



Original Research Article

Challenges Of Directing The Child Actor In Nigeria: A Consideration Of Ibukun Fasunhan’s Production Of *Moremi*

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ABSTRACT	
<p>ARTICLE INFORMATION</p> <p>Received: 15 Dec. 2018 Received in revised: 3 Jan. 2018 Accepted: 6 Jan. 2019 Available online: 8 Jan. 2019</p> <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Challenges of directing child actor University theatres in Nigeria Children’s theatre Ibukun Fasunhan <i>Moremi</i></p>	<p>This article is prompted by the perceived inadequacy of substantial number of child actors on the Nigerian stage. The theatre seems to have been turned completely to an all-adult-only activity because it has become increasingly difficult to see children performing even the roles conceived for their age, moral, social and physical presence. In most university theatres in Nigeria, undergraduate students who are diminutive in nature are usually cast to play roles meant for children wherever the need arises. Even in most professional theatres, plays which contain children’s roles are either totally avoided or actors with diminutive stature are cast to play children’s roles meant for child actors. As a result, children are almost entirely wiped off the Nigerian stage. It is in view of this that this study used historicocritical and direct observation methods to examine the challenges of directing the child actor in Nigeria, using Ibukun Fasunhan’s production of <i>Moremi</i>, a cultural play written by Ayodele Arigbabu. The conclusion reached is that the challenges of directing child actors are caused by both natural/psychological factors and environmental/external factors. Based on this it is recommended that university theatres should adopt a more practical approach to teaching children’s theatre, and directors of child actors need to do some studies on child psychology and child development theories.</p>

1. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that an audience is usually enthralled and captivated whenever it is privileged to see a child actor performs brilliantly in the theatre because as Meredith Ott observed, “children have a strong and powerful effect on the audience when they appear on stage” (iii). The audience, who is often bewildered and amazed by the brilliant performance of a child actor, usually exhibits a high level of appreciation that it applauds and praises the child actor even while the child is still on stage, especially when that child is performing in the midst of adults. In such a situation, it is common for members of the audience to get as fascinated and excited as to become unaware of the effort of the adult performers in the production, especially if the role played by the child is a major one. Based on this natural phenomenon, playwrights have been taking the bold steps to explore audience psychology by including children characters in their plays, and few directors, probably motivated by the quest to achieve verisimilitude, use child actors in play productions. In this article, those referred to as children are those within the average ages of 5 to 10 years old.

In the theatre practised in the earliest recorded times, females and children were restricted from appearing on the stage and as a result, could not become theatre artistes. Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy have posited that in Greek theatre “all actors were men” (19). This does not mean that there were no female or children’s roles in the plays that were performed, but because it was considered inappropriate for women and children to appear on stage in classical Greek theatre, both male and female roles were played by men (Oscar Brockett and Robert Ball 70). For instance, regarding children, Ott notes that “a child role can be found in Euripides’ violent tragedies such as *Trojan Women*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Electra*, and more... and Shakespeare also included young children in his plays such as *Richard III* and *Macbeth*” (12). However, as the norm in classical Greek and Elizabethan times, young males, rather than real children, played these roles.

With time, the importance of the role of children in performance gained recognition because it was realized that though an adult may theatrically portray a child on stage, such character portrayal by an adult can never have the same impact that a child actor can have on an audience. As Aristotle has argued in his *Poetics*, humans crave to see imitation and accurate representation of things (Dukore 34). All adults have

experienced childhood. Therefore, seeing the live bodies of children portraying difficult situations, suffering, death, mischief, or any other actions on stage can cause intrigue, fear and interest in an audience. This is because involving children in dramatic production may provide a perfect reflection of the society and therefore may inspire members of the audience to re-examine their behaviour.

With the merging of traditional African and Western theatre practices, playwrights in Nigeria now include children's roles in their plays with complex plot structure, verbose lines and complicated situations for the child actor. The concern now is how a director can realize such complicated situations with inexperienced child actors since an actor's previous experience in life is very crucial in interpreting a role and embodying a character. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the challenges of directing the child actor in Nigeria, using Ibukun Fasunhan's production of *Moremi* as case study. But the meaning of children's theatre and its practice in Nigeria would be explored first as a way of foregrounding our discussion.

2. Children's Theatre

What is children's theatre? It is easier to ask this seemingly simple question than to answer it because there is no one perfect definition of the term as has been revealed by the heated and never-ending debate among scholars of children's theatre as well as its practitioners from different parts of the globe. Cheela Chilala submits that:

The general understanding of children's theatre in Africa differs from the Western one...The characteristic features of African children's theatre are different from those of children's theatre as practised in the Western world. This is largely due to differences in cultural environment as well as perception. Also, the historical development of children's theatre in Europe and Africa has followed dissimilar paths, although both European and African theatre have their origins in ritual and ceremony associated with religion. (1)

Obviously, then, one of the reasons responsible for the varying views of the concept of children's theatre is associated with the differences in cultural environments in which it grew, as well as the different perceptions and values that led to its development in

different parts of the world. While Chilala's view is valid, Goldberg gives another reason responsible for the varied views. To him, "part of the confusion surrounding the area of dramatic activity by and for children stems from terminology"(3). In agreement with Goldberg's submission, Kamla Alwaleed Al Hinai argues that "since the appearance of the term "children's theatre," various researchers have given many interpretations and explanations" (46). The failure to provide an all-encompassing definition has led to the continuous evolvement of several theories relating to children's theatre. Buttressing this claim, Dennis Eluyefa points out that "there is no universal agreement within academic discourse on the parameters in which the term should be defined. While some scholars suggest age as a defining factor, others think it should be decided by the performers who design a piece of theatre based on their knowledge of the children audience" (79). To some scholars, these different views exist because the term is used to literally describe the theatre that involves children in one way or the other.

It is clear from the foregoing that children's theatre has been researched by many scholars and their definitions of the term vary and differ as their faces vary and differ from one another. This, however, is not an excuse to evade the question. To define is to adorn a blurred area of thought with a wall of meaningful words. Applying this stance to the topic being examined, some of the varying views provided by scholars are presented here.

Eluyefa explains succinctly that "children's theatre is specifically created and performed for children audience, either by children actors or professional adult actors or a combination of both" (82). Eluyefa's explanation needs no further clarification. Although it states that it can either be performed by child actors or professional adult actors, a performance can only be regarded as children's theatre if it is specifically targeted at children audience. Even though he recognizes that accompanying members of the family can be part of the audience, he stresses strongly that "the primary audience for all forms of children's theatre is children" (82). This view fails to realize that there are situations whereby children may use theatrical means to express their concern about certain unpleasant events in the society. In such an instance, adults, rather than children, become the targeted audience, and the performance is still children's theatre.

For J. H. Davis and Walkins M. J. L., "a children's theatre exists whenever a production of a written script is directed specifically for the child audience" (18). This conceptualisation also suggests that the presence of children audience is one of the

deciding factors of what constitute children's theatre. They do not also restrict the performers in children's theatre to adults alone, but believe that the performers could include children or adults. However, they observe that the combination of both; adults in adult roles, children in child roles is preferable, and suggest that the child actors should be cast to perform according to their qualifications (18). The second deciding factor they point out is that there should be an existing text for children's theatre to occur. This script must be carefully written with the special interest of children audience in mind. They explain that what makes children's theatre special is the fact that the director is not necessarily concerned with the play's therapeutic value to his or her actors but rather with its dramatic value to his audience (18).

Here, children's theatre is defined, not only in relation to its target audience, but also in relation to an existing text. But just like the first definition, this view is not perfect either. First, there are situations where children perform for adult audience in the theatre. So we do not need to have children seated as the audience before such performances can be considered children's theatre. Second, performance in children's theatre is beyond scripted play. In Africa for instance, masquerading can be regarded as performance in children's theatre. This view is, therefore, one-sided because it neglects African experience of theatre.

In his definition of the term, Goldberg also observes that "children's theatre is a formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children. The goal of children's theatre is to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience. To this end, children's theatre employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre, using some of them in special ways" (5). This definition claims like the first two definitions, that the primary factor that makes a theatrical performance children's theatre is the target audience, the children audience. In Goldberg's view therefore, if the audience is not children audience, the performance cannot be seen as children's theatre.

Goldberg restricts the audience to children, but he is not specific about who the performers should be. What truly matters is the enjoyment and experiences provided for the audience. Goldberg stresses the need for the child actor to be well equipped for the task, and argues that the term children's theatre only applies if "the audience enjoyment is the main consideration, and the occasional child (child actor) was chosen because he or she is sufficiently talented to project the role, rather than because he needs the opportunity to develop poise or self-confidence" (5). For Goldberg, children's

theatre is basically the same as adult theatre because “it is a formal theatrical experience... that employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre” (5). Goldberg’s definition is concrete and broad. Nevertheless, children’s theatre is not always formal. It could be ceremonial or informal.

Some scholars based their definitions of the term on its purpose, objective, function, quality and processes involved. For instance, Osakue Omoera conceptualises children’s theatre as an educational instructional approach which focuses on development through drama; it is a relaxed kind of theatre that is geared towards developing the participants. Its main objective is to enhance learning and intellectual development rather than entertainment of the audience (61). From this position, a number of factors determine children’s theatre. First, it is an educational instructional approach which aids learning. Evidently, therefore, it takes place in a school environment. Second, it must be geared towards developing the participants. This means that the performers are obviously children, not adults. Adults, however, guide the children. Third, the audience is usually children since it is to enhance learning and their intellectual development. But the definition still falls short in some ways because children’s theatre does not always take place in school environment. It could take place in a public square during festival activities.

Poston-Anderson provides a broader perspective on the term when he explains that “children’s theatre can refer both to a performance acted by adults for children and to a rehearsed play presented by children for others” (362). The audience here is not restricted to children as noted in the earlier claims. Since the audience is not defined, it could be adults, children or combination of both. Even the performers are not restricted to either adults or children. A performance is children’s theatre provided it involves children’s active participation one way or another.

It is clear that this definition covers everything that constitutes children’s theatre. Children could be the audience, co-performers with adults or the only performers. It is the theatrical performance whereby children are anything and everything: a sort of catch-all-term which refers to all the activities involving children in the theatre which include adults acting for children, children acting with adults and children acting for children and/or adults. Therefore, children’s theatre manifests in three basic forms determined by the extent of children’s involvement, that is, the degree to which it is participatory.

The first form is termed *theatre for children* where adults perform for children audience who are passively involved in the action on stage. The content is usually carefully directed towards educating, correcting and entertaining the audience. Since children are merely audience, the performance must be well tailored so it can capture and sustain audience's interest. The second form is *theatre with children*. Here, adults and children work together to present a theatrical piece to an undifferentiated audience. Usually, the adults in this theatre are the ones who coordinate the children. This form, if properly handled, serves as training for children and equips them for the third form of children's theatre. Because children are co-performers and actively involved in the on-going-stage-action, their attention is easily aroused and sustained. *Theatre by children* is the third form of children's theatre where the performers are all children. They generate the ideas, direct and coordinate themselves. They might perform a scripted play or engage in improvisation. Their performance could be a cultural display, masquerading, dance, among others. This form is the height of children's theatre and it is the second form that must serve as the preparatory ground for it to happen. Hopefully, this categorization helps to simplify and establish a proper understanding of the term as well as nullifies all the confusions associating with it.

3. Professional Children's Theatre Practice in Nigeria

The practice of children's theatre in the indigenous way in Nigeria today is disappearing. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to see children performing in the streets today as they used to do in time past. Although Ngozi Udengwu acknowledges that "not too long ago, children could be seen going from house to house and from street to street performing," he also complains that "that theatre culture, however, is almost completely dead now" (136). Even the so called professional children's theatre in which we try to adopt the Western approach where performance is done for a formal audience in a theatre building is not even getting the attention it deserves. As a matter of fact, Nigeria is behind some African counties when it comes to the practice of professional children's theatre. Lamenting about the discouraging patronage professional children theatre practice receives in Nigeria, Udengwu states that

This country has never taken children's theatre serious. The best we have ever had was lip-service like that paid by the National Theatre with the

production of *The Flute* and *Tales by Moonlight* on television, where adults act out folktales for young viewers. Theatre Arts departments on Nigerian universities teach their students children's theatre without children; arts councils and cultural centres are silent on the matter. Are we losing sight of the importance of the child in the society or are we just failing in our duty to give our children good grounding in their lives? (137)

There is no need contending the above observation because it has just stated the obvious. Happily though, some reputable private primary and secondary schools in Lagos, Benin, Port Harcourt, Abuja, among other places in Nigeria have come to realize the importance of theatrical activities such as drama, dance and music in the all-round development of children. As a result, they have now included these activities in their extra-curricular activities. Such reputable schools now have their pupils/students/children present drama, music and dance on prize-giving day and others school's social activities. Some schools even have days dedicated to some of these activities. There are drama day, cultural day and others. Suffice to say that if other schools, public and private, emulate this trend, professional children's theatre in Nigeria will gain remarkable and international reputation. It is important to note too that some professional children's theatre troupes have started springing up in some places in the country such as Lagos.

Ibukun Fasunhan: A Children's Theatre Director

Born in Ekiti State, Ibukun Fasunhan is a professional stage manager and children's theatre director. He is currently a Ph.D. student of Theatre Arts in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. He also obtained his B.A and M.A degrees at the University of Lagos. He manages a franchise of Helen Ogrady Drama Academy in Surulere, Lagos. The academy runs in several African countries such as South Africa and Gabon with its headquarters in Australia. The academy has a well-structured children's theatre programme. Apart from his drama academy where he teaches drama, acting and produce plays with his pupils, he also gets contracted and consulted by private schools to direct their pupils in dramatic productions. He is a children's theatre director.

The Challenges of Directing Child Actors

Directing is indispensable to every type of theatrical production. Because of its importance, it has always existed in one way or another throughout the history of theatre. It is the process by which a director “rehearses the performers and coordinate their work with that of others such as the designers, to make certain that the event is performed appropriately, intelligently, and in an exciting manner” (Wilson 145). However, as earlier indicated, this article is prompted by the perceived inadequacy of substantial number of child actors on Nigerian stage, and the factor responsible for this ugly phenomenon may be entirely ascribed to the challenges of directing the child actor. This is not to say that there are no challenges when directing adults but the challenges of directing children are peculiar and significantly different from that of adults. That is why the study is devoted to the identification and analysis of the challenges of directing the child actor in Nigeria with a special focus on the experiences of a child actors’ director, Ibukun Fasunhan, in the production of *Moremi*, a cultural play written by Ayodele Arigbabu.

These challenges are classified into two major categories: natural/psychological factors and environmental/external factors. By natural factors, we mean the challenges caused by the nature of children, that is, by being whom they are – children. Environmental factors, on the other hand, are all the challenges that originate from external sources and have influence on the children. Some challenges, however, are a mixture of both natural and environmental factors.

Natural Factors

The first challenge in directing child actors is that of casting. In every dramatic production, appropriate casting is a very important asset because it is one of the factors that shape a production. Marian F. Monta and Jack R. Stanley note that “on stage, if you have a great cast, the show will be great. Even if the sets and costumes are not the most wonderful, a terrific cast will have the audience thinking they have seen a wonderful play...(The) most important asset as a stage director, then, is the ability to select a good cast and to communicate well with them” (85). A director first expresses his or her artistic vision about a production through casting. Since casting can either make or mar a production, a director must, therefore, handle this preproduction stage carefully and

wisely. Casting is usually done based on the director's understanding and interpretation of the script and his or her knowledge of the people to be cast for roles.

The first challenge the director of *Moremi* faced was casting the child actors for the roles in his production. The director did not know the children personally. As a result, it became very difficult to know "who" plays "what". Casting is indeed an arduous task even for adult productions. However, adults are comparatively easier to be auditioned and cast for roles in a production. The challenge in casting children lies in the fact that the method of casting that works for adults might not work for children. The casting for the production of *Moremi* was an enormous challenge to the director because he needed to get it right. He learnt that for a director to do well when casting, he needs to carefully and discretely observe the children so that he can cast them for roles based on the way they normally interact, not on the way they read the play. Casting children for roles requires time, patience and insight so that it can be done appropriately and intelligently.

Another aspect of the challenge casting children presents (especially in children's theatre and/or school play) is that some children are indecisive in nature. They might show lack of interest in certain activities at the beginning only to come back later to express their interest in those same activities they were apathetic to initially. This was what the director encountered when directing *Moremi*. After casting those who were interested, the children who showed apathy initially came later to express interest in the activities they rejected earlier. Furthermore, some children were not quite sure where their interest was. Some wanted to act and were given roles. However, when they saw their friends dancing (in the same production), they ran to join the dancers, and after a while, they ran back to join the acting group again. Those who were dancers did the same thing. Moreover, some children swapped roles between themselves without the knowledge of the director. For instance, the child who finally played the character, Olorogbo, was not cast by the director. He did not even come out to audition for any role because he was timid initially. While alone with his friend who was initially cast for the role, he collected the script and read it and then afterwards begged his friend to give him that role and his friend obliged him. Surprisingly, he played the role very well.



Figure 1: Ibukun casting children for the production of *Moremi* at Mind Builders School

Another challenge in directing the child actor is that of self-consciousness and shyness. While it is true that some children can be very assertive and bold, some are rather shy and overly self-conscious. Griffel states that “children come with a wide variety of personalities. Inevitably you will find one or two very forward kids in the group. These kids will shoot up their hands and chime in with their bright ideas at any given opportunity. Others are so timid or withdrawn that you can hardly get them to speak aloud a single line of dialogue” (1). These two attributes do not help an actor in any way. Rather, they hinder creativity (Omoera and Ozoemenam 154-154), and make them difficult to direct. Ibukun experienced this as a challenge in directing *Moremi*. The child actress who played *Moremi* was a very shy person. She could not speak out for people to hear at the beginning of rehearsal. But through patience and understanding, Ibukun was able to get something wonderful out of her.

Yet another challenge in directing the child actor is that of short attention span and easy distraction. Compared to adults, children naturally have a short attention span when it comes to learning or doing any serious activity. As a result of this natural phenomenon, directing them becomes a big challenge. Griffel submits that “children generally have varied attention spans, although some children may be able to sit still while others float away into a world of their own almost immediately” (1). Unlike adults that could endure hours of rehearsal, children attention span is short and can easily be distracted. As a result, before a director can achieve anything meaningful with a set of

easily distracted child actors during rehearsal, he would have to face a lot of challenges. Closely related to short attention span is distraction. What children want is to go and play with their mates. Getting their complete attention becomes a huge challenge to the director. Moreover, some might forget 'blockings' easily because of their playful nature. In the production of *Moremi*, the director encountered this as part of the challenges of directing child actors. *Moremi* was performed with primary 5 and 6 pupils. Almost all of them saw the rehearsal period as play time. To get them to fully pay attention was very challenging.



Figure 2: Child actors and actresses distracted in one of the rehearsals of *Moremi*

Negative response to criticism is another challenge a director faces in directing the child actor. As an instructor, a director disciplines members of his or her cast when necessary so that everyone can work assiduously towards realizing the goal of the production. But disciplining a child actor can be very challenging. This is because it might yield the opposite of what was intended. A child might decide to drop his or her role arbitrarily without informing the director. This is supported by Rick Davis who submits that:

The first thing you keep in mind is that children, whether they appear to be the best-behaved, disciplined and respectful individuals you have ever met, children are still children. You cannot talk to them the same way you might speak to your adult actors. Children have sensitive psyches and will respond to criticism in much different ways than adults. They can also be hurt much more severely by simple words that you would think are harmless. (1)

In the production of *Moremi*, this was one of the challenges faced by the director. He had to be very careful with the children so that they would not get hurt. But no matter how careful he was, some children still felt hurt sometimes. For instance, the child who played Moremi cried when she felt the voice of the producer was harsh when correcting her. Some children refused to on stage to rehearse some times because they felt hurt by the corrections they received from the director.

Another major challenge a director of the child actor often face is the difficulty of making the child act in a particular way. As Charlie Mitchell argues, “actors must explore the emotional world of the character” (51). This can be extremely perplexing for the director since it is hardly possible for the director to know beforehand whether or not a child is ready to receive certain materials. In the production of *Moremi*, it was not easy for the director to reach the actors’ ‘hearts’ as he desired. As a result, some actions were rehearsed over and over again before the children could get close to what he wanted. A lot of explanation was made too. In fact, since all the child actors gave him this challenge, he was always exhausted at the end of every rehearsal.



Figure 3: The Kabiyesi in the production of *Moremi* reacting to terrible news Baba Fakunle just delivered from the gods

Level of understanding and acting the subtext poses a formidable challenge to the director of the child actor also. As noted earlier, an actor must explore the emotional world of his character. To get into that emotional world, understanding the “what”, “why”, “when”, “where” and “how” a character says what it says and does what he does is a necessity. An actor can easily enter a character’s world through its words. However, the meaning of words in drama might not really be as direct as one might wrongly conclude sometimes. An actor’s level of understanding of a language determines how well he can embody a particular character. The level of understanding and vocabulary development of some children may not be very strong. In this case, the director has to explain everything to the children so that the essence of the production will not be lost. This eats into the rehearsal time and makes rehearsal longer than would normally be necessary.

This was the case with the production of *Moremi*, a play full of proverbs. It was obvious that the children did not understand the meaning of those proverbs and it showed in their actions during rehearsals. The director had to help them get the meaning before they were able to render such lines correctly and act accordingly. In spite of the director’s effort, some lines were almost recited by the children who could not speak audibly enough.

Insufficient life experience of the child is another challenge facing the child actor’s director. Constantin Stanislavsky successfully coded a system of actor training to help an actor play his role truthfully. One of the methods is “emotional memory” where an actor is expected to draw inspiration from his previous experiences or from things that have happened in the past that he can easily relate with, which help him embody his role convincingly. This technique, no doubt, helps both the actor and the director since an actor’s previous experiences serve as the foundation for both the director and actor to build on. But in a situation where an actor has not gained enough experiences in life on account of his age, this method becomes more or less irrelevant.

Buttressing this point about child actors, Camille L. Poisson explains that “as actors, they tend to portray characters in stereotypical terms. Internalizing a role at this age is difficult, for they have trouble getting in touch with feelings and expressing emotions, and have little life experience to draw from” (56). The amount of life experience an actor has can affect how well he plays his role. A director is to help the child enter the character so that he can play his role convincingly. Where sufficient life

experience is lacking, it undoubtedly becomes a challenge to the director as there is no foundation for him to build on. The director of *Moremi* faced this challenge when directing *Moremi*. The children who played Kabiesi, Moremi, Olorogbo, Esu and Esimiri, all lacked experiences to relate with.



Figure: 4A.



Figure: 4B. These two photos above (4A & 4B) show the two warring kingdoms captured in *Moremi*. Directing these actors to embody their characters was a challenge to the director

The challenge of voice and theatre building is another problem area for the director of the child actor. This challenge is a combination of natural and environmental factors. It is a well-known fact that children have low/tiny voices because their voices have not fully developed yet. Still, they are expected to speak loud enough for the audience to hear irrespective of the fact that they are children. Understandably, this presents a challenge to the director. Some resolve this challenge by employing the use of microphones on stage. But in the case of technical failure, the negative effect is always glaringly noticeable. This was the director's experience in the production of *Moremi* and it almost ruined the production. The hall was large, constructed with marble, tiled floor and the audience was sizable. There were also many openings – windows and doors – through which the voices of the child actors escaped the hall. Microphones were given to the children to use. Unfortunately, there was technical failure and the children almost forgot all their 'blockings' as they were practically dragging the microphones. Besides the technical failure, passing microphones was not part of the rehearsal.



Figure 5: An actor waiting for the other to drop microphone before they can fight. Spontaneity is lost.



Figure 6: As shown here, a child actor (left) who played Esu in the production of *Moremi* decided to execute all the movements/gestures he was taught during rehearsal and forgot about the mic in his hand. Unfortunately, the audience could not hear him properly

Environmental/External Factors

Other challenges a director faces in directing children in a production are those which emanate from environmental factors. Parents, who are undeniably first among the external factors, are a huge challenge a director contends with when directing children because they have a lot of influence on their children. Their decisions can adversely affect the artistic vision of the director. This is because children are dependent on their parents and they do not usually have a choice in any matter once their parents have taken their decision. An adult (20 years and above) might be able to influence his or her parents' decision through an act of disobedience or persuasion. A situation whereby parents decide what their children should do or not do usually leaves the director hanging until the production is over. Some parents decide the roles their children can play, determine how long they will be available for rehearsal and when they will be available. Situations such as these definitely frustrate a director. Griffel remarks that one challenge with directing children is the parents. Most parents are great to work with. Most are glad, grateful and proud for their children to have a chance to be in a play. They love inviting grandma and grandpa, aunt and uncle and other community members to

the play and generally glow with joy and pride as their children perform. However, there's rarely a time when you don't have at least one parent that is either neglectful, disgruntled or a stark raving stage mom... Ask anyone who works with kids. Teachers, dance instructors, sports coaches will all tell you parents can be a real pain in the neck (2).

For instance, when the director of *Moremi* directed a Christmas play at Newland Elementary School, Lagos, the father of the lead child actor decided that the family was travelling on the day of the production. He had to look for another child to learn the lines immediately. There was no way the performance of the new actor could equal the other who had been rehearsing the role since the production process began. This ugly incidence also repeated itself in the production of *Moremi*. Two children dropped the role of Esimiri before the last child who finally played it. The first girl dropped out of the play because her father wanted the family to travel for summer while the other dropped her role because her parents said the role was that of a river goddess. Some children did not participate in the production because their parents said it was not moralistic enough. Some said it was too fetish. Some parents even see drama as a waste of time. They perceive it as a non-serious activity for not serious minded people and would therefore not want their children to get involved in it. At the same time, some parents also complained that their children were given minor roles to play. Obviously, then, parents can make directing children a very challenging enterprise.

Closely related to parental factor is the challenge religion presents to directors of child actor or children theatre. Religious intolerance has eaten deep into every institution in the country. When directing a play based on Christians' doctrines and beliefs such as Christmas, children of Muslims do not participate. For example, in the production of Christmas play mentioned earlier, a Muslim parent prevented his child from participating although the child wanted to and was the best actor cast for that role.

Christians do the same thing too. Many Christian parents frown at using their children in roles that have anything to do with African traditional religion (ATR). Although drama is make-believe, they usually feel that their children are being compromised and corrupted. Some even feel that their children will get possessed by an evil spirit by participating in such drama. The director of *Moremi* had a lot of challenges caused by religion. For example, there was no child who was willing to play the river-

goddess, Esimiri. The child who took the role first had to drop it because her Christian parents did not welcome it. Before the director could finally get someone to play that role, he had to modernise everything about the character. The costume, lines and actions were completely changed. In fact, everything Esimiri is known for was almost completely stripped off the character before a child could accept to play the role without many complaints from her parents. The same thing happened to the child who played the diviner. His parents warned the director in advance that their child must not use any diabolical object. For instance, the child would not touch “opele,” a sacred object a diviner uses in his or her line of job. Even a make-believe opele constructed by the director himself would not be acceptable. So the director had to make him use a laptop instead. In addition, instead of chanting incantations, the child used the nursery rhyme – *twinkle, twinkle little stars*. Needless to mention that this really is a challenge to a director as it negatively affects his or her directorial concept and vision. He or she is stripped off the freedom to create in the name of religion.

It is imperative to note that though parents are mentioned here as the ones who rejected roles on behalf of their children, some children have been well indoctrinated to reject roles in the name of religion without waiting for their parents. Ideally, a director should not demand that his or her child actors do anything they are not comfortable with or things that their parents would not accept. Even though religion might also present itself as a challenge in cases relating to adults, it is more serious with children because an adult can easily reason that the performance is not real but a child might think otherwise.



Figure 7: As shown in this photo, the child that played Baba Fakunle, the diviner, used a laptop instead of opele which diviners normally use. This automatically transformed the serious issue in this scene to a comical one, and that was never the vision of the director.



Figure 8: Esimiri and Esu in the production of *Moremi*. They look more like musicians than the characters they are portraying because of religion.

Funding is incontestably one of the challenges of directing child actors in Nigeria. This is especially true if the director is a professional children's theatre director running his or her own children theatre troupe. Many people have not come to value the practice of children theatre in Nigeria the way it is valued in other parts of the world. As a result, children's theatre is not properly practised in the country and the reason for that is

partly because of inadequate funds and support from government and other agencies. In some private schools where it is even recognized, it is not well funded too. This underfunding goes a long way to affect the director since it makes it impossible for him or her to get the right costumes, makeup, lighting, theatre, props, set, etc., that will make the production a success. In addition, there are times when the director will need to give refreshments (sweets, ice-creams, biscuits and other snacks) to the children as a way of encouraging them to do more or commending them. Without adequate funding, the director is unable to do this.

Theatrical conventions present their challenges too. Acting is a profession. Although there are a lot of people who are engaging in it without any formal training of any kind, it does not rule out the fact that it is a profession. To act in the theatre, there are some terms that are supposed to be at an actor's finger tips. Having the knowledge of these terms such as stage geography, body positioning, etc., which are what the director relies on when instructing an actor on how to move on stage, makes the task of the director a little bit easy. In a situation where an actor does not know any of these terms and how they are being employed, it becomes a challenge to the director. This is why Shifra Schonmann submits that "there are very many theatrical conventions... The use of them in the theatre is problematic for young people" (88). So instead of a director to simply employ acting and directing terminologies in giving 'blockings' and viewing what he or she is composing from the auditorium, he or she has to be running up and down the stage in order to position the actors.



Figure 9: The director, placing the child actors on the right positions on stage.



Figure 10: The director, pointing to where a child actress is supposed to be on stage.

In directing *Moremi*, the director was practically arranging the children on stage (as shown in the pictures above). In fact, he was almost always on the stage with them. When it was time for an actor to cross from stage right to stage left, he took the child and moved him to where he wanted him to be. After that, he would run down to see the stage picture and run back to the stage again. This, of course, was quite a challenge.

Insufficiency of time and effect of broken home also pose a big challenge to the director of the child actor. The age grades of children studied in this paper range from 5 – 10 years old. Children at this age are still in school. In Nigeria nowadays, pupils/students now stay longer in school than adults in the universities. It is not uncommon for some children to leave for school before 7:00 a.m. and return about 5:00 p.m. In cases like this, a child actor normally has just few hours for rehearsal and that is not always sufficient for the director to achieve anything worthwhile with the child. In some professional theatre such as the National Theatre (in Lagos, Nigeria), theatrical activities that have to do with children are put on hold until the children are on holidays. Even during the holidays some children attend summer lectures which still demand more of their time. This kind of situation whereby the tool a director needs in order to work is not readily available definitely creates a big challenge for that director.

Similarly, children from broken homes and children who have lost one or both of their parents are especially difficult to direct. In the presence of such children the director is conditioned to be mindful of what he or she says and how he or she says them so that he/she does not hurt their feelings. In this kind of situation where the director is restricted in expression and choice of words in passing instruction, directing becomes a heavy task than it is supposed to be. For instance, if a director instructs a child actress to welcome a child actor the way her mother normally welcomes her father when he comes back from work, he/she might hurt the child whose parents are separated by death or by divorce. Indeed, apart from the director, other actors, especially adults, must also become mindful of how they relate with such children as well as how they relate with each other in their presence.

4. Conclusion

The challenges of directing the child actor in Nigeria which are responsible for the perceived inadequacy of substantial number of child actors on the Nigeria stage have been identified and discussed in this article. Although it is indisputable that directing child actors in Nigeria is a herculean task, it is not a licence for directors to keep using adults in roles meant for the social, age, moral and physical presence of children. Rather, directors who happen to have children's roles in the plays they are directing should endeavour to apply the recommendations made that may be relevant to him or her in

fulfilling his/her responsibilities as a director, so that they can use children in theatrical productions. In this way, everyone in the society, young and old, would have the wonderful opportunity of experiencing and enjoying theatre to the fullest extent possible. It is in view of this that the following recommendations are made:

- a) having a degree in theatre arts and specialising in directing is not enough for one who desires to become a director of child actors. Such individuals need to do additional studies on child psychology and child development theories. The knowledge acquired in this field would go a long way in helping the director manage the challenges he might face when directing children. He should ensure that he naturally loves to work with children too;
- b) a lot of academic materials that discuss the importance of children's theatre in the development of children are available in library and on the internet. But there is almost no academic material that addresses the challenges of directing child actor in Nigeria. Therefore, it is recommended that the academia and practitioners should endeavour to come up with the academic materials that can serve as guides to anyone who might want to go into directing child actors as a profession;
- c) universities should adopt a more practical approach to teaching children's theatre. The Nigerian universities have a big role to play in helping prospective directors of child actors to surmount the challenges facing them. The course should be well rounded enough to include directing children. There should also be a practical aspect to the course. In this way, a theatre art graduate will be well-equipped to go into directing children as a specialty;
- d) it is true that children are easily distracted and that they have short attention span. This can be solved if the chosen play is full of activities that can capture their attention completely. When selecting a play to be performed by children, it must be an interesting play with content they can easily relate with;
- e) Religious beliefs are not what can be overlooked easily, and it would not be right for a director to force a child to do what he/she is not comfortable with. To resolve this issue, a play that is not religiously biased should be considered; and
- f) at present, some parents lack a thorough understanding of the role of the theatre in strengthening a child's critical thinking, a child's perceptions of good and evil, how a child makes sense of the world he or she lives in, and how the theatre

helps in developing the aesthetic and artistic dimension of his or her life. It is not surprising, therefore, some parents pose a big challenge to directors when their children are in a production. When the importance of theatre in the development of children is made known to them, the challenges from parents might be considerably reduced.

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How to cite this manuscript: Thomas Onyonyor and Isaiah Ode, Challenges Of Directing The Child Actor In Nigeria: A Consideration Of Ibukun Fasunhan’s Production Of *Moremi*. *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 2019, 2(1), 52-78.