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Audience(ing) and Mobility in Site-specific Performances in Lagos

¹Ibukun Fasunhan

Abstract

*The role of the audience is sine-qua-non to any theatrical performance. Due to the promenade nature of site-specific performances, one of the major challenges in this art form, especially in Nigeria, has always been moving the audience through different spaces in the performance site. This study thus investigates and highlights the challenges that are prevalent in moving the audience through different spaces in a site-specific performance. This study becomes important since emerging site-specific theatre practitioners in Lagos are overwhelmed by this art form and how to negotiate their audience through spaces. Using Schechner's performance theory and Bennett's theory of production and reception in the performance analysis of *Shattered*, directed by Kenneth Uphopho, and *Make we Waka*, devised and directed by Mimi Poskitt and Molly Taylor, this study examines emerging challenges, as well as needs and mechanisms required for a successful symbiotic relationship between audience and site-specific practitioners. This study proposes ways in which the movement through spaces can be made immersive, thereby encouraging more people to participate in this art form. Such a relationship will then lead to a steady growth and proper understanding of site-specific performances in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Audience, Site-specific, Mobility, Performance, Theatre

Audience is the water in which the fish, the performers, swim; when the audience advances, the performers should fall back

- Richard Schechner

The role of the audience in the theatre is very important, even though they have faced series of inclusion and exclusion in performances from the Greek period to the present day. While the “asides” of the Greek drama signified the importance of

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audience, at some point they became very disturbing to the theatre during the early nineteenth century. The private theatre of the seventeenth century and the introduction of footlights became a major hindrance, and was met with opposition by several theatre practitioners and scholars (Bennet 3). Amongst them are Augusto Baol, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Meyerhold, Picastor, Jerzy Grotowski, Allan Kaprow and others. Of particular interest is Kaprow, who turned the audience into actors by eliminating scenes and replacing them with events that he termed "Happenings."

Audience participation is ingrained in the practice of Nigerian theatre, which can be seen to be the result of the communal participation that is quite common in Africa. However, this participatory form has been criticized by theatre practitioners and the audience itself. Right from the introduction of the proscenium theatre to the African theatrical landscape, audience participation and engagement has gradually dwindled. Owing to this, most audience have become comfortable with the conventional style, seeing the environmental theatre where Nigerian theatre itself emanated from as 'archaic', 'unprofessional', and 'unsafe.' While this might be right in the sense of the audience engagement and outdoor approach to most environmental theatre performances, environmental theatre was birthed out of the perceived stiffness that came with the proscenium theatre.

With the inclusion of the audience in the performance then comes the issues of errant immersion and mobility, as Schechner himself was particularly concerned about the issue of mobility in the performance of *Commune* (1971), where some audience were at some point reluctant to move to some spaces because of the structure of the performance and space ("Audience Participation," 76-83). Some were also sceptical of immersing themselves into the performance. Although errant immersions contribute to the overall meaning of the play, the issue of moving audience through spaces, as will be discussed using the performance of *Make We Waka* (hereinafter referred to as *MWW*) devised and directed by Mimi Poskitt and Molly Taylor and *Shattered* written by Bode Asiyanbi and directed by Kenneth Uphopho, becomes very necessary.

Interrogating Audience(ing) and Mobility in Site-Specific Performances

Inspired by the need to preserve and reawaken historical consciousness amongst others, *MWW* explores the history of Freedom Park (formerly a colonial prison), the concept of freedom and the typical Lagos life. This performance, largely mobile in

nature, involves audience moving from one performance space to the other with the aid of mp3 players. Promenade form of performance has been a favourite choice of theatre directors used to the conventional spaces in Nigeria. Mimi Poskitt and Molly Taylor¹ employed this to activate the “sensory, and mental interactivity” (Sakellaridou24) of the audience in *MWW* as seen in the lines below:

I hope that champagne hasn't gone to your head! These IJGB's certainly are mixing Lagos up! You know what an IJGB is – a name for 'I Just Got Back'. You know, these Nigerians coming back from America and London... It's time to get out of the heat, I want you to go into the gallery. Walk straight ahead, out of the food court. Turn right. Take the path on your left and walk up the ramp. Enter the gallery. Once you are inside, stop the track (Audio Lines of *MWW*).

From a personal experience in the crew of *MWW* as the stage manager, audience involvement was significant to the rehearsal process, thereby leading to several exercises in improvisation. Although the lines in the play were focussed on at the later part of the rehearsal, which was continually restructured based on stories about Freedom Park and life in Lagos, envisaged response of the audience was also rehearsed. The director, Mimi Poskitt, further organised a mock performance, which involved audience mainly from the British Council Lagos Theatre Festival team, in order for her to gauge audience reception. In envisaging audience response to the performance, the director employed a method where the actor allows audience members to intrude or break the performance flow with questions relating to the performance. However, care was taken not to overindulge the audience in their involvement, as this may lead to overexcitement on their part. One of the actors (Austine Onuoha) in *MWW*, who played the role of Christian, recounts instances of excitement on the part of some audience who felt the need to keep talking when he got to a line which demanded a response from the audience.

Some directors often do not share interest in this audience involvement. One of such directors is Kenneth Uphopho, the director of *Shattered*. In several rehearsal and performance discussions with the researcher, Uphopho made it clear that he prefers to direct his plays in a manner that gives the audience a sense of belonging, but not

¹Mimi Poskitt; founder and Artistic Director of Look Left Look Right, alongside Molly Taylor; Associate Artist of the same company were invited by the British Council Lagos Theatre Festival in 2014 to conceptualise a performance on Freedom Park

one that encourages communal participation. He expresses some fear of the audience disturbing the flow of a performance, thereby leading to its possible extension in terms of timing, as seen in Schechner's performance of *Commune*², or a riotous case where the actors need to go the extra mile to refocus the attention of the audience. As a result of this, audience involvement in *Shattered* was passive in nature, thereby leading to the same experience witnessed in a conventional setting by the audience. However, attempts at jolting the audience were achieved through actors' entrances, actors moving through the audience and the audience moving from the living room to the bedroom, and back to the living room during the course of the performance. Uphopho's anxiety is thus similar to what could be found in the approach adopted by Mimi Poskitt in *MWW*, with the latter controlling the audience's level of involvement. Nonetheless, Uphopho, in the reckoning of Ola Rotimi's yearnings, as noted in Gilbert and Tompkins, (157), could still be classified among directors who have refused to leave the physical and creative connotations that proscenium arch comes with.

In moving audience from one space to another, especially in the performance of *MWW*, mp3 players proved very useful in locating spaces as seen in the audio lines above. Based on the structure of the performance, only 16 audience members were allowed to experience the performance at a time. They were then divided into 8 groups, with each of them having an mp3 player, an earphone and a map to assist them in locating spaces in the park. However, the voice records in the mp3 players vary from one group to the other. While some actors were positioned at the destination points stated in the mp3 players, other actors were made to meet the audience.

In deconstructing the use of mp3 players and its perceived effect on the audience, the researcher discovered that this device did not only help the audience in locating performance spaces in the park, but also added to the overall aesthetic appreciation of the performance. As seen in the construction of the lines above and other audio recordings of the performance, comic intrusions are often infused to ease the stress of locating a performance space. Due to the exterior locations of most of the performance space like the space between the cells, food court, amphitheatre, and the

²The break in this performance of *Commune* (1971) which was due to the unwillingness of some audience member to participate in a decision-making process, that automatically leads to the continuation of the play, lasted for more than three hours. Detailed study of this performance and audience involvement is in Schechner R. (1971) "Audience Participation".

ramp, the audience were made to experience some sort of relief from walking and the heat (especially in the afternoon performances), by locating other acting spaces in interior locations such as Kongi Harvest Gallery and the Museum. As expected by the director, these locations were convenient and useful in relieving the audience members of stress while on tour of the performance, before they get prompted by an actor to play the next track in their respective mp3 players, which directs them to another location in the park.

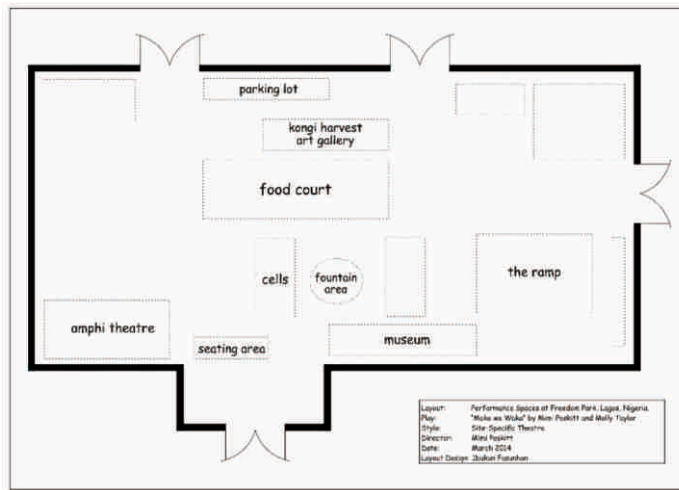


Fig 1. Performance Space layout of *MWW* directed by Mimi Poskitt and Molly Taylor

Owing to the different experiences that the performance takes the audience through, there were varied levels of reception and appreciation. While some members of the audience were fascinated with the approach and were willing to experience the performance, others, who were considerably less in number, were not too satisfied with this approach. The approach to them was not comfortable as they had to always move from one place to another. They also felt that the performance ought not to be ticketed, based on its promenade nature. On another note, the barriers that are often experienced in the distinction between VIP and non-VIP audience in terms of ticket sales were broken.

Audience participation was further made possible by grouping the audience as noted above, thereby indirectly forcing audience members who would not naturally want to associate themselves with others in performance to do so. The reverse was the case in the performance of *Shattered* where audience members who bought VIP tickets felt

that they should be the first to move into the bedroom before the audience that bought regular tickets. However, special treatment of the audience with VIP tickets did not go beyond their access to a comfortable sofa to sit on. The people who bought regular tickets, thereby, had a better engagement with the performance in terms of moving from one space to another. In an interview with the researcher, one of the audience members who bought a VIP ticket said he felt “cheated,” because he was neither given a special treatment during the performance nor given drinks or something to snack on. Hence, the purpose of VIP ticket was defeated, based on the nature of site-specific performances which require a level playing field for all the audience members to experience the performance.

The aforementioned issue is not peculiar to site-specific performances alone, but also to performances in proscenium settings where people who buy VIP tickets are in a disadvantageous sitting position leading to a defect in viewing the performance from a vantage point. An example of this can be found at Muson Centre in Lagos, Nigeria, where the VIP sitting position is located in a boxed area at the extreme left and right sides of the audience area.



Fig 2. Audience members in *Shattered* picking their mp3's and maps and getting ready to start the tour in *MWW*.

Errant Audience and Immersions in *Shattered* and *Make We Waka*

Ibukun: Mimi, the lady is confused on where to go. I need to help her on what to do next and where to go.

Mimi: Leave her. She will surely get it. It's part of the experience.

This was my first encounter with “errant immersion,” and the world of site-specific performances. The notion of “errant immersion” has always been a bone of contention amongst theatre makers in Nigeria who constantly try to think for their audience, especially in the case of site-specific theatre. This happens especially as a result of the culture of dictating to the actors what to do and what to expect from the play. Though it is necessary to always tell actors what to expect as a play starts, it is important, especially in site-specific performance, to disassociate the audience from the 'theatre format' of play reception, and allow them to adopt the 'filmic format' where they can direct their attention to wherever they deem fit (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 82-5).

Alston clarifies that errant immersion should not be associated with the notion of “misfiring or misfitting,” asserting instead that it should be seen as a step taken towards discovering meanings and extending the creative discourse of the Director. He thus likens his concept of errant immersion to that of Roudout's concept of 'mis-spectator' or an 'in-expert' who accidentally reads against the grain' (67). Deliberate mistakes of an audience by an act of boldness or a willingness to errant-immense itself is regarded as antithetical to Alston's notion of errant immersion, as he sees that type of audience as just errant. In giving further definition to immersive theatre, Alston is careful not to equate this with any performance style or building, but to associate with the audience, as they are the ones being immersed. Hence, for him, immersive theatre is more concerned with the “mode of encounter rather than a particular theatre” (71).

In a conversation with the researcher after the performance, the *MWW* audience member who had been confused about where to go said she later engaged with and understood the performance better. She was able to recount all what she experienced previously and in the process of trying to figure out the next track to play, her conversation with her partner during this process made the experience worthwhile. It was discovered that she bought another ticket to experience the performance again the following day.

The Health and Safety Question

The issue of mobility in line with health and safety is one of the most important factors to be taken into consideration in site-specific performances. Although the issue of mobility and safety has been properly dealt with in western site-specific performances, they are still a thing of concern in Nigeria, especially in Lagos. The

concerns range from electrical hazards and the size of performance to space, entry, exits and audience size in correspondence with performance space. In cases of productions which involve technical instruments, lighting or sound designers often insert wires directly into a socket, without properly putting them into plugs. This has led to hazardous situations such as lights suddenly going off during performance amongst many others.

Moving audience through spaces also becomes challenging. Often times, the director either decides to reduce the movement, or the audience withdraws from actively participating in the performance. In some cases, audience, especially in Lagos, who rather prefer to sit during performance, see the site-specific practice as going too far. An example of this is *The Beatification of Area Boy* directed by Wole Soyinka and staged at the Freedom Park in 2015.

This performance was largely mobile in nature, and although the audience enjoyed moving their chairs to other performance spaces in the park during the early stages of the performance, they gradually withdrew as the performance kept moving from one space to another. While some of the audience members stopped moving their chairs, and decided to stand, others who were tired of moving, decided to stay put and wait till the performance came back to where they were sitting. Inasmuch as these chairs made the audience comfortable, they served as hindrance to the mobility of the audience, and also led to some audience getting injured as the performance progressed.

The performance of *Shattered*, as earlier mentioned, involved a less promenade approach of audience moving through spaces. Despite this, the movement of audience was not fluid due to factors ranging from artistic interpretation of the play to performance space. Audience members were made to move from the living room to the bedroom with the aid of a placard which read “follow me” carried by the stage manager. Exits, entrances and the performance space vis-à-vis the audience that occupied the space were of concern in *Shattered*.

Firstly, the location of the performance in Presidential Suite of Eko Hotel created a safety challenge for the audience. Granted that escalator took the audience from the ground floor to the presidential suite located at the uppermost part of the towered structure of the hotel, the space between the escalator exit and the entrance of the suite, which is approximately 11 feet by 8 feet, was of utmost concern. Taking into cognisance the size of this space, audience were at a risk of a possible stampede and loss of life if any emergency occurred during the course of the production.

Furthermore, the size of the exits and entrances is noteworthy. Though there were three exits in the bedroom as seen in Fig 3, which made exiting easy for the audience, the two exits beside the bed were permanently closed during the performance, thereby leaving the audience only the main entrance of 31.5 inches. In sum, the audience would have been trapped if any emergency had happened in the room.

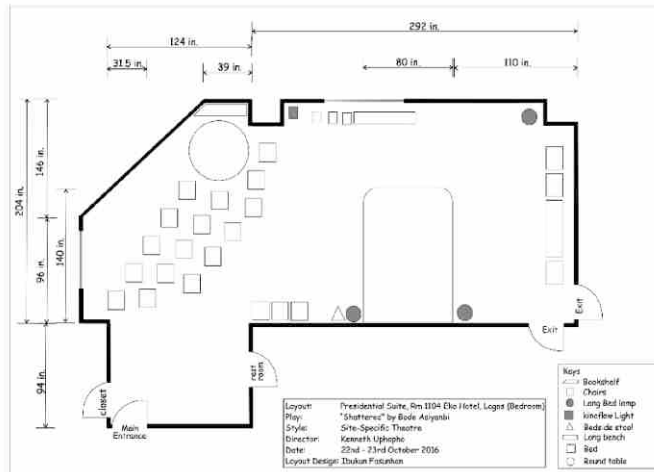


Fig 3. Layout of the Bedroom in *Shattered*

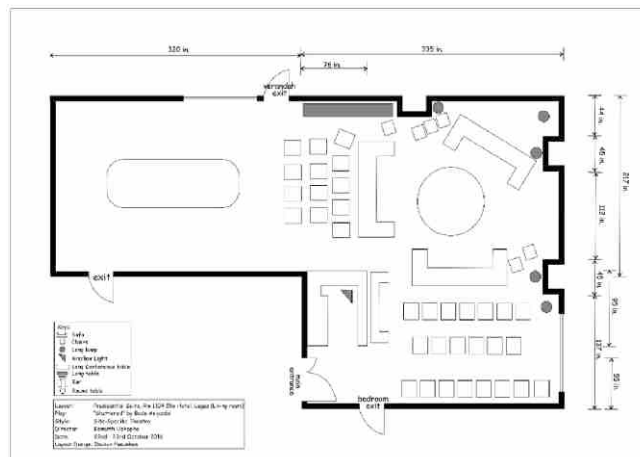


Fig. 4. Layout of the Living Room in *Shattered*

Although there is a passage (approx. 180 by 320 inches) that leads to the living room which partly gives the audience a sense of space in case of any emergency, the fact that four exits lead to this passage, is hazardous. A single exit of 31.5 inches further

compounds this safety hazard, based on the health and safety requirement that “each exit should lead via an independent route to a place of public safety” (*RU Safe?3*)³. The width of the only exit route is 31.5 inches or 800mm. This negates the minimum of 900mm meant for an exit route in an existing route (4). It makes the venue for the performance of *Shattered* totally unsafe for the audience.

The size of the audience (40 members) also posed a great challenge based on the arrangements of chairs, especially in the living room. The close arrangement of the chairs and the number of chairs in the room were hazardous to the audience, as this could lead to audience members sustaining injuries in a case of emergency. The number of people in the room also exceeded its capacity. A pictorial example of audience exiting the room is seen in Figure 5, where a possible emergency and the likelihood of stampede can be envisaged. Regardless of the size of the living room which includes the area covered by the long conference table as seen in Figure 4, the playing area throughout the performance was restricted to where the chairs are. In other words, the performance of *Shattered* went against health and safety rules in terms of the audience size that ought to be in the space based on the exits, entrances, and space in relation to arrangement of chairs.

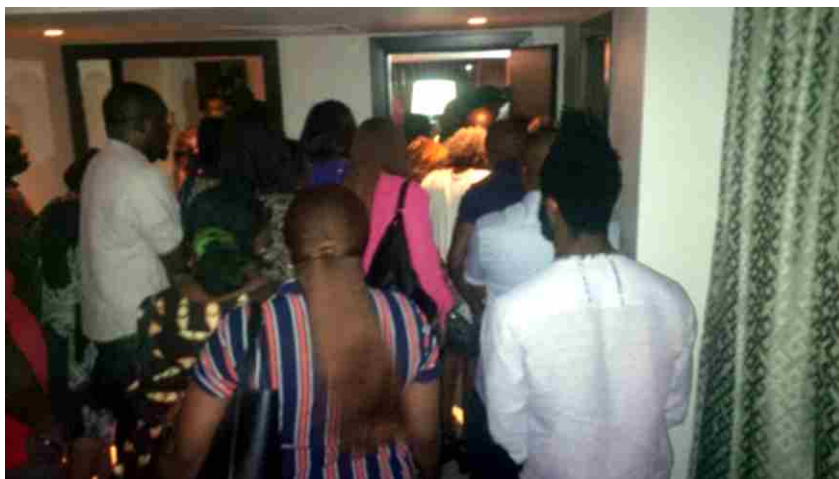


Fig. 5: Audience exiting the bedroom scene at *Shattered*

³A copy of the ebook “RU Safe can be downloaded from www.rusafe.org.uk, to get more guidelines on health and safety.

Towards a Re-Orientation in Performing Site-Specific Theatre in Lagos

Site-specific theatre is gradually gaining grounds, especially in Nigerian theatre festivals like British Council Lagos Theatre Festival, and Lagos Fringe, where plays in unconventional setting are mostly encouraged. While this art form is at its formative stage⁴, there is a need to re-orientate practitioners in this field in the aspect of mobility and audience involvement, which most directors happen to be struggling with.

The issue of unwillingness to participate in moving from one space to another was experienced by the researcher in *Shattered* and *Beatification of Area Boy* as discussed above. Since this approach is new to the audience, who are used to the conventional sitting arrangement, there should be consistency in adopting this art form in performances. Restructuring ticket sales and seats, and a well thought out creative approach in audience involvement need to be employed by the directors in adopting the site-specific style. This style should however not be mistaken for a cheap (in terms of funding) way to produce performances, but one which can either be cheap or expensive depending on the performance. Site-specific theatre is also one which requires a well-thought-out plan for actor-audience-space interaction.

Although seats were needed in the performance of *Beatification of an Area Boy* for the elderly audience and those with disability, chairs in site-specific performances should be minimal, especially where the performance is highly promenade and participatory in terms of audience involvement. Thus, chairs can be stacked in a corner in a room, depending on performance structure, for interested audience members to pick if they wish to sit.

Eradication of VIP tickets will help to a large extent in reducing any form of special treatment during site-specific performances. Going by the experience of the VIP audience in *Shattered*, there was absolutely no need to create class separation, as site-specific performance itself is inclusive, and one of its major purpose is to foster audience engagement.

Moving audience through spaces can be made more engaging either with the aid of mp3 players or maps as seen in the performance of *MWW* or by creatively using the actors to move the audience. Manipulating the audience into participation through jokes, acting, as witnessed in *MWW* is a great tool to explore, especially in Nigeria,

⁴Formative stage in the sense that this style is currently widely practiced in Lagos, although there were traces of site-specific culture in traditional egungun and gelede performances

where security is a main issue, and people are constantly finding it hard to trust one another. When this is done, people can be relaxed enough to engage in a tour with other audience members without reservations. Using actors to move audience from the living room to the bedroom in *Shattered* with a placard could have been made more engaging for the audience by employing one of the actors in the scene to tell the audience to follow her into the bedroom. One of the audience members in *Shattered* recounted that the use of placard disassociated him a bit from the “emotions that has been built from the start of the performance.” Hence, audience are in this play prevented from being too emotionally attached with the use of placards that Brecht is often known for in his epic theatre approach. While Brecht's approach was not the intention of the director, the use of placards made the audience to tilt towards empathy and not sympathy for the performance.

Although the unwillingness to participate on the part of the audience might be seen as negative, it can also add to the aesthetics of the performance or help the audience to understand the play better. This can either be possible through the audience experience with the space, noise, co-audience members, actors' lines from a distance, or any other element in the performance space. Hence, forced participation or appeal to an audience member who decides not to totally engage himself in the performance should not be encouraged.

Health and safety need to be taken into full consideration during any site-specific performance. Requirements for viewing this performance also needs to be put on the posters so that audience are in the know of what is required of them before coming to see the performance. As such, they can get themselves ready by, for example, not being 'improperly' dressed (e.g. wearing high heels that inhibit easy movement) for a performance that is largely mobile in nature.

Conclusion

To borrow from Schechner (“Audience Participation”), audience members play the role of the bass line, while actors play the role of the melody line. Making reference to the use of guitars in music, the lead guitar plays the melody, while the bass guitar supports the lead guitar, and adds flavour to it. While the bass guitar (audience) does not function every time as the lead guitar (actors) would, it is important that the director of a site-specific performance sees the audience and actors from this angle. Though audience members are needed to make sense of the performance and engage with it, this should be done from an angle of the base line where interruptions are

controlled, even though the lead guitar (actor) which plays the melody has made it all possible.

Further alluding to suggestions made by Schechner, site-specific theatre needs to be seen from the angle of “social occasion” (“Audience Participation,” 75), where audience members are not forced to be part of the play or are guided to different sites for the performance. Based on the re-introduction or “freshness” of the theatrical style in the current Nigerian theatre practice, audience need to be allowed to discover themselves in the performance process. Only when this is done can the “true theatre” that Soyinka calls for be achieved, and a true appreciation of site-specific theatre be embraced in Nigeria.

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