

Stand-up Comedy as Contemporary Live Theatre

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Abstract:

Stand-up comedy is a new subgenre of comedy that widely watches across the globe. It is a form of aesthetic performance that elicits laughter and also brings succour and mirth to its audience. Its therapeutic mode, although temporal, gives a thorough and sound approach to life's issues in a mild way. Stand-up comedy show has been proven to be one of the major components of pleasurable shows. However, many scholars viewed stand-up comedy as mere entertainment and humorous show without taking a deeper look at its theatrical performance. Therefore, this paper examines stand-up comedy as a contemporary live theatre. Besides, it investigates the dialoguing conversational techniques of characters, paralinguistic features of the stage play and the use of music, symbolism, caricature, subtle irony, humour, blazer costume, improvisation and interactivity in a bid to show stand-comedy as a contemporary live theatre. Schechner's Performance, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyse the aesthetic unique performances of the stand-up comedians. The purposively selected stand-up comedian for stage show is Klint De Drunk (Ahamefula Igwemba) and supported by Basket Mouth (Bright Okpocha). Live digital discs of performance recordings of Klint De Drunk were used. Data were subjected to performance and literary analyses.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, live theatre, humour, aesthetics, comedians

Introduction:

Theatre is seen as a play acted or performed on stage before a live audience. It is a representation of life on stage through the use of action and dialogue (Oripeloye, 2017: 49). In African society, it is a reconstruction and perpetuation into the historic myths of the past to better contemporaneous existence of modern age and ritual continuum (Adekunle, 2017: 50). Jackson (2011: 4) affirms that in a pan-Africa context and in line with true folk meaning it refers to a broad spectrum of cultural acts from religious ritual, to playing mass carnival, to children's circle games. This means that in Africa, theatre is a representation of African historical past, present and future's engagement. Also, theatre is an evolution of Greco-Roman religious

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worship of gods like Dionysus (Dasyuva, 2004: 4). In Medieval Europe, it emerges from the annual Feast of Corpus Christi of Medieval Christian mystery circle (Clark, 1947; Britannica, 2010; Adekunle, 2014). Its theatrical displays include a procession, open-air arena setting, episodic, and symbolic actions, an active audience, masking, music, dance, impersonation, songs, dialogue, spectacles and so on (Ogundeji, 2003; Dasyuva, 2004; Adekunle, 2014). According to Schnecher (2012: xv), its performances are make-believe in play for entertainment.

On the other hand, Ian Brodie defines stand-up comedy as a form of talk which implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking (2008: 55). In this case, Brodie regards it to be sociological happenings or affairs. Similarly, Nwankwo describes stand-up comedy as a product of a fast globalizing world where there is a profusion of inter-cultural encounters (2014: 1). Other scholars, like Mintz (1985, 1998); Zolten (1993), explain that when the stand-up comedian speaks, the text could be seen as a collection of smaller textual units in which numerous of it are identifiably analogous to classic folkloric genres, such as legends, riddles, tall tales, jokes, toasts, deities, dozen, memorates, blazons populaires, etc. It also appears in a form of rhetoric and polemic. Auslander (1992: 196-197) sees stand-up comedy as a distinctive, perhaps distinctly postmodern performance mode, which may be understood in terms of its relation to other postmodern performance discourses and a specific, culturally and generationally defined audience. The cultural milieus or sociological realities are significant factors in the appraisal of stand-up comedy in any society. Adekunle (2014: 96) opines that stand-up comedy is a comic act and satire on the socio-economic and cultural ills in society. The cultural renewal of stand-up comedy is the transformation that stand-up comedy undergoes over time due to time and space and cultural interaction among countries. This is to say that stand-up comedy is a global phenomenon that is regulated by social discourses that engage the minds of the performers as well as the audience reception. Stand-up comedy's jocular techniques, narratives, mimicry, song enactments, and therapeutic mode are largely informed by the experiential knowledge of the comic actors from their sociological realistic views of happenings that straddle their societies (Adekunle, 2017: 25).

In the above, despite the assertions of the scholars on characteristics and global relevance of stand-up comedy, its theatrical performance has been deeply neglected. Therefore, this paper examines stand-up comedy as a contemporary live theatre. Besides, it investigates the dialoguing conversational techniques of characters, paralinguistic features of the stage play and the use of music, symbolism, caricature,

parody, subtle irony, humour, blazer costume, improvisation and interactivity in a bid to show stand-comedy as a contemporary live theatre.

Solo Theatre Performance: Klint De Drunk's Aesthetics with His Audience

Klint De Drunk (Ahamefula Igwemba), a stand-up performer, adopts the behaviour of a drunkard's lifestyle in his theatrical performance, as a metaphor, on the stage, to portray the lifestyle, of the downtrodden masses, that are in the state of hopelessness, gloominess and disillusionment. Klint De Drunk usually looks haggard and silly. He is a portrayal of the people that take to drinking as a way of drowning their sorrow, however short-lived.

His performances are elements of societal obscurantism that practically characterise the lives of the Nigerian citizenry. These social factors are catalysts of societal irregularities and misdemeanours that make people more prone to errors and ignorance of warning signs. Here, Klint De Drunk's lifestyle can be likened to William Shakespeare's Macbeth's gravedigger and Yoruba court jester who used their comic roles to satirize their societal ills (Adeleke, 2001; Adejumo, 2008; Geddes and Grosset, 2013; Sheehan, 2014).

Klint De Drunk's comic orature is a stream of consciousness comic style through which depressed and emotionally imbalanced people are revealed. The negative effects of the poor economic state of the Nigerian society are practically manifested in the lives of the Nigerian masses. As Klint De Drunk staggers on the stage, the intoxicating spirit of a frustrated life is signified.

Klint De Drunk:

DJ anyhow, no wonder, you are wearing yellow T-shirt, and folding the hands, like short sleeve. You are wearing your cap backward, because you can never think forward. Do play that thing again, I will press something near your family, your generation will hold you responsible. If, even, with the earpiece, it does look like you are wearing earpiece. It is the way your ear is naturally. He has removed the earpiece, now you can see the ear. Play that music again, wearing the same shirt with the cameraman. I done even know you whether you are cameraman? Who is using who? You are using the cameraman or the cameraman is using you? You have snapped picture to the extent that you look, like digital camera. Instead of people beware of them, they snapped; snapped you, they snapped your colour away. You will come turn black and white. No wonder you perfect the photograph. I can really understood [sic] paying school fee for you, you are eating the money [Klint De Drunk, Vol. 22].

Audience: hahaha! [laughter]

Klint De Drunk, in this performance above, satirises the oddity of modernity and civilization that capsizes the well-mannered behaviour

and general sensibility of the society and the global society at large. He sees things from a negative point of view. “DJ anyhow” and “you are wearing your cap backward because you can never think forward.” are metaphorically used to show how disorderliness has taken over orderliness in the society. “DJ anyhow” portrays how music is being played haphazardly without considering the social benefits. The music is devoid of organization, and moral sanity. This shows that music should not only be for entertainment, but also moral and social criticism. It is meant to awaken the souls of the depressed, by releasing them from every bottled up emotion. Not only this, “you are wearing your cap backward, because you can never think forward” reveals changes that occur in the social order. DJ wearing the cap backward instead of wearing it forward shows that people are taking what is wrong to be right. This is Klint De Drunk’s criticism of those that wear their face caps backward. He also queries the logic and concludes that whatever makes the modern youths oddly wear their caps must be responsible for the decay in their lives. This means that there is no sanitary order or moral sense in the way people think about what they put on or do. This provokes laughter from the audience as the comedian draws the audience’s attention to DJ’s caricature. As Robeyns (2009: 17) notes, “a commitment to moral individualism is not incompatible with the recognition of connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment”.

The use of “earpiece” and “ear” connotes its binary oppositions. “Ear” stands for the natural auditory system, while “earpiece” symbolises an artificial auditory system, that is, naturalism against artificiality. Klint De Drunk intentionally uses these two binary elements, to portray how artificiality has taken over natural order in modern days. This is why he initially says that people think backward instead of thinking forward. The “DJ” and the “cameraman” are also synonyms of social contradictions. “DJ” represents “audio” while “cameraman” signifies “visual”. The DJ’s musicality is, often, done through an electronic configuration that is solely audio. The cameraman stands for visual aid. It is an electronic device that vividly showcases the graphic image of an artistic piece. This is why Klint De Drunk uses a rhetorical device of chiasmus, to question the DJ and the cameraman, on their social role, in the society, by saying: “Who is using who? You are using the cameraman or the cameraman is using you?”. He goes further to ridicule the cameraman on his ability to take and mutilate pictures at will by creating near realities. He stresses that the cameraman looks like a “digital camera” that “snaps” people’s pictures out of social reality. He proves this, by saying that the cameraman snaps people’s colour away, and turning them to black and white. He goes further to say no wonder

the cameraman perfected his “photograph”. This means that society is stripped off of her natural identity and values. Society is no longer living in the world of reality but actual pessimism and illusion.

These social factors are catalysts of societal irregularities and misdemeanours that make people more prone to errors and ignorance of warning signs as further revealed below:

Klint De Drunk:

My friend went and bought fuel in gallon, N120 per litre. I told this man, please, start trekking, is better for you. He say no, fuel is better. He went and brought fuel N120 per gallon. He is in the hospital right now recovering, because he went to put the fuel in the car, suck the fuel from the pipe, put the pipe in inside “pua”, brought out the remain fuel in his mouth. He forgot that what we called residue of fuel is remaining in the mouth, move away from the car, lit cigar, turned to dragon. I thought he was doing a magic show. I was clapping for the man, (talking to the man): “man brother in fact, we are going to the show together” until I saw ambulance [Klint De Drunk Vol. 22].

Audience: hahaha! [Laughter]

In the performance above, Klint De Drunk sarcastically displays how people carelessly endanger their lives through ignorance of warning signs. Fuel, an inflammable product, is often, and, carelessly, used by people in Nigeria. This has led to a loss of lives and property across the nation. Some keep this inflammable product in houses in places where it can easily catch fire.

Klint De Drunk, in the performance under reference, warns the people who use fuel carelessly. He uses his friend as a case study to portray this lackadaisical behaviour of people. He warns his friend, not to buy fuel, as a precautionary signal that foreshadows an impending doom. His friend rejects the warning sign and goes for the inflammable product. After the man has put the fuel in his car, he uses his mouth to suck out the petrol he had bought and once it started flowing, he quickly removes the pipe from his mouth and puts it in his car fuel tank. Shortly after this, he moves to a corner of the car to light a cigar, forgets that there is a residue of fuel in his mouth. His friend’s mouth catches fire. This takes his friend to the hospital. This is why he jocularly mocks his friend by saying that his friend has turned into a “dragon”, and, at the same time, performing a “magic”. Here, the “dragon” symbolically signifies “the agent” and “the victim” of human-induced problems or challenges. Also, “magic” connotatively represents the “trickish role of evils” that man plays on himself through his evil intelligence or foibles. Magic is the opposite of reality. This shows that stand-up theatrical show is an archetype of social reflection that disseminates historical facts.

In the above, what Klint De Drunk is drawing attention to or satirising, is the wacky habit of Nigerians using their mouths to draw

petrol from inside jerry or plastic cans, a very dangerous thing. Smokers who indulge in the habit could get themselves burnt unawares. Besides, magic refers to fire-eating, which some magicians do. A dragon spits fire, and so do fire-eating magicians.

Duet Theatre Performance: Klint De Drunk and Basket Mouth's Aesthetics with Their Audience

From another point of view, the comic persona also uses this comedic orchestration to create moral etiquette, foster unity, and co-existence in the nation. He applies this comic device to purge individuals from social vices and follies. In the excerpt of his comic show below, he reveals how individual members of the society should have mutual respect for one another. Apart from this, he further shows how military and paramilitary personnel should relate to civilians. These are the security agencies that are trained to protect, and, at the same time, expected to treat civilians to civility at all times.

Klint De Drunk:

You know, Police, MOPOL [Mobile Police], and Military's slaps are three different types of slaps. There is nothing relating to all of them. Let me show you an example of what I mean [He called Basket Mouth, another comedian, to assist him on stage to play a duet performance. Klint De Drunk takes a posture of a Civilian, while Basket Mouth takes the position of another Civilian. Both comedians try to show how Civilians relate to one another when having a misunderstanding with one another]. Let me tell you something, I am telling you, I will deal with you. I am going to deal with you.

Basket Mouth: Don't tell me rubbish [he slaps Klint De Drunk on the face].

Klint De Drunk: You slap me? I will deal with you today. You are, in short... [He spits on Basket Mouth. Both Klint De Drunk and Basket Mouth pick a quarrel with each other as civilians].

Basket Mouth: I slapped you.

[Shortly after this first playlet, Klint De Drunk faces the audience, addressing them on the next playlet. Now, he takes a posture of a Civilian, and Basket Mouth, a posture of a Policeman].

Klint De Drunk: Now, Civilian to Police. When police now slap you, the things at this point you recognize is uniform, and his office, and his duties to humanity. Let me show you what I mean. [Both comedians resume the stage playlet] I know your DPO [Divisional Police Officer]. I will deal with you. I will remove this, your, uniform. You are a fool.

Basket Mouth: Don't tell me that? [He gives Klint De Drunk a slap on the face. Suddenly, he becomes sober, and penitently explains his offence to Basket Mouth, the Police Officer].

Klint De Drunk: [Reaction and explanation] Officer, the Police is your friend. I respect you. See; let me show you, the boy came out. You see him there...

Basket Mouth: [Resolution] I am not your friend. If am your friend, you would not talk to me like that. Now, follow me to the station [Police Station]. How much do you have on you?

Audience: hahaha... [Laugh]

[After the end of the second playlet, Klint De Drunk addresses the audience again on the next play, that is, the third playlet yet to unfold. This section of the play shows how the Mobile Police relate with the civilians in an inhumane way, in Nigerian society].

Klint De Drunk: [Talking to the audience] Know Mobile Police, you know Mobile Police do press-up with their fingers. Their slap does not include any explanation, anything to recognize his office, you go straight to explanation. This is not different. Once they slap you, you will explain, that is how they do. Let me show you (Both comedians resume the performance). Let me show you, I will talk to the IG. They will remove you. You are stupid. There is nothing you can do, if you think is a lie try me.

Basket Mouth: asalala [He slaps Klint De Drunk on the face].

Klint De Drunk: [Shivering, and crying before Basket Mouth, the Mobile Police, to recap the incident that leads to his molestation]. The boy came out from here and when he was coming, I did not see him. You should ask me at least two times. [Aftermath this third piece of drama, he resumes his prologue to explain to the audience what to encounter in the fourth play]. That is MOPOL, but the army slap is the very slap. When he slaps you, you don't explain to the army man, you explain to others. And when you are explaining to others, he would now call you back. And when you come back, you would put these letter words called "SIR". So many times in the sentence that even the sentence would lose meaning. Let me show you what I mean. [In this fourth play, Basket Mouth represents a "Soldier Man", while Klint De Drunk serves as a Civilian. The play starts, as Klint De Drunk confronts Basket Mouth, the Soldier man]. [Facing Basket Mouth] I am the brother to the Major-General. I will make sure that you hear it. You are going back to the village. You are going to turn to a farmer because I am going to deal with you (After this hot argument, Basket Mouth, the Soldier, gives him a slap across his face. He bounces up and down over the hot-hit slap given by the Soldier; afterward, he faces the audience and explains what leads to a quarrel between the soldier and himself). Sheebi, you people were here when the boy came out? Did the boy see me? Did I see him? He slapped me here?

Basket Mouth: (The soldier orders Klint De Drunk to come close, and explains the matter to him, why he was unruly) Come here, come here; and stand there. I have been talking to you and asked you where that boy came from. You are the one am talking to. Come, come, come and stand there!

Klint De Drunk: Me!

Basket Mouth: Come and stand here! What do you have to say? Klint De Drunk: Sir, see sir, sir, the boy came, sir, the boy sir, tell me, sir, sir, he was..., I don't know where he was coming from sir, I don't sir, the boy sir [Klint De Drunk Vol. 22].

In the performance above, Klint De Drunk ridiculously demonstrates how the civilians are badly treated by the Nigerian security personnel. The personnel lacks good human relations when dealing with civilians on public matters. Most civilians are molested, brutalised, and, sometimes, killed. These brutalities have left some civilians in pains and woes. In some instances, some females are raped in the molestation. In the second performance, it shows how corruption thrives in the Nigeria Police Force. For example, the policeman takes advantage of the molestation to exploit the civilian, by openly asking the civilian the amount of money that was on him, "How much do you have on you?". This is exactly what some bad eggs in the Nigeria Police Force do. They

exploit the civilians and rob them of their possessions. Some will even threaten to put them in the guardroom when they fail to comply with their desires, as the policeman says it in the excerpt above: “Now, follow me to the station [Police Station]”.

In the same vein, civilians’ interaction with Mobile Police and the army is more severe and deadly. Their relationship is like a cat-rat’s relationship. In the illustration above, one can see how the security personnel maltreated the civilians without giving them a fair hearing. For instance, the soldier ordered Klint De Drunk, the civilian, to come close and explain his unruly behaviour to him. Klint De Drunk comes close as ordered with fear and trembling. He is stammering and, at the same time, applies “sir” to all his loose statements when he talks with the soldier. Here, “sir” is a metaphor used to express “fear”. Besides, “Nigerian military and police uniforms” symbolise “fear” and “respect”. The uniforms symbolise fear because of the force personnel’s mode of operations that sometimes goes with brutality. The uniforms are also a sign of respect because of the force personnel’s national duties as security apparatus to the nation.

On the other hand, civilians are also expected to be polite when dealing with one another in society. They are not supposed to be callous to one another. As shown in the performance above, Klint De Drunk ridicules some members of the society who are always tensed up over trivial issues and fight back against their neighbours over them “You slap me? I will deal with you today. You are, in short... (He spits on Basket Mouth. Both Klint De Drunk and Basket Mouth pick a quarrel with each other as civilians)”. These trivial issues are as a result of the economic hardship that pervades the nation. Here, the comedian is trying to say that everyone should device a means of getting over their societal challenges without wreaking havoc on other people.

Another message to note is that there should be mutual understanding and respect for one another in the society, from civilians to civilians, or security personnel to civilians. The civilians should also learn to respect the “security forces” that are saddled with the responsibility of protecting lives and property. They should be appreciated and well addressed in any public matter. They should be seen as friends, not as enemies. This is why Ekemenah (2012: 8) says that the Nigerian problem goes beyond the issues of poverty, corruption, politics, fuel subsidy, and religion, but disregard for the law of homogeneity that throws the country into the state of disunity, and lack of mutual respect for one another. He states that the law for mutual respect should be upheld, and seen as supreme in the nation.

In conclusion, the stand-up comedians above theatrically and aesthetically used their solo and duet performances to elicit laughter

from their live audience and, at the same time, lampoon the social vices of their society. Besides, the performances are also used to create morally sensibility as one of the major functions of theatre and drama.

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