the actors even while the former speaks to the latter only through commentaries, action and reactions of either praise or blame.

The fundamental ambience of pre-and above all post-production otherwise known as post-mortem is that of perpetual search for growth and development. Through an empirical survey of the audience responses, theatre talks and by extension post-production or post-mortem proposes a reliable and genuine basis for the judgement of, and self-assessment by the entire crew, of its take home by the spectators whose presence complements live performances. Essentially, the power and influence that the audience wields is made manifest in various forms irrespective of whether the actors know or not. Yet, despite the challenges that beset post-mortem exercise, its lively and fruitful results effectively compensate in no small way for the extra cost, pain and additional

pressure that comes with post-performance sessions. The inevitably happy outcome of post-mortem in the theatre is predicated on the following:

- Offers good grounds that enable the growth and maturity of the technical and artistic crew
- Facilitate individual and collective growth in the exploration of available skills and talents.
- Sets parameters and corrective measures for improvements and growth that lead to professionalism
- Offers opportunity for the harmonization of group interests concerning the target objective of every theatre performance.
- Allows for community participation and appropriation (ownership) of the theatre event by the people.
- Engages other societal factors such as press organs (radio, TV, print press and social media outlets) to play their roles in accompanying the promotion of culture, the shaping of talents and the coaching of skilful artists for the preservation and promotion of the arts and culture of people, communities and nations of the world.
- Reinforces the essence and ethics of art by underlining the need to uphold and foster respect for standards with the respect of the basic stages of play production.

In general terms, the anticipated benefits or gains that accrue from the painstaking and costly exercise of post-mortem can no longer be the subject of debate. In effect, the gains are many and diverse. They include the harmonization of group interest in the ultimate objective of theatre productions. Concerning standards, theatre performances are designed to target specific concerns of a society with the view of achieving paradigm shifts that could foreground positive change. While this expectation remains laudable and achievable, all that is needed to ensure the effective accomplishment of desired plans is the collective consciousness of the cast and crew that ought to agree to look in the same direction. However, to do so, individuals who make up the group must harmonize their perspectives in favour of a collective vision. It is this new perspective that post-production sessions seek to guarantee for the group owing to its avowed goals in trying to service societal needs.

Another likely worthy outcome of post-production or post-mortem is that the session offers an opportunity for the participation of members of the audience thereby allowing target communities to appropriate and effectively take ownership of the production. By having to critically involve target community members through theatre talks and related participatory approaches, the production crew unconsciously implicates the people in its production structure. This tactical conscription gradually compels the people in the community to eventually find sufficient grounds for the sustainable support of community theatre projects. The organization and practice of post-production help to enforce the essence and ethics of the art through the respect of the standard stages of production with each stage in the chain helping to add value to the professional practice. Although ethics and deontology warrant strict adherence to the different phases of production, many professional and semi-professional troupes, unfortunately, treat post-performance concertation as an optional exercise. While there is no gainsaying that by evading such sessions, production crews summarily forfeit proper platforms for the amelioration of the calibre of the art as it is being practised, much more needs to be done to enable theatrical practitioners to understand the deep value of post-mortem sessions.

With the advent of social media handles, it is worth noting that the practice of the art has witnessed increased critical and accelerated circulation among cultural activists. With this increased participation comes increased partnerships of different societal structures competing in the promotion of collective cultural values. Therefore, taking full advantage of the contextual organization of post-performance sessions, the cast and crew benefit enormously from the urgent and timely corrective measures required for improvement and growth.

By and large, the practice of post-production exercise only stands to add value to theatre practice. Notwithstanding the challenges and sometimes

incidental drawbacks that impede the organization of post-mortem, this practice contains rare offers of ally forces that are required for the preservation and promotion of the practice of lively performance for the growth of society. Without fear or favour, it can be safely affirmed that, while proactive measures in performing arts remain a necessary precondition for growth and development, feedback, otherwise known as post-production remains the engine that powers corrections and adjustments which are simple requirements for sustainable result-orientated action by performing artists. No doubt despite steep challenges, post-production remains an inevitable activity in theatre practice by professional theatre practitioners the world over.

WORKS CITED

- Banham, Martin, Gibbs, James & Osofsan, Femi**, (Eds.), *African Theatre Playwrights and Politics*. Bloomingham: I.U.P., 2001.
- Benedetti, Robert**, *The Actor at Work*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.
- Boulton, Marjorie**, *The Anatomy of Drama*. London: Routledge, 1960
- Gillette Michael**, *Theatrical Design and Production; An introduction to Scene Design and Construction, Lighting, Sound, Costume and makeup*. Australia McGraw-Hill Education, 1987.
- Grotowski, Jerzy**, *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- Jeyifor, Biodun**, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. London: Port of Spain, 1985.
- Nelson Peter and Osborne Nigel**, *The Sociology of the Theatre, Contemporary Theatre Review*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000.
- Sauter, Martin** *The sociology of the Theatre*, Hildesheim Germany, Taylor & Francis Group, 1995
- Wilson Edwin**, *The Theatre Experience*, London, McGraw Hill, 1994